

Writings during the Stamp Act Crisis and the Beginning of the American Revolution

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Abstract

This article seeks to establish that the writings during the Stamp Act crisis galvanized the feelings of the American colonists against the oppression of Great Britain and helped in ushering in the American Revolution. By providing news and information they gave the American colonists the alarms and kept them in alertness to withstand the onslaught of the approaching British tyranny. Through dissemination of ideas, the printing press and the writings spurred the colonists to action. The writings also helped them to assert themselves and steer through the turbulent times and reach the destination. This essay records the phenomenal role of writings in the coming of the American Revolution during the Stamp Act crisis.

The Stamp Act of 1765 galvanized the American Revolution and in this the printing press and the writings played a phenomenal role. London press revealed that the proposed Stamp Act, announced in March 1764, would be passed by the British Parliament the next year. This gave the American colonists a period of one year and a half for deliberation and action since the Act was scheduled to go into effect from November 1, 1765. But strangely, there was no writing on the issue even a long time after the announcement of the proposed Act. While some scholars ascribe it to the sudden confusion and bewilderment on the part of the colonists in the cluster of unprecedented events, others believe that the press-men hesitated as there was no rooted tradition of law defiance and there was uncertainty about eliciting support from their fellow-men. However, by the autumn of 1764 the colonists could perceive the issues in their true relations and proportions and were roused to defend their constitutional rights in the matter of taxation.

Though in 1764 Grenville had offered a scheme to the colonists to tax themselves "it was never couched in terms that were definite enough to permit of action" (Morgan, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan 85-86). Hence, the attempts of both, the Massachusetts Assembly and the colonial agents in London, did not bear any fruit. The contention of the Morgans that the reason behind the year's delay on the part of Grenville was to commission Whately to get the necessary information and prepare the bill for a Stamp tax has been dealt with in detail by Edmund S. Morgan in "The Postponement of the Stamp Act" and in "Colonial Ideas of Parliamentary Power, 1764-1766". All these studies successfully challenge the arguments of the Imperial and the Progressive historians that the colonies did not suggest any alternative to the Stamp Act since they were not opposed to taxation without representation, but to taxation in general. These studies help in establishing the veracity of devotion of the colonists to political and constitutional considerations during the Sugar and the Stamp Acts.

A spirited debate on the proposed Stamp Act in the House of Commons on February 6, 1765 witnessed the support of a large majority for Grenville to present the bill. Petitions against the bill were refused since it violated the Parliamentary privilege to receive petitions

against money bill. Parliament approved it and the Stamp Act became law on March 22, 1765:

Whereas by an act made in the last session of Parliament, several duties were granted, continued and appropriated, towards defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing, the British colonies and plantations in America : and whereas it is just and necessary, that provision be made for raising a further revenue within your Majesty's dominions in America, towards defraying the said expenses ... be it enacted ... That from and after the first day of November, one thousand seven hundred and sixty five, there shall be raised, levied, collected ... [stamp duties on legal papers, commercial papers, liquor, licenses, land instruments, indentures, cards, dice, pamphlets, newspapers, advertisements, almanacs, academic degrees, and appointments to office.] (Pickering 179, 201)

The printers began the attack against the Sugar and the Stamp Acts with strong denunciations against the unjust and illegal tax collections. The merchants and lawyers joined the campaign and during a short span the movement percolated to all other areas of colonial life. Writings played a phenomenal role in this struggle. They served as news and information to the colonists. They were also their alarm bells. They inspired them and gave impetus to action. They accelerated their thoughts and formed their ideas and established their relevance through argument and debate in print. They not only gave expression to their joys in their supposed success, but also provided them with caution and vigilance against the lurking dangers.

