

An Uneasy Connection An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution

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I

To a question about "the temper of America towards Great Britain before the year 1763," Benjamin Franklin, in his famous "examination" before the House of Commons during the debates over the repeal of the Stamp Act in early 1766, replied that it was the "best in the world." The colonies, he said, submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numerous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink, and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce. Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old-England man was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

That Franklin was correct in this assessment was widely seconded by his contemporaries and has been the considered judgment of the most sophisticated students of the problem over the past quarter of a century.

So persuaded have modern historians been that the relationship between Britain and the colonies prior to the Stamp Act crisis was basically satisfactory to both parties that they have, with very few exceptions, organized their continuing search for an adequate explanation of the American Revolution around a single, overriding question: why in less than a dozen years after 1763 the colonists became so estranged from Britain as to take up arms against her and, a little more than a year later, to declare for independence. The focus of their inquiries has thus been primarily upon the colonial response to the preRevolutionary controversy and upon the many medium-range issues and conditions that contributed to the creation of a revolutionary situation in the colonies between 1764 and 1774 and the short-run developments that touched off armed conflict in 1775 and led to the colonial decision to seek independence in 1776.

A result of this preoccupation with the immediate origins of the Revolution has been the neglect of two other, interrelated questions also raised by Franklin's remarks: first, whether the relationship between Britain and the colonies actually was so satisfactory prior to 1763, and, second, if the existing imperial system worked as well for Britain as Franklin contended, why the British government would ever undertake--much less persist in--measures that would in any way impair such an obviously beneficial arrangement. Of course, neither of these questions is new. They were widely canvassed by men on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1760s and 1770s, and they provided a focus for most of the early students of the causes of the Revolution from George Bancroft to Charles M. Andrews. But no recent historian has dealt with both of these questions systematically or attempted to relate them either to each other or to the question of the impact of post-1763 developments upon the "tempers" of Britons and Americans towards each other. This essay seeks, through a reconsideration of these questions, to provide a comprehensive discussion of the preconditions--the long-term, underlying causes--of the Revolution. Such a discussion is a prerequisite both for a clearer understanding of colonial and British behavior after 1763 and for the eventual achievement of a more satisfactory conceptual framework for analyzing the causal pattern of the American Revolution.

II

When one looks closely at the relationship between Britain and the colonies during the century from 1660 to 1760, one discovers, as Charles M. Andrews argued so brilliantly almost a half century ago in *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution*, that it was in many respects an uneasy connection --and one that was becoming considerably more so through the middle decades of the eighteenth century as a result of several important structural changes taking place in both the colonies and Britain. Throughout these decades, contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic conventionally described the imperial-colonial relationship in terms of the familiar parent-child metaphor with Britain as the mother country and the colonies as its infant offspring. The clear implication of this usage was, of course, that the colonies had by no means yet reached a state of competency. As is well known, however, by the middle of the eighteenth century in most of the colonies, the colonists themselves were already handling a substantial portion of their internal affairs with an impressive and even a relatively quiet efficiency: to an extraordinary degree, the several colonies had become what Edward Shils has referred to as "pockets of approximate independence" within the transatlantic imperial polity. In all save the newest colonies of Georgia and Nova Scotia, they possessed by 1750 virtually all of the conditions necessary for self-governing states.

The first of these conditions was the emergence of stable, coherent, effective, and acknowledged local political and social elites. We do not know nearly enough about the nature, structure, and functioning of these elites. But it is certainly clear from what we already know that their size, cohesion, self-confidence, sense of group identity,

