

NEW JERSEY IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

While therefore We look back on the Regularity of our Committee Meetings, We cannot apprehend any Danger, that they may be misled by the Language and Sentiments supposed to be held forth at such Meetings in other Governments. On the Contrary, We esteem the continuance of Committees in that good Order and Decency, with which they have Conducted hitherto, as essential to the preservation of our inestimable Privileges and Liberties.

Permit us at the same Time, Sir, to assure you, that We shall return to our respective Homes, with the utmost unshaken Resolution, both by advice and example to inculcate throughout the County, the Necessity of Obedience to the Law, and the Constitutional exercise of those executive and Legislative Powers, which are the Pride of Englishmen, and the Envy of the Rest of the World.

9 “Cimon” on the Necessity of Independence

[*Postscript to Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet; or, the General Advertiser*,
April 15, 1776.]

With the passage of time the incongruities attendant on an undeclared rebellion became intolerable. The existence of both the formal royal government and the informal popular front caused numerous complications and outright absurdities. To whom did one pay taxes? How could men sit in both the Provincial Congress and the General Assembly? As the rebel regime increased its control over the lives of most citizens, the duly constituted government became a facade. Therefore, secessionist spokesmen reasoned, a formal declaration of independence would be nothing more than a recognition of political realities. Jerseymen had nothing to gain from a state of limbo, and independence was the only viable option available. Unlike Thomas Paine, whose *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, emphasized the long-term institutional and organizational defects of the empire, “Cimon” was concerned mainly with the tangible, immediate problems of the day. In calling for independence, he advocated a takeover of government by the people and not a revolution which would overturn established procedures and institutions.

April 1776

Friends and Countrymen,

The Colony of New-Jersey is, I fear, in a situation by no means to be desired.

Imbarked deeply, from the zeal of the inhabitants, in the general quarrel, with the war perhaps approaching to our doors; with a sea coast upon which it is probable the naval armaments of our friends and our enemies will both be employed, we are so far from being in a capacity to exert the natural strength of our country, that we

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are burthened with a load of taxes for the support of a government in the highest degree inimical to our cause. We want every aid of a regular establishment in a war upon the success of which our lives, liberties and estates depend; yet we are laid under contributions for the purpose of giving weight and efficacy to a government that is opposed to us. While we are groaning under a load of debt and grappling with the iron hand of oppression, the Officers of the British Government, which is employed in oppressing us, are maintained, at the expence of the People, in a splendor fit to dazzle the weak and timid, with a power of distributing profitable employments among a numerous class of dependants and the entire distribution of justice between man and man; so that the property and very subsistence of a large part of the community, in some measure, depends upon them. In the mean time the friends of Liberty, employed in the justest and noblest of all causes, crouch and wind through indirect paths. Resolves and Recommendations of Congresses and Committees are put in place of the commands of a Legislature: The punishment of crimes is reserved to a standing Committee, who are often feeble, sometimes oppressive. The boasted Trial by Jury is sinking to decay. Anarchy threatens us: We hardly know whom to obey, and not a few are dispirited and bewildered by the confusion of the scene. Many of the ablest and wealthiest men in the Colony slip their neck from the burden and devolve it on the poor. Profest enemies lift up their heads and boast and threaten in the midst of us and visibly enjoy the embarrassment of our circumstances.

The reader, I presume, by this time begins to construe that it is my wish to see a new government formed in the Colony. Yes, my Friends, I most sincerely wish to see the whole power, force, and energy of government in such hands as we can trust: in such hands as will most heartily cooperate with us in the great cause of freedom and our country, and that before it is too late; before this Colony be shaken to its centre by the alarms of war and invasion, before we are left to see our military force rambling and marching and counter-marching, bewildered and confused for want of a regular system of government. I wish to see the confusion of Bunker's Hill avoided betimes: I wish to see the hands of the Continental Congress (who have too much to do to regulate the affairs of every Colony) strengthened by a regular system of government in each Colony.

But this leads to Independency, it will be said. It does so, my friends, and I think we are now visibly reduced to the alternative of Independency or Submission: And I am sure we had better never have engaged this controversy than not to have the courage to go through with it. To submit after having once refused! to be treated as a conquered country! " 'tis horrible!"

We are too weak a Colony, it may be said, to take the lead or stand alone in such a business. I believe we are weaker thro' the want of wisdom and order than any other cause. But we shall not be the first, nor shall we be alone. Massachusetts and New Hampshire have gone before us,¹ and the rest must speedily follow. And what is there so frightful in being forward in a good and necessary cause. The most forward in all our measures hitherto have seen the rest following after at no great distance; and besides, I would by no means have this step taken without consulting the Continental Congress. Let us lay our case before them, as did the people of Massachusetts and New Hampshire; let us beg their advice and approbation. They advised and approved of the proceedings of the two last mentioned Colonies and to the reasons which then prevailed. We have to add the late Act of Parliament

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declaring expressly every American to be out of the royal protection, as well as some particular circumstances of our own Colony which need not here be mentioned. This method of applying to the Continental Congress will also serve to answer another objection.

