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Government at War

Although it is true that independence could only be won through force of arms, the success of the American military on the battlefield turned upon the achievements of civilians in the halls of government. It is simply impossible to wage a war without a political organization capable of maintaining order among noncombatants and marshalling the resources of society in support of the war effort. In New Jersey as elsewhere, the transition from dependent colony to independent state—a formidable task in itself—was anything but smooth and uneventful. Besides the usual weighty problems of routine governance, political leaders who renounced allegiance to Great Britain faced special problems attendant on the establishment of civil authority amid war and revolution.

While attempting to inaugurate a new order that differed in important respects from the political assumptions and practices of the past (see Sec. XIII), the New Jersey governmental establishment led by Governor William Livingston faced serious threats to its very existence. Although in December 1776 the British army chased the legislators out of their chambers and for a time the Council of Safety headed by Livingston was the only semblance of civil authority in the state, patriot leaders were more concerned with internal problems than uncontrollable military threats. Loyalists posed a particular danger and were dealt with in summary fashion (see Sec. VIII). The chief concern of the government, however, was not the enmity of hard core royalists but subversion. The legislature enacted a series of laws defining treason and prescribing penalties for those who defied the authority of the state. Civil and military officials were required to take a loyalty oath that was eventually administered to the populace at large (Doc. 1). And through various means, including stirring speeches by Livingston designed to arouse the patriotism of the public (Doc. 5), the republican regime labored hard to obtain the adherence of the uncommitted and secure the support of the faint of heart. Members of pacifistic religious sects, mainly Quakers and Seventh Day Baptists, who

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refused to take sides in the secular struggle paid penalties for their conscientious objection (Docs. 10 and 11). A more potent political catalyst than all the efforts of government leaders, however, was military success; nothing was quite so effective, in consolidating support for the state government and converting those whose political behavior derived more from expediency than principle (Docs. 2 and 3), as the occupation of a given region by the American army.

The battle of Monmouth (see Sec. IX, Doc. 7) signaled the stabilization of the political and military situation in New Jersey. Except for the presence of a small British outpost at Paulus Hook, American forces occupied the state after the summer of 1778. If anything, the sporadic raids that occurred during the succeeding two years helped bolster the stock of the government by further discrediting the British (see Sec. IX, Docs. 8 and 9). But on another level, endemic civil disorder threatened to undermine the credibility of the Livingston administration. The depredations of both Loyalist marauders (Doc. 15) and patriot vigilantes (Doc. 17) created doubts in some areas about the ability of the government to maintain order and protect the citizenry. However, on the whole, thanks in large measure to the leadership of Governor Livingston, the political establishment withstood the challenges to its authority and provided effective governance for wartime New Jersey.

As if pervasive political problems that at times threatened its very existence were not enough, the state government encountered formidable difficulties related to the waging of war for nearly eight years. As a principal battleground of the war (see Sec. IX), New Jersey suffered greatly from the ravages of warfare as well as the requirements of provisioning troops cantoned in or marching through the state (Doc. 8). Moreover, men, money, and munitions had to be raised to support three different military units—the Jersey Continental Line (the state's complement of the national army), the state militia, and the local militia. The latter two outfits posed special problems because of inadequate administrative machinery (Doc. 13) and endemic parochialism (Doc. 9). Moreover, state officials found themselves responsible for British and Loyalist prisoners of war (Doc. 7) as well as captured Jerseymen in enemy hands (Doc. 14). Finally, there were the vexing dilemmas of desertion (Doc. 4) and civilian-military discord (Doc. 12) that contributed so much to declining public morale and war weariness. As in the political arena, the success of the state government in dealing with military matters was generally proportional to the accomplishments of the armed forces. The martial spirit of most Jerseymen was an accurate barometer of the military situation at a given time.

Military fortunes rose and fell in cyclical fashion, but the economy moved steadily from bad to worse. The expense of waging a war plus the physical destruction and economic dislocation attendant on warfare wreaked havoc with the New Jersey economy. Collectively the devastating property losses suffered by many residents (see Sec. IX, Doc. 14) had a far-reaching impact on the economy as a whole. But more important were the pervasive conditions that affected everyone. Public officials and private citizens alike strove with mixed results to combat the deleterious economic effects of the curtailment of manufacturing, disruption of commerce, and excessive emissions of paper currency (Doc. 16). Most vexing of all was the spiraling inflation that brought

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the nation to the brink of bankruptcy (Doc. 6). Indicative of the magnitude of the problem is the fact that the pernicious trade with the enemy (Doc. 18), clearly treasonable, was widespread and in some respects vital to the economic health of the state. In reality, the government faced an impossible task in attempting to reconstruct the economy. New Jersey was simply not in a position to control its economic fortunes because the root problems were external. For the resolution of those problems and the return of prosperity, Jerseymen looked first to the Articles of Confederation (see Sec. XII) and then to the federal Constitution.

1 The New Jersey State Loyalty Oath

[“An Act for the Security of the Government of New-Jersey,” *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, August 27, 1776-March 17, 1777* (Burlington, 1777), Chap. 2.]

Governments have traditionally required oaths or tests of loyalty from persons entrusted with positions of public trust. But the following oath of abjuration and allegiance to be taken by all civil and military officials in the state was no mere formality. The double-edged declaration was simultaneously a vow of fidelity to the state of New Jersey and admission of treason against Great Britain. As self-confessed leaders of the rebellion, those who signed the oath were guilty in the eyes of the British of political crimes which could not be pardoned. With a stroke of the pen, they had committed a willful act of disloyalty and thus literally pledged their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” to the cause of independence.

Princeton, September 19, 1776

Whereas it is essentially necessary for the Safety of this State, That every Person, who holds any Office or Post of a publick Nature, should evince his Fidelity and Attachment to the Government from whence he derives Protection, and under which he is authorized to act; And Whereas to effect this important Purpose, it is necessary that a proper Test be established to be taken by all Officers civil and military within this State; and that the Governor or Commander in Chief be authorized by Law to administer such Test, and the official and other necessary Oaths in the several Counties thereof;

Sect. 1. Therefore be it Enacted by the Council and General Assembly of this State. . . That the following Test shall be taken by all Officers civil and military, who are now in Office, or hereafter shall be appointed, elected or commissioned, within the several Counties of this State, That is to say,