Neither any official information nor even a copy of the Stamp Act was sent to the governors of the provinces and to the officers appointed for the collection of duties for several months after the enactment of the Act. It was the colonial newspapers that gave extensive coverage to this event in May 1765 and alarmed the people. John Adams wrote : "This execrable project was set on foot for my own ruin as well as that of America in general, and of Great Britain" (Adams II. 156). He further wrote that the Stamp Act was a stratagem "to strip" them "in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the press, the colleges, and even an almanac and a newspaper, with restraints and duties" (Adams III. 464). Franklin warned his partner David Hall of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in Philadelphia on February 14, 1765 with the following words : "I think it will affect the Printers more than anybody" (Smyth 363-364). James Parker, who was then planning on a paper in Burlington wrote to Franklin on June 14, 1765 and termed it as the "fatal Black-Act" (Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings 198) and he further wrote to Franklin on April 25, 1765 saying that "the News of the Killing Stamp, had struck a deadly blow to all" his "Hopes on that Head" (American Antiquarian Society Proceedings 25). David Ramsay points out that though the Stamp Act had terrible effects on the colonial economy, it was "fortunate for the liberties of America" because, the printers "when uninfluenced by government" had "generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty" and they were not "less remarkable for attention to the profits of their profession" and the "stamp duty, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, provoked their united zealous opposition" (61-62).

The non-importation movements got a fillip and were galvanized through the aid of writings. Innumerable letters to editors in newspapers, extolling the virtues of homespun and homebrew, spurred people to action. Volunteer firemen announced in newspapers that they would increase American supply of wool by not eating lamb. Messages of unstamped

newspapers which appeared weekly encouraged people to stand firm. All these had an electrifying effect on the people.

But writings played the most pivotal role in helping to form and crystallize the ideas of the colonists and in establishing their relevance and position in the then colonial existence. During the Stamp Act crisis they included such issues as taxation and the authority of Parliament and their constitutional rights. In early 1765, even before the passage of the Stamp Act, many writers, mostly English, wrote and defended Parliament's right to tax and denied the constitutional claims of the colonists and their assemblies. Soame Jenyns wrote :

... for, every Englishman is taxed, and not one in twenty is represented. Copyholders, leaseholders, and all men possessed of personal property only, choose no representatives. Manchester, Birmingham, and many more of our richest and most flourishing trading towns send no members to parliament. (quoted in Tyler 83)

Thomas Whately, a confidant of Grenville and the principal author of the Stamp Act, argued that the non-electors in both England and in the colonies were virtually, if not actually, represented in the British Parliament and that a member of the Parliament represented the whole British Empire and not merely the constituency one sat for and on the basis of this argument he not only justified the Sugar Act but also the proposed Stamp Act. Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) which was held in high esteem also assumed that in every polity there had to be one supreme and sovereign legislative authority and he endorsed the conventional British view that "what the Parliament doth, no authority upon earth can undo". During the debate in the House of Commons on January 14, 1766 Grenville opposed Pitt's argument that Parliament had the power to legislate for the colonies but could not tax them. Grenville held the view that taxation was only a branch of legislation and that there was no limitation upon Parliament's authority over the colonies. The House of Lords also witnessed such a debate on February 3, 1766 between Camden and Mansfield on the issue of the Declaratory Act (which was to accompany the repeal of the Stamp Act), providing authority to Parliament to make laws for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever". Camden maintained that the proposed Declaratory Act would violate the laws of nature and the principle of no taxation without representation. But Mansfield argued that Parliament's authority in the British Empire was supreme and ultimate and he cited a number of precedents in support of his argument and the Declaratory Act was passed.

The British stand on taxation and Parliamentary authority was immediately challenged by a large number of American writers. Otis wrote in the pamphlet entitled *Consideration on Behalf of the Colonies* :

To what purpose is it to ring everlasting changes to the colonists on the cases of Manchester, Birmingham, and Sheffield, who return no members ? If these now so considerable places are not represented, they ought to be ! ... So, a small minority rules and governs the majority. (quoted in Tyler 87)

He admitted the supremacy of Parliament inside the entire British Empire but pleaded for leniency on the part of Parliament toward the American colonies. Earlier, in 1764, he had already advocated for American representation in the British Parliament in his pamphlet *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*. John Adams considered the Stamp Act as an example of "ecclesiastical and civil tyranny"(Adams III. 451). John Dickinson, in *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies*, wrote in opposition to the policy out of which the Stamp Act had come to pass, but like Otis, Dickinson's was marked by a tone of supplication, that "their resentment" should be "the resentment of dutiful children" who had

“received unmerited blows from a beloved parent” (Bailyn 690). An anonymous pamphlet entitled *Considerations upon the Rights of the Colonists* made open avowal of the Doctrine of Nullification which was then in vogue and pleaded to frustrate the Act which was designed to enslave them.

