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Empire or Independence

Although even the most radical Whigs were unwilling openly to advocate secession from the empire, the pervasive question of independence loomed ever larger in the thoughts and actions of the people of New Jersey in the winter of 1775-1776. Events on either side of the Atlantic during the past eighteen months made it impossible to deny or evade the logic and momentum of the rebellion much longer. The brief "house arrest" of Governor William Franklin by a detachment of militia in early January and the usurpation of effective local government by rebel committeemen signaled the virtual end of royal authority in New Jersey. The revolt was rapidly reaching the stage where that which was implicit would have to become explicit. Yet independence could not be a sudden-stroke creation. Indoctrination and persuasion would be necessary to induce British-Americans to renounce the crown; psychological as well as military preparations were prerequisite to severance of ties with the mother country. During the first six months of the year 1776, the political debate, whether public or private, turned on the issue of empire versus independence.

Amid the shock waves from Thomas Paine's clarion call for independence, *Common Sense*, published in January 1776, Jerseymen began systematically to assess the relationship between America and Great Britain and to contemplate the prospect of an independent nation. The forum ranged from the anonymous essays by Cumberland County residents which appeared in the installments of the "Plain Dealer" posted at Matthew Potter's tavern in Bridgeton (Docs. 1 and 2) to the markedly different analyses of the imperial controversy exchanged between Chief Justice Frederick Smyth (Doc. 7) and the Middlesex County Grand Jury (Doc. 8) during the April term of the supreme court. However, the debate was largely one-sided. Intimidated, unorganized, and unsure of themselves, conservatives and royalists rarely spoke out against the rising tide of revolution. The real discussion took place among the Whigs.

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If the discussions of the future of the Anglo-American union that took place in New Jersey during the spring of 1776 indicate growing colonial intransigence, they also demonstrate the essential political moderation of the province. Jersey-men were willing to go to almost any lengths short of independence to secure constitutional rights and redress imperial wrongs. After all, a thin but crucial line divided rebellion from revolution, loyal opposition from outright treason. Ardent Whigs recognized the need to proceed with caution, lest the moderate and uncommitted among them defect from the common cause (Doc. 5). To test the temper of the people (and thus determine a course of action), the Provincial Congress on February 21 called for a general election on May 27. The election promised to be a referendum on the unspoken issue of independence. The defeat of an attempt by the Reverend John Witherspoon and the Somerset County committee to organize support for secessionist congressional candidates revealed that independence was taboo for many Whigs at even this late date. (Doc. 10).

The tide began to turn in May 1776. Pushed by internal pressures and pulled by external developments, New Jersey prepared to join the radical republicans. Jerseymen were not the only actors in the unfolding drama of American independence. By the spring of 1776 the New England and southern colonies were primed for separation. And on May 10 the Continental Congress issued a de facto declaration of independence by calling upon those provinces which had not already done so to dismantle their royal governments and erect revolutionary regimes. Moreover, everyday events and pragmatic considerations prepared the people of New Jersey for the final break with the mother country. The very act of waging war against British forces acted as a catalyst in transforming a defensive war of rebellion into an offensive war for independence: the battlefield was itself a point of no return. Jersey sons were, as they had been for nearly a year, under arms in the defense of their liberties (Doc. 4); others marched off to war steeled by personal convictions and accolades from family and friends (Doc. 6). Similarly, the dynamic of extralegal protest activity led to a fundamental restructuring of the political life of the province. Men who had previously been excluded from the process of governance suddenly found themselves participating in mass meetings and serving on local committees. The reality of increased participation in the political process eventually translated itself into philosophical commitments to popular sovereignty and republicanism (Doc. 3). But in a larger sense the debate over independence was resolved when a sufficient number of Jerseymen became convinced that no alternative to secession from the empire existed (Doc. 11) and that they in fact had much to gain and relatively little to lose from an attempt to establish an independent state (Doc. 9).