openness, and authority over the public varied considerably from one colony to another according to their antiquity, experience, and effectiveness and according to the political and socio-structural characteristics of their particular society. At one end of the spectrum were the relatively cohesive, self-conscious, and unified gentry groups of Virginia and South Carolina; at the other were the more fissured elites of Pennsylvania, New York, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. In reference to the point at hand, however, the degree of cohesion and sense of group identity matter less than the degree of visibility and public authority, and as the societies of the colonies had become more clearly differentiated during the early eighteenth century, the local ruling elites had come to be more clearly defined and their right to authority more and more widely acknowledged. By the middle of the century, there existed in virtually every colony authoritative ruling groups with great social and economic power, extensive political experience, confidence in their capacity to govern, and broad public support. Indeed, the direction of colonial political life throughout the middle of the eighteenth century was probably toward more and more public deference to these ruling elites; certainly, their willingness to mobilize various groups of marginal members of political society in the protests against the Stamp Act as well as at later stages of the pre-Revolutionary conflict strongly suggests not a fear of such groups but a confidence in their ability to control them. The relatively small incidence of excessive and independent behavior by those groups in turn suggests that the confidence of the elite was not misplaced.

A second and complementary condition was the development of local centers and institutions of acknowledged and functioning authority within the colonies, that is, centers and institutions in which authority was concentrated and from which it was dispersed outward through a settled network of local urban administrative centers and institutions to the outermost perimeters of colonial society. Whether merely small administrative centers such as Annapolis or Williamsburg or large, central trading places such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Charleston, the colonial capitals supplied the colonists with internal foci to which they customarily looked for political leadership and models for social behavior.

Perhaps even more important was the emergence of a set of viable governing institutions both at the local level in the towns and the counties and, especially significant, at the colony level in the form of the elected lower houses of assembly. More than any other political institution in the colonies, the lower houses were endowed with charismatic authority both because, as the representatives of the colonists, they were thought to hold in trusteeship all of the sacred rights and privileges of the public and to be the sole giver of internal public law and because of their presumed--and actively cultivated--equivalence to the British Parliament, that emporium of British freedom and embodiment of all that was most sacred to Englishmen everywhere. As powerful, independent, self-confident institutions--in most colonies, the primary vehicles through which the local elite exerted its leadership and expressed its aspirations --with vigorous traditions of opposing all attempts by external authorities to encroach upon their own or their constituents' rights and with the general confidence of the public, the lower houses were potentially effective mechanisms for crystallizing and expressing grievances against Great Britain. Together with the elites who spoke through them, the local centers and institutions, particularly the lower houses, in each colony thus provided authoritative symbols for the colony at large and thereby served as a preexisting local alternative to imperial authority.

A third and closely related condition was the development of remarkably elastic political systems, not so elastic by any means as the political system of the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, but probably much more elastic than any contemporary Western political system. They were elastic in two senses. First, they were inclusivist rather than exclusivist. For analytic purposes, one may divide the potential participants in the political process, that is, the free adult male population, into three categories: the elite, including both colony-wide and local officeholders; a broader "politically relevant strata or mobilized population" that participated with some regularity in the political process; and a passive or underlying population that took little part in the political system, in some cases because they were legally excluded by racial or property qualifications and in others because they had no interest in doing so. Available evidence seems to suggest that by contemporary standards the first two groups were relatively large and the third group relatively small. The elite seems to have extended rather far down into the wealth structure and to have taken in as much as 3 percent to 5 percent of the free adult males, while the second category may have included as many as 60 percent to 90 percent of the same group. This wide diffusion of offices and extensive participation in the political process meant that colonial Americans --leaders and followers alike--had very wide training in politics and self-government and were thoroughly socialized to an ongoing and tested political system.

A second sense in which the political systems of the colonies were elastic was in their capacity to permit the resolution of internal conflict. Indeed, they were early forced to develop that capacity. The expansive character of American life prevented any group from obtaining a long-standing monopoly of political power, economic opportunity, or social status; new groups were constantly springing up demanding parity with the old. They could not always achieve their demands peacefully, and the still unwritten history of collective violence in early America may very well show that the incidence of violent--and illegitimate--opposition was rising rather than falling during the eighteenth century. But my impression is just the opposite, that opposition demands were increasingly being channeled through the normal processes of government and that the capacity of the political systems of the colonies to absorb new and diverse

groups was steadily expanding during the middle of the century as a result of severe pressures created by a combination of rapid demographic and economic growth and increasing social, cultural, and religious diversity.