It was as early as this period that some even ventured to vociferously express their feelings about the dissolution of government. Stephen Johnson boldly argued against the constitutionality of the Stamp Act and warned England that the persistence of such policies would witness a bloody revolution in which Great Britain would suffer “the loss of two millions of the best affected subjects” (quoted in Tyler 100). Richard Bland considered the colonies as separate states, “independent, as to their internal Government, of the original Kingdom, but united with her, as to their external Polity, in the closest and most intimate LEAGUE AND AMITY, under the same Allegiance, and enjoying the Benefits of a reciprocal Intercourse” (Hyneman and Lutz 79). He went on to say that “America was no part of the Kingdom of England” and it was “settled by Englishmen at their own Expense, under particular Stipulations with the Crown” (Hyneman and Lutz 80) and hence the colonists had the “Right ... of directing their internal Government by Laws made with their own Consent, which has been preserved to them by repeated Acts and Declarations of the Crown” (Hyneman and Lutz 81). Of the many examples of the hypothetical declaration of independence preceding the real one, an anonymous poem entitled “Oppression” appeared in London in 1765 written by an American just then staying in London. Though this verse satire ended with a filial note, it was a pungent castigation against the Stamp Act and predicted independence if the utterly detestable colonial policies were pursued by the British government. On December 10, 1765 the Sons of Liberty group at New London, Connecticut took resolutions relating to the dissolution of government wherein they stated that when a government exceeded the boundaries set by the people, the people have a right to overthrow it. But even though these views were indicative of the direction the colonial feelings were gradually assuming, they were certainly then ahead of the time and were to take a coherent shape in later years only.

The British position on taxation was squarely and effectively met with, in keeping with the tradition and also with the times, by the colonial Assemblies and the Stamp Act Congress. On May 30, 1765 the Virginia House of Burgesses, sparked by Patrick Henry, adopted a set of five resolutions which unequivocally declared the rights of the colonists and emphatically challenged the right of Parliament to tax the colonies. The third resolution read as follows :

Resolved, That the Taxation of the People by themselves, or by Persons chosen by themselves to represent them, who can only know what Taxes the People are able to bear, or the easiest Method of raising them, and must themselves be affected by every Tax laid on the People, is the only Security against a burthensome Taxation, and the distinguishing Characteristic of British Freedom, without which the ancient Constitution cannot exist. (Kennedy lxvii)

On May 31 the fifth resolution was rescinded which stated that “the General Assembly of Virginia” had “the only and sole exclusive Right and Power to lay Taxes and Impositions upon the Inhabitants” of Virginia and held that “every Attempt to vest such Power in any other Person or Persons” had “a manifest Tendency to destroy British as well as **American Freedom**” (Kennedy frontispiece). It is not clear whether the sixth and the seventh resolutions failed to pass or were not at all discussed. The sixth resolution asserted that the “Inhabitants of ” Virginia were “not bound to yield Obedience to any Law or Ordinance whatsoever, designed to impose any Taxation upon them, other than the Laws or Ordinances of the General Assembly” of Virginia and the seventh one stated that “any Person or Persons,

other than the General Assembly of ” Virginia assuming “any Right or Authority to lay or impose any Tax whatever on the Inhabitants thereof, shall be Deemed, AN ENEMY TO” the colony of Virginia and they were published in *Newport Mercury* on June 24, 1765 and *Maryland Gazette* on July 4, 1765 respectively. Thus the first four remaining resolutions also asserted, though in less aggressive tone than fifth, sixth and seventh, the right of the colonists not to be taxed without their own consent or of their representatives even though it did not challenge the right of Parliament to tax. But the wide publication of all the seven Virginia Resolves in the American newspapers electrified the atmosphere in most other colonies so that with the exception of Georgia, North Carolina, Delaware, and New Hampshire, all the other eight of the rest of twelve colonies made resolutions, modeled on the Virginia Resolves, declaring their rights and denying the authority of Parliament to tax the colonies. Rhode Island was the first to be inspired. While almost entirely adopting the six Virginia Resolves which had been printed in the *Newport Mercury*, Rhode Island added another which read :

