

# III

## *The Common Cause*

Except for a few isolated disturbances in New England such as the Boston Massacre of May 1770 and the destruction of the British revenue schooner *Gaspee* in Rhode Island in June 1772, the substantial revocation of the Townshend duties ushered in a period of relative calm in relations between Britain and the American colonies. But beneath the surface, fundamental tensions were evident. As with the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, removal of the Townshend duties did nothing to resolve the overriding issue of the proper constitutional relationship between Parliament and the provinces. Thus the imperial interlude of 1770-1773 was in reality the lull before the storm that would inevitably erupt should Britain try to exert effective sovereignty over America.

The storm eventually broke in Boston in late 1773 with cataclysmic repercussions. The Tea Act of May 1773 precipitated the shattering of the uneasy calm. In granting rebates and marketing privileges to the financially troubled British East India Company, Parliament made it possible for the firm to sell its tea in Ireland and America at a greatly reduced price. A boon to consumers, the act nonetheless soon aroused violent protest. Honest merchants objected to the virtual monopoly of the extensive colonial tea trade that would accrue to East India factors; even smugglers of cheap Dutch tea could no longer compete with the legitimate traders. More important, in the purchase of East India tea Americans faced compliance with the Townshend tea tax of 1767. It was mainly the latter consideration that prompted a group of Massachusetts radicals on the night of December 16 to disguise themselves as Indians, illegally board three British tea ships, and steep some 340 chests containing 90,000 pounds of the baneful leaf in the brine of Boston Harbor.

The response of the British government to the latest act of colonial defiance was swift and resolute. To punish the Bostonians, on March 31, 1774, Parliament passed the Boston Port Act, closing the port of Boston pending

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restitution to the East India Company for the destroyed tea. More interested in preventing disorders than in punishing the Bostonians, Parliament passed in May and June three additional acts designed to curb the rebelliousness of the Bay Colony. The Massachusetts Government Act altered the structure of the Bay Colony's government and broadened the powers of the royal governor. The Impartial Administration of Justice Act provided for the appointment (instead of election) of local juries and if necessary a change of venue for trials involving crown officials. The Quartering Act authorized the use of public or unoccupied buildings to house British soldiers where barracks were inadequate or non-existent.

Instead of pacifying the Americans, the Massachusetts Acts, dubbed "coercive" and "intolerable" by the colonials, escalated hostilities. Predictably, Massachusetts took the lead in organizing resistance to the acts. On May 13 the Boston Committee of Correspondence dispatched a circular letter requesting the other colonies to join the "common cause" by suspending all commerce with England; on June 17 the Massachusetts House of Representatives issued a formal call for a continental congress to meet in Philadelphia on September 1 to discuss the general state of imperial affairs.

Jersey men deplored the conduct of the Boston mob but considered the response of Parliament to be far more offensive. Although most people regarded the Boston Port Act as proof of British hostility and oppression, they adopted a cautious attitude instead of taking rash action to resist encroachments upon American liberties. Speaking for the assembly (which was not in session at the time) as well as for most citizens, the legislative committee of correspondence on May 31 pledged support for the beleaguered Bostonians but declined to take any direct action pending the meeting of a general congress (Doc. 1).

There now emerged in June and July the grass-roots committee system that would eventually serve as the structural apparatus of the movement for independence in 1776. On June 11 residents of Essex County met in Newark to discuss the current crisis. They pledged solidarity with the Bostonians, agreed to a series of resolves protesting the Massachusetts Acts, selected a committee to correspond with like committees in other counties, and urged the other counties to follow suit and to participate in a province-wide meeting (Doc. 2). Although some Whigs preferred legislative action to mass meetings (Doc. 3), the response to the Essex invitation was overwhelming; only Cape May and Cumberland failed to elect county committees and to record their particular views of the imperial situation. The movement to fashion a unified, coordinated mode of opposition culminated in the general convention that met June 21-23 in New Brunswick. In addition to remonstrating against the coercive acts and launching a campaign to raise cash and commodities for the Massachusetts martyrs, the seventy-two delegates from the various county committees named five men to represent the province in the intercolonial congress (Doc. 4).

The Continental Congress was the prime topic of discussion in New Jersey during the summer of 1774. Despite a clear consensus in favor of a general conference, Jersey men debated the nature of the impending assembly (Doc. 5), the principal issues at stake (Doc. 6), and the proper course of action to be pursued by the intercolonial body (Doc. 7).

When the Congress convened in Philadelphia on September 5, the

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congressmen themselves, representing all the colonies except Georgia, were uncertain how to proceed. During nearly two months of intensive debate, the more radical delegates slowly came to dominate the sessions. In the end the Congress adopted addresses to the people of Great Britain and Canada as well as America, issued a declaration of colonial rights and grievances, and proposed a total boycott of British goods. Its most important action, however, was the creation of the Association, which called for the formation of local committees of inspection and observation to enforce compliance with the economic sanctions. Before adjourning on October 26, the Congress agreed to reconvene on May 10 if American complaints had not yet been resolved.

The First Continental Congress was a turning point in the development of the resistance movement. For the first time there existed a national deliberative body to direct intercolonial activities. Moreover, by imposing the Association the Philadelphia conclave presented Americans with a crisis of allegiance: should they obey the duly constituted government or the extralegal Congress? The result was a brief period of political adjustment as people grappled with the alterations in the nature and scope of the resistance organization. While some Jerseymen enthusiastically endorsed and implemented the congressional program (Docs. 11 and 12), others censured the congressmen (Doc. 10) and committeemen (Doc. 15); some, like Samuel Allinson, sought to take advantage of the times to strike additional blows for human freedom (Doc. 8), while others sought glamorous ways of demonstrating political faith (Doc. 14). All in all, the recommendations of the Congress became the orders of the day during the latter months of 1774 because of popular belief in their efficacy (Doc. 9), the inability of the royal regime to prevent them (Doc. 13), and the lack of a viable conservative alternative.

By the end of 1774 the Boston radicals' destruction of East India tea and the equally rash passage of the Massachusetts Acts had raised the Anglo-American conflict to a new, more dangerous height. The controversy over the constitutional relationship between the mother country and the colonies had been joined anew; moreover, the enthusiastic support of the blockaded Bostonians and the formulation of a national program of resistance by the Continental Congress had forged unprecedented intercolonial solidarity. Most Americans were now united in a common cause.

#### 1 The Committee of Correspondence of the New Jersey Assembly to the Boston Committee of Correspondence

[Minutes of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, 8:709-10, Bancroft Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.]