The rising competence of the colonies in nonpolitical or semi-political spheres during the eighteenth century was a fourth condition that had prepared them for self-government. This competence was made possible by the dramatic enlargement of internal and external trade, travel, and migration; the increasing availability of knowledge through a broad spectrum of educational, cultural, social, economic, and religious institutions and through a rising number of books, magazines, and newspapers of colonial, British, and European origin accessible to the colonists; the development of more efficient means and networks of communication within and among the colonies and between the colonies and Great Britain; and the emergence of relatively large numbers of men with the technical skills, especially in law, trade, and finance, requisite for the successful functioning of an autonomous society. These developments not only provided the colonists with some of the technical wherewithal--for example, lawyers and newspapers--that turned out to be of crucial importance in resisting Britain and creating a new nation; they also helped to free the colonies from total dependence upon Britain for certain kinds of essential skills, to raise levels of literacy and education within the colonies, to liberate them from their former isolation and rusticity, to widen their "range of perception and imagination," and to create a potential for cooperation, for overcoming the "inherent localism" and traditional disunity they had stubbornly and perpetually manifested throughout most of their existence.

A fifth and final condition was the tremendous increase in the size and wealth of the colonies in terms of the number of people, the amount of productive land, labor, and skills, and the extent of settled territory. The wealth of the colonies had become sufficient to give them a potential for economic and military resistance, while the sheer vastness of all of the continental colonies, taken together, constituted a formidable obstacle to suppressing any large-scale or broadly diffused movement of resistance. Indeed, this condition may well have been the most important of all, because it is the only one of the five not shared to a large degree by the British West Indian colonies, which did not revolt.

It is thus clear in retrospect that the colonies had achieved a high degree of competency by the 1750s and 1760s. Far "removed from the sources of metropolitan authority," they had early been transformed by the very exigencies of life in America from passive "recipients of tradition and objects of authority into independent, differentiated, initiating" social and political entities that put a high premium upon resourcefulness, self-control, and the ability to act successfully and confidently in an uncertain environment that frequently threw them back upon their own devices. By 1760 the colonies were thus not only able to meet most of the objective conditions necessary for self-government but even had to a significant degree been governing themselves, maintaining internal civil order, prospering, and building an ever more complex and closely integrated society for at least three-quarters of a century and in some cases much longer. Equally important, such a large measure of de facto autonomy at every level and in all sectors of colonial society--with all of the responsibilities it required--had prepared them psychologically for self-government and independence.

The corollary of this impressive increase in colonial competency was the continued weakness of British power in the colonies. The bureaucratic structures organized, for the most part during the Restoration, to supervise and maintain control over the colonies had never been adequate for the tasks they were assigned. As Andrews was fond of pointing out, there was no central governing agency within Britain with effective authority to deal quickly and efficiently with colonial matters until 1768, on the very eve of the Revolution. The Board of Trade, which had primary responsibility for the colonies after 1696, had only advisory powers, and its history is essentially one of failure to obtain the ministerial and parliamentary support necessary for its many and repeated attempts to establish a more elaborate and effective system of colonial administration. Moreover, its staff was so small and the number of separate colonies with which it had to deal so great that it could not possibly keep abreast of the rapidly fluctuating political and economic circumstances of every colony. This situation was exacerbated by the absence of any efficient means of communication between Britain and the colonies--a regular system of packet boats was not established until 1755--and by the seeming inability of the Board to force its representatives in the colonies to supply it with up-to-date information. Finally, like all of the agencies within the British government that had any colonial responsibilities, the Board was invariably more responsive to the demands of powerful interest groups within Britain than it was to those of the colonists. The result, therefore, was an administrative structure in Britain that for most of its existence had insufficient influence or power either to obtain support for its policies at home or to enforce them in the colonies, a structure that was both poorly informed about what was happening in the colonies and only minimally responsive to colonial demands.

