

Excerpts from Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress

Samuel Seabury

Commentary

Parliament followed the Boston Port Bill by revising the Massachusetts charter to increase gubernatorial powers. From a strictly legal perspective, the legislature's response marks its first revolutionary act, for it retreated to the countryside and continued to govern, as best it could, under the old charter. Meanwhile, Parliament enacted several other "Intolerable Acts," which applied to all the colonies. Several colonial legislatures promptly elected delegates to a "Continental Congress," which met in Philadelphia in September, 1774. The Congress was of questionable legality because some legislatures elected delegates after gubernatorial orders to dissolve, and other colonies elected them at local and county conventions.

Most Americans during 1774-1775 did not realize that they were on the verge of founding a new nation. Even militants indignantly (and probably sincerely) denied British allegations that the Congress was illegal and that they wanted independence. Supporters of the Congress argued that their meeting was legal under British law and that endorsing Massachusetts's actions was legal because Parliament had no constitutional authority to revise colonial charters. Moreover, they argued that other congressional actions (petitioning the King to mediate its dispute with Parliament and endorsing another economic boycott) were in accord with legal precedent. Congress did nothing to prepare for war. It simply adjourned after agreeing to meet the following spring, when the King's response would be known, and after issuing its declarations in the name of the "United Colonies."

Just how united were the "United Colonies"? Whereas earlier historians generally believed that only an active minority supported the Revolution, most recent scholars subscribe to a "consensus" interpretation. Yet no one denies that a band of Loyalists existed. Unfortunately, the old cliché that "winners write history" has never been illustrated better than in the case of the

Loyalists. We know little about them, though we know that the term *Loyal* had long been a rhetorical god word used by various politicians to enhance their ethos as defenders of the British constitution. It was not until 1774 that "Loyalist Associations" were formed to oppose the Continental Congress and other "illegal" acts. Prior to that time, some future Loyalists had supported British policy while others had opposed it. Just why former opponents refused to join the budding rebellion is not altogether clear, but existing evidence points to various factors: membership in the Church of England, belief that Parliament had the constitutional authority to tax the colonies, fear of war, and psychological ties to the "mother country."

Being in the minority when passions were intense, Loyalists faced public pressure, mob action and little help from the press. One New York printer was a Loyalist, but mobs soon put him out of business. After fighting began, Loyalists were silenced completely. Even during 1774-1775, only a few managed to get anything into print.

One was Samuel Seabury (1729-1796), an Anglican minister who wrote a series of pamphlets whose title pages said they were "By a Farmer." Seabury's basic rhetorical strategy was to portray the Revolutionists as merchants without concern for the hard-working farmers who would suffer from the economic boycott that the Congress had endorsed. The following excerpts from the first pamphlet, which include his opening paragraph, illustrate this strategy. The excerpts are reproduced from the original pamphlet (1774), which is housed at the American Antiquarian Society, pp. 1, 9-11.

***Excerpts from Free Thoughts on the
Proceedings of the Continental Congress... in a Letter to the
Farmers, and Other Inhabitants of North America in
General, and to Those of the Province of
New-York in Particular***

My Friends and Countrymen,

Permit me to address you upon a subject, which, next to your eternal welfare in a future world, demands your most serious and dispassionate consideration. The American Colonies are unhappily involved in a scene of confusion and discord. The bands of civil society are broken; the authority of government weakened, and in some instances taken away: Individuals are deprived of their liberty; their property is frequently invaded by violence, and not a single Magistrate has had courage or virtue enough to interpose. From this distressed situation it was hoped, that the wisdom and prudence of the Congress lately assembled at Philadelphia, would have delivered us. The eyes of all men were turned to them. We ardently expected that some prudent scheme of accommodating our unhappy disputes with the Mother-Country,

would have been adopted and pursued. But alas! they are broken up without ever attempting it: they have taken no one step that tended to peace: they have gone on from bad to worse, and have either ignorantly misunderstood, carelessly neglected, or basely betrayed the interests of all the Colonies.