That all the officers in this colony, appointed by the authority thereof, be, and they are hereby, directed to proceed in the execution of their respective offices in the same manner as usual; and that this Assembly will indemnify and save harmless all the said officers, on account of their conduct, agreeably to this resolution. (Records of the Colony of Rhode Island 451-452)

Pennsylvania stated that they considered their annually elected members of Assembly to be their only legal representatives and on September 21, 1765 declared :

That the Inhabitants of this Province are entitled to all the Liberties, Rights and Privileges of his Majesty’s Subjects in Great-Britain, or elsewhere, and that the Constitution of Government in this Province is founded on the Natural Rights of Mankind, and the noble Principles of English Liberty, and therefore is, or ought to be, perfectly free. (Pennsylvania Archives 5779)

Likewise, in reply to Governor Bernard’s address to the Massachusetts Assembly on September 25, 1765, the Massachusetts House of Representatives stated :

the charter of the province invests the General Assembly with the power of making laws for its internal government and taxation ... there are certain original inherent rights belonging to the people, which the Parliament itself cannot divest them of ... among these is the right of representation in the same body which exercises the power of taxation. There is a necessity that the subjects of America should exercise this power within themselves, otherwise they can have no share in that most essential right, for they are not represented in Parliament, and indeed we think it impracticable. (Bradford 45)

The Assembly of Maryland stated that it could not be said, with truth or propriety, that the colonists were represented in the British Parliament and Connecticut Assembly affirmed that Parliament could legislate but not tax the colonies. So too were the three other of the twelve colonies who denied the right of Parliament to tax them.

The Massachusetts House of Representatives, on June 8, 1765, gave a call to other colonies to meet in a Congress for a deliberation on the Stamp Act and other grievances. The Stamp Act Congress met in New York on October 7 and transacted its business within the space of seventeen days. On October 19 it adopted fourteen formal declarations of rights and grievances. In addition three elaborate addresses were adopted, one to the King and one to the House of Lords on October 22 and one to the House of Commons on October 23. All these

papers may be said to constitute the official colonial constitutional position during the Stamp Act crisis. Though the declaration began with the acknowledgement of the colonies of “all due Subordination” (Stamp Act Congress 15) to Parliament, they proceeded to deny the authority of Parliament to tax since “no Taxes be imposed on” the colonists “but with their own Consent, given personally, or by their Representatives” (Stamp Act Congress 15). They also denied the British Parliament as the representative of Americans as “all Supplies to the Crown, being free Gifts of the People” it was “unreasonable and inconsistent with the Principles and Spirit of the British Constitution, for the People of Great-Britain, to grant to his Majesty the Property of the Colonists” (Stamp Act Congress 15). Having refuted the concept of virtual representation, they also rejected the view of Otis and Bernard about actual representation, of American representation in the British Parliament. They stated : “That the People of these Colonies are not, and from their local Circumstances cannot be, Represented in the House of Commons in Great-Britain” (Stamp Act Congress 15). In refutation to the argument of Car L. Becker in *The Declaration of Independence* and of the other Progressive and the Imperial historians that the Stamp Act Congress and the colonists made distinction between internal and external taxes, Edmund S. Morgan has clearly and extensively asserted that the Stamp Act Congress and the colonists made no such distinction. In the petition to the House of Commons, the Stamp Act Congress differentiated between “Parliamentary Jurisdiction in general Acts, for the Amendment of the Common Law, and the Regulation of Trade and Commerce” (Stamp Act Congress 23) and that of taxing the colonies. Having made the distinction between taxation and legislation, it sought to confine the power of Parliament to legislation only. The Stamp Act Congress even did not intend to attribute unlimited legislating power to Parliament and disapproved legislation relating to the curtailing of the rights of trial by jury (Stamp Act Congress 15) and objected to the extension of admiralty jurisdiction over Navigation Acts on the ground of being unconstitutional (Stamp Act Congress 16). But taxation was the paramount issue during the Stamp Act crisis. The thought of putting shackles on the legislative power of Parliament belonged to the event of a later period.