Within the colonies the situation was little, if any, better. Imperial administrative machinery was insufficient for the enforcement of imperial policy, and authorities in Britain had no effective controls over the machinery that did exist. The governors, the primary representatives of the imperial government in the colonies, had almost no coercive resources at their command. Prior to the introduction of large numbers of British troops at the beginning of the French

and Indian War in the mid-1750s, there was no more than a handful of regular troops in any colony on more than a temporary basis, and governors had few other dependable resources with which they could put down opposition to imperial policies, whether it came from the elected representative assemblies, the press, local governing institutions, or some segment of the public at large. Theoretically great, even their control over judicial machinery was, in most cases, highly tenuous. Of course, most governors did have some utilitarian resources in the form of crown or proprietary lands or access to other special privileges or concessions that could be used to build up a solid base of support for their administration. But few had much patronage--in the Anglo-American political world of the eighteenth century, the most important utilitarian resource of all--at their disposal. Imperial authorities never sought to strengthen the ties between Britain and the colonies by systematically admitting "the leading members of the provincial aristocracies" into the metropolitan political establishment. Increasingly, in fact, they even excluded such men from the few royal offices available in the colonies, which, especially after 1720, were usually filled by the ministry at home with needy place seekers. After 1740, even the largely honorific seats on the governors' advisory councils, which had in earlier times usually been reserved for wealthy and well-affected colonists, came more and more to be filled in the same way.

With little prospect for solid backing from home, only a rudimentary bureaucracy on which they could count for assistance (and over which they frequently had little control), and little patronage through which they might have gained the support of strategically placed members of local elites, governors frequently allied themselves with the dominant political groups within the colonies and did little more than keep up the appearance of adherence to the policies of the home government. Far from being able to co-opt the provincial elites by binding them to the imperial order in the colonies with strong ties of interest and obligation, the governors were, rather, coopted by those elites; and the local standing and influence of governors, which in many cases was by no means inconsiderable, came to depend at least as much upon local connections as upon their formal position as representatives of the imperial government. Gubernatorial influence was thus highly personal and did not automatically extend beyond an individual governor to his successor, much less to the imperial government in Britain. Whatever power Britain had over the colonies by the mid-eighteenth century derived not from its monopoly of force, not from its efficiency and responsiveness, and not from a systematically cultivated network of interests and political obligations.

The counterpoint of this continuing weakness of British power in the colonies was the dramatic increase in the importance of the colonies to Britain's economy during the first seven decades of the eighteenth century. The population of the continental colonies soared from 257,060 in 1700 to 635,083 in 1730 and 1,593,625 in 1760. The average decennial rate of increase was nearly 36 percent. As the population increased, the colonies not only supplied Britain at extremely favorable rates with a growing variety of raw materials, many of which were subsequently re-exported at a considerable profit to British middlemen, but also provided a growing stimulus to British manufacturers by taking an ever-rising amount of British finished products. Indeed, during the eighteenth century, the colonial trade became "the most rapidly growing section"--and accounted for a significant proportion of the total volume--of British overseas trade. Imports from the colonies (including the West Indies) accounted for 20 percent of the total volume of English imports in 1700-1701 and 36 percent in 1772-1773, while exports to the colonies rose from 10 percent of the total volume of English exports during the former year to 37 percent during the latter. In real figures, imports from the continental colonies increased very sharply in every decade from an annual average value of £265,480 in 1701-1710 to £667,135 in 1731-1740 and £1,042,619 in 1761-1770, an overall growth of 165 percent. During the same period, exports to the colonies rose over twice as fast, increasing at an overall rate of almost 400 percent from an annual average value of £267,302 in 1701-1710 to £646,192 in 1731-1740 and £1,797,922 in 1761-1770. The colonial trade thus constituted a large and critical segment of the British economy and was becoming more important every decade. It is conventional to think in terms of the colonies' dependence upon Britain, but it is also very important to keep in mind that in the economic sphere Britain was becoming increasingly dependent on the colonies. To a considerable degree, the growing awareness of how much the economic wellbeing of Britain actually did depend upon the colonies, one strongly suspects, accounts for Parliament's willingness to contribute substantial sums toward the expenses of settling Georgia beginning in the 1730s and Nova Scotia starting in 1749 and to make such enormous outlays of money and men in defense of them during the Seven Years' War. Such profitable possessions could never be permitted to fall into the hands of Britain's Continental rivals.