The next thing I shall take notice of, is the advanced prices of goods, which will, not only probably, but necessarily, follow, as soon as the non-importation from Great Britain, &c. shall take effect. This is a consequence that most nearly concerns you; nor can you prevent it. You are obliged to buy many articles of clothing. You cannot make them yourselves; or you cannot make them so cheap as you can buy them. You want Woollens for your winter clothing. Few of you have wool enough to answer the purpose. For notwithstanding the boasts of some ignorant, hot-headed men, there is not wool enough on the continent, taking all the colonies together, to supply the inhabitants with stockings. Notwithstanding all the home-spun you can make, many of you find it difficult, at the year's end, to pay the shop-keeper for what the necessities of your families have obliged you to take up. What will you do when the prices of goods are advanced a quarter, for instance, or an half? To say that the prices of goods will not be raised, betrays your ignorance and folly. The price of any commodity always rises in proportion to the demand for it; and the demand always increases in proportion to its scarcity. As soon as the importation ceases in New-York, the quantity of goods will be daily lessened, by daily consumption; and the prices will gradually rise in proportion. "But the merchants of New-York have declared that, they will demand only a reasonable profit." Who is to judge what a reasonable profit is? Why, the merchants. Will they expose their invoices, and the secrets of their trade to you, that you may judge whether their profits are reasonable or not? Certainly they will not. and if they did, you cannot understand them; and, consequently, can form no judgment about them. You have therefore nothing to trust to in this case but the honour of the merchants. Let us then consider how far we have reason to trust to their honour.

Not to raise the price of a commodity when it is scarce, and in demand, is contrary to the principles and practice of merchants. Their maxim is, to buy as cheap, and sell as dear, as they can. Will they let you have a piece of goods for twenty shillings, which will fetch twenty-five? When the stores and shops are full, and a price is demanded which you think unreasonable, you will ask an abatement. If you are refused, you will look elsewhere. But when there are few goods and many buyers, no abatement can be expected. If you won't give the price, your neighbour perhaps is in greater necessity, and *must* give it. Besides, the merchant knows that no more goods can be imported. He knows that the necessities of the country are increasing, and that what you refuse now at twenty shillings, you will be obliged to take, by and by, at twenty-five.

But no argument is like matter of fact. You have had one trial of a non-importation agreement some years ago. Pray how did you like it? Were the prices of goods raised on you then? You know they were. What remedy had

you? A good Christian remedy indeed, but a hard one — patience — and patience only: The honour of the merchants gave you no relief — confound their honour — it obliged me — it obliged many of you, to take old moth-eaten cloths that had lain rotting in the shops for years, and to pay a monstrous price for them.

Some, indeed, I confess it with gratitude, had honour enough to attempt to regulate the price of Tea, at that time. Did they succeed? No. There was not honour enough in the body of merchants to bring it to effect. Messrs.

declared at the Coffee-House, that they would be bound by no regulations. They would have their own price for their tea. They had it. And common bohea tea was sold at the enormous price of nine shillings the pound. Will you again trust to the honour of these men? You had better trust to the mercy of a Turk.

I know not how it happens, but not only the merchants, but the generality of citizens, treat us *countrymen* with very undeserved contempt. They act as though they thought, that all wisdom, all knowledge, all understanding and sense, centered in themselves, and that we farmers were utterly ignorant of every thing, but just to drive our oxen, and to follow the plough. We are never consulted, but when they cannot do without us. And then, all the plans are laid in the City before they are offered to us. Be the potion they prepare for us ever so nauseous, we must swallow it down, as well as we can. It is not many years since the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonalty of the city, shewed their contempt of us, in the most insulting manner. They passed a law to regulate the prices of our produce; and instead of protecting us in their markets, we were exposed to continual abuse and insults. We could not carry a quart of milk, a duck, a chicken, — I think not an egg, — I am sure not a quail or *snipe*, to market, in peace. If they were scarce, we durst not ask an advanced price; for if we did, a fine — or imprisonment, was our portion. — Did they also fix the price of *shop-goods*? catch them at that, and I will humbly ask their pardon. — Where was honour at this time? Troth I cannot tell: But were it necessary, I could easily tell you where she was *not*.