

II

Taxes and Troops

The year 1767 dawned on an uneasy Anglo-American empire. The Stamp Act troubles had been forgotten by no one on either side of the Atlantic. Americans like Richard Stockton of New Jersey pondered the whys and wherefores of the imperial problem (Doc. 1); British ministers like Charles Townshend searched for ways to raise revenue and make administrative reforms in America without causing another crisis.

Abstract concerns became realities in June when Parliament adopted a new program for the colonies. Americans were now to pay import duties on a variety of commodities including glass, "painters' colours," paper, and tea; a new American Board of Customs Commissioners, headquartered in Boston, was to ensure closer supervision of colonial commerce; provincial courts were to grant writs of assistance (general search warrants) to aid in the apprehension of smugglers. And in December vice-admiralty courts (maritime tribunals that operated without juries) were established at Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston to supplement the existing court at Halifax and thus facilitate enforcement of the mercantile regulations.

The response to the Townshend program in America was essentially a replay of the protest against the Stamp Act. Although New Jersey was the only colony without a newspaper, Jerseymen read the New York and Philadelphia press, and those papers came alive with denunciations of the new taxes. Merchants launched a boycott of British goods, and the legislatures, led by the Massachusetts House of Representatives, petitioned the crown for a redress of grievances. But whereas in 1765 Americans had objected to the imposition of internal taxes, they now, as John Dickinson's famous "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania" proclaimed, denied the right of Parliament to levy any taxes on America (see Sec. III, Doc. 6, headnote). The controversy had been raised to a more perilous level.

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As with Grenville's economic reforms, New Jersey was but little affected by the Townshend program because of the nature of her economy. While displeased with the new policies, especially the prospect of paying new taxes, most people disapproved of what they considered to be the excessive defiance of New England (Doc. 3). However, the assembly sent a petition of protest to the king (Doc. 4) as the Massachusetts legislature suggested, and eventually endorsed economic sanctions as an effective means of securing repeal (Doc. 7). After all, such tactics had previously been successful. Opposition to the Townshend duties grew steadily in the province (Doc. 5); by the fall of 1769 some residents even took it upon themselves to instruct their assemblymen on imperial issues (Doc. 6).

Ironically, concerted protest and violence occurred in New Jersey after Parliament rescinded all but one of the Townshend duties in April 1770. Initially, the resistance to the Townshend program aimed at securing total removal of the imposts, but partial repeal (the tax on tea was retained as a symbol of parliamentary authority) induced merchants to abandon the boycott. When the traders of Newport, Rhode Island, announced the resumption of business as usual in May, Jersey merchants were quick to denounce such perfidy and to declare their adherence to the boycott (Doc. 9). But when the New Yorkers also defected in June, Jerseymen became outraged. Students of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) turned from academics to protest activities (Doc. 10), residents of commercial towns like Woodbridge and New Brunswick physically abused importers (Doc. 11). Even inhabitants of rural communities like Mansfield avowed their commitment to the continuation of resistance (Doc. 12). But New Jersey could not stand alone; other provinces steadily joined the defection and by September the nonimportation movement was over in the colony (Doc. 13).

Following on the heels of the Stamp Act crisis, the controversy over the Townshend duties served to heighten other tensions subsisting between New Jersey and the British government. The economic dislocations and inflation attendant on the French and Indian War found expression in the acute shortage of specie and paper money that plagued the colony after 1763 (see Sec. I, Doc. 1). Repeated pleas by government officials and private citizens for permission to issue new currency were to no avail as the Privy Council, invoking a narrow interpretation of the Currency Act of 1764, persistently vetoed money bills passed by the Jersey legislature on the grounds that the colonies could not emit legal tender. In turn, the currency controversy intensified other, more explosive issues related to the garrisoning of royal troops within the province.

Although New Jersey had neither an exposed frontier nor a hostile Indian population and was far removed from scenes of the warfare between France and Britain that raged intermittently in North America during the eighteenth century, the colony bore a large military burden. New Jersey not only contributed men, money, and munitions to fight the French, but also provisioned and quartered a large number of troops passing through the province en route to and from the battle zones. Unable to accommodate such forces, the colony suffered considerably from the expense, inconvenience, and physical destruction concomitant with massive troop movements; predictably the presence of soldiers created tension and turmoil between the military personnel and the civilian

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population. To help alleviate the problem, the legislature in 1758 authorized the construction of five 300-man barracks in Elizabethtown, Perth Amboy, New Brunswick, Trenton, and Burlington. The decision to build the facilities was fortunate, for the decision of the British government in 1763 to station troops in the western territories acquired from France meant that a steady stream of soldiers traveling to and from the wilderness would be cantoned temporarily in New Jersey. A new problem emerged in 1765 when Parliament extended the Quartering Act to North America, requiring that the entire cost of quartering and provisioning troops be defrayed by the colony in which they were stationed.

To show their displeasure at what appeared to be an unreasonable attitude on the part of the British government regarding paper currency, the New Jersey legislature first threatened and then actually withheld the funds necessary to supply the royal troops. Although relations between soldiers and citizens were on the whole exemplary (Doc. 8), the sporadic incidents that occurred exacerbated the entire problem (Doc. 2). As relations with Britain deteriorated, Jerseymen increasingly feared the political dangers posed by the presence of a standing army (Doc. 14) and resented the expense involved in maintaining peacetime garrisons (Doc. 15). (Actually as well as proportionally, New Jersey hosted more British soldiers than any other American colony from 1765 to 1770.) The withdrawal of all British forces from New Jersey in November 1771 resolved the military problem; the currency issue lingered until the enactment of legislation acceptable to the Privy Council in 1774.

Despite repeal of most of the Townshend duties and the subsequent demise of colonial resistance, the Anglo-American situation remained explosive. Britain could not permit continued colonial challenges to its legislative supremacy; Americans would not admit the legitimacy of parliamentary taxation. The constitutional stakes in the imperial dispute were near the point of being nonnegotiable. Moreover, the annual contests between governor and assembly in New Jersey over soldiers and currency contributed measurably to the growing spirit of resistance to British authority and feeling of alienation from the empire that would come to a head in the years 1775-1776. In short, it would take little to transform resistance into rebellion.

1 Richard Stockton to Samuel Smith

[Dartmouth Papers, 822, Staffordshire County Record Office, Stafford, England. I have supplied paragraphing for a lengthy text that originally consisted of only two paragraphs.]

Samuel Smith, an attorney and wealthy merchant of the Old Jewry section of London, was well versed in colonial administration by virtue of his service as agent for North Carolina from 1759 to 1764. Richard Stockton, then