But of all the American writings refuting the constitutionality of the British Parliament taxing the American colonies, the most effective and the most widely read was the pamphlet entitled *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies for the Purpose of Raising a Revenue* written by Daniel Dulany which served as a death-blow to the concept of virtual representation. Dulany sought to put the situations of the American non-electors and the British non-electors in their proper perspective. He argued that the concept of virtual representation might be applicable to Great Britain, where the interests “of the non-electors, the electors, and the representatives are individually the same” (Bailyn 612) and the “electors, who are inseparably connected in their interests with the nonelectors, may be justly deemed to be the representatives of the non-electors” (Bailyn 612), but there was “not that intimate and inseparable relation between the electors of Great Britain and the inhabitants of the colonies which must inevitably involve both in the same taxation” (Bailyn 615). Dulany admitted the right of Parliament to levy duties in the colonies “to regulate their trade” (Bailyn 638), but denied its right to impose taxes “for the single purpose of revenue” (Bailyn 638) and the constitutionality of a duty was to be judged by its intent.

The Stamp Act was repealed on March 18, 1766. Though a post-war recession along with the massive success of the American non-importation activities considerably influenced the repeal, yet the role of writings in it can never be undermined. The American boycott of English goods reached such terrible proportions that the British mercantile community was shocked and alarmed. The petitions from the merchants of London, urging the repeal of the Stamp Act, was presented to Parliament on January 17, 1766. Early in 1766 the British merchants sent innumerable petitions to the Parliament for repeal. Though the members of

Parliament took the challenging declarations of the colonial assemblies with a pinch of salt, the papers of the Stamp Act Congress, with their sedate and moderate tone of appeal, were effectively put forth by Rockingham which had a benign effect on the members. The Rockingham Government, along with Pitt and his followers, were favorably disposed toward the repeal. Pitt supported the American cause in the House of Commons and argued that Parliament had only the power to legislate and not to tax the colonies. The influence of Dulany's pamphlet *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies for the Purpose of Raising a Revenue* on Pitt in the repeal of the Stamp Act can clearly be ascertained from a comparative study of Dulany's pamphlet and Pitt's speeches on this issue (Niles 457-460).

The repeal of the Stamp Act on March 18, 1766 brought unprecedented enthusiasm and delight in the Americans. It witnessed a national revelry in the colonies. Among other forms of expression of joy on the occasion, writings poured forth in its celebration. Addresses were sent to Barre, and Conway and Lord Camden. A gold-medal was offered on this occasion in the college of Philadelphia for the best essay on "The Reciprocal Advantages of a Perpetual Union between Great Britain and her American Colonies." John Adams wrote: "The repeal of the Stamp Act has hushed into silence almost every popular clamor, and composed every wave of popular disorder into a smooth and peaceful calm" (Adams II. 203).

Along with joy, the repeal of the Stamp Act brought puzzle and bewilderment to the sensitive and alert colonists and they believed that vigilance and alertness are the prerequisites for the preservation of liberty. The note of disquietude among the colonists was the result of the presence of the Declaratory Act with the repeal of the Stamp Act. Very significantly, the colonists, through their writings at that time, sent signals of vigilance and alertness. The impact of the Declaratory Act on the colonists did not even escape the notice of sensitive Englishmen. In a letter to Pitt, Lord Shelburne wrote that it generated a suspicion of the British government in America. John Adams wondered whether the British Parliament would not, in future, impose a tax in the colonies on the basis of the Declaratory Act. This foreboding and gloomy suspicion found expression in numerous writings of the period. Mayhew wrote to Otis emphasizing American unity and vigilance :

Cultivating a good understanding and hearty relationship between these colonies, appears to me so necessary a part of prudence and good policy, that no favorable opportunity for that purpose should be omitted. I think such an one now presents. Would it not be proper and decorous for our assembly to send circulars to all the rest, on the late repeal of the Stamp Act, and the present favorable aspect of affairs... expressing a desire to cement and perpetuate union among ourselves, by all laudable methods ? ... It is not safe for the colonies to sleep; for it is probably they will always have some wakeful enemies in Great Britain. (quoted in Tyler 139-140)

Thus, through news and information, through alarm and inspiration and through expression of thoughts and arguments of debate in print, the printing press and the writings gave impetus to the American colonists for action and galvanized the revolution.

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