Commissioners, it is said by some, are coming over to settle all our differences.² For my part, my Friends, I do not believe it; and I think that every man of sense and impartiality, who will read the late Act of Parliament, will think with me that there is just as much reason to expect an angel from Heaven to fight our battles for us as commissioners to settle our disputes upon a proper footing. But what if they are coming? The Congress I presume are the best judges of this matter; and they in their wisdom, if they think proper, may deny their approbation to our measures and put a stop to them betimes; for I must observe; my Friends, that before our application to Congress can be concerted, formed, presented, deliberated upon and determined, the Congress will have full and perfect information what may be depended upon in this affair. But what if the commissioners are not coming, or what if they are coming only to grant pardons, accept submissions and attempt to divide us as the case most probably is? What then? Are we always to remain thus hesitating between two governments? Are we engaged in a war so light and easy that we may fight it out with our hands tied? Is it not high time to prepare in earnest for battle? To clean away the trappings of the ancient government with which we are at once burthened and entangled and make ready to the utmost of our power for a contention in which our all is at stake?

But methinks I hear one complain—Sir, I have suits depending in the courts, all my property is at stake, the laws, the sacred guardians of my rights, are in danger of being overturned. Friends be of good cheer! In the future regulations of government there is no necessity of endangering your property or even of abating your suits. Let the laws which regulate property betwixt man and man remain the same. Let the forms of the courts remain the same. Let all law proceedings be continued in their present form, and the new Officers of the several Courts be enjoined to carry them forward to a conclusion from their present stages, whatever they may be. It is the easiest thing in the world to alter the stile of a Writ from that of "George the Third commands, &c." to "the Court commands," or "it is commanded by the Court;" and this is all that is necessary on this head. Nay, I would even continue the same Officers in commission wherever they would conform to the new government. Here too, it may be added, that if after all a reconciliation should take place at any future period we may the more easily return to our old form of government, without any alteration in the laws of property.

What shall be the particular form of government to be established is a matter which it belongs to the wisdom of the whole Colony to determine. All I shall say on this head is, that it is our own fault if it be not a good one.

When I reflect that we are placed, as it were, on an isthmus, that before us is danger, that behind us is destruction, that in this perilous situation we are intangled with a government among ourselves which in every principle is averse to our proceedings: When I consider that to oppose all these dangers we have no established Legislature, no regular government; when I recollect that acts, absolutely essential to our well-being, such as the striking of money, Admiralty Laws and others are passed by a body whose authority can never be deemed to be settled while another Legislature is acknowledged to be in force in the Colony, I think it my

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duty to warn you of our common danger. I hope you will exert yourselves, and I trust that your own virtue and that kind Providence which has hitherto assisted us, will yet save us.

CIMON³

1. In July 1775 the Continental Congress authorized the Massachusetts rebels to assume governance of the colony under the Charter of 1691; in January 1776 New Hampshire secessionists adopted a state constitution which, after approval from Philadelphia, became operative in March. In May the Congress instructed all colonies to erect republican governments.

2. See Doc. 5, note 2.

3. Cimon was the Athenian statesman and soldier who led the aristocratic party in opposition to Themistocles and Pericles.

10 Elias Boudinot versus John Witherspoon on Independence

[Boudinot, *Journal or Historical Recollections of American Events During the Revolutionary War* (Philadelphia, 1894), pp. 4-8.]

Cognizant that the May election for representatives to the Third Provincial Congress would be considered a poll on the question of independence, the Somerset County committee, chaired by the Reverend John Witherspoon, attempted to organize an effort to promote the selection of secessionist candidates. Letters were sent on March 27 to each of the county committees inviting them to send delegates to a conference in New Brunswick on April 18 to discuss "some matters of great importance"; an announcement of the meeting was also carried in *Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet; or, the General Advertiser* on April 1. That independence was taboo among Jersey Whigs as late as April 1776 is demonstrated by the debate which ensued at the conclave between Witherspoon and Elias Boudinot and by the subsequent defeat of the Somerset scheme.

[April 18, 1776]

. . . . In 1776 in the month of April, an invitation was given in the News Paper of New Jersey (but without a name) for each County to choose delegates or a Committee to meet at New Brunswick on matters which greatly concerned the Province—but it was generally conceived to be designed to promote some general