

11 A Taxing King

Government

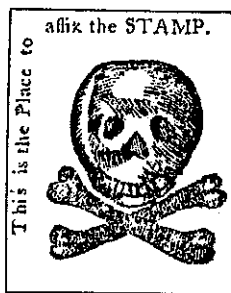
officials are sometimes called "ministers." They are not ministers of religion. It is confusing, but keep in mind that there are two kinds of ministers: of government and of religion. England's Prime Minister is the leader of the country's government.

Peevish means irritable.

No Right to Tax

William Pitt was an old man, and sick, but he spoke in the House of Commons on January 14, 1766, anyway:

It is my opinion, that this kingdom has no right to lay a tax upon the colonies....The Commons of America [the colonial assemblies] have ever been in possession of...their constitutional rights, of giving and granting their own money....At the same time, this kingdom...has always bound the colonies by her laws, her regulations...in every thing except that of taking their money out of their pockets without their consent. Here I would draw the line.



The colonists' opinion of the Stamp Act. On the opposite page, inset, is one of the hated British stamps.

Benjamin Franklin knew that sometimes the best way to get people to think is to make them laugh. So when he was serious, he wrote a joking poem. Here is part of it:

*We have an old mother that peevish is grown;
She snubs us like children that scarce walk alone;
She forgets we're grown up and have sense of
our own.*

Who was the "old mother?" Why, England, of course! "We" were the colonists. Ben Franklin was right. King George III and his ministers didn't believe the colonists were grown up and capable of ruling themselves. The colonists knew they were. After all, they'd been running most of their own affairs from the time they first arrived in the New World. But even England's William Pitt, who was a friend of America, wrote, "This is the mother country, they are the children; they must obey, and we prescribe."

Part of the problem was that almost none of the English leaders had been to America—or cared to go. They didn't understand the country or its people. One London newspaper called Americans "a mongrel breed."

Now we were, and are, exactly that. A mongrel (MONG-grull) is a dog that is a mixture of breeds—a mutt. From our beginnings, we were a mixture of peoples. That was unusual for a nation. We were attempting something difficult and challenging. The London newspaper thought it was insulting us when it said "mongrel breed." Well, it was no insult—unless, of course, they were calling us dogs.

As I've told you, most colonists (no matter where they came

FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

from) thought of themselves as English citizens, so they were hurt by sneers from London. But, to be fair, the colonists didn't quite understand themselves. Even those who had come from England weren't really English anymore. They were now Americans. The people who came to America were different from the stay-at-homes in Europe. Many had risked their lives and gone through great hardships to cross the ocean and build homes and farms in a land of thick forests. They weren't going to let anyone tell them how to run their country. King George never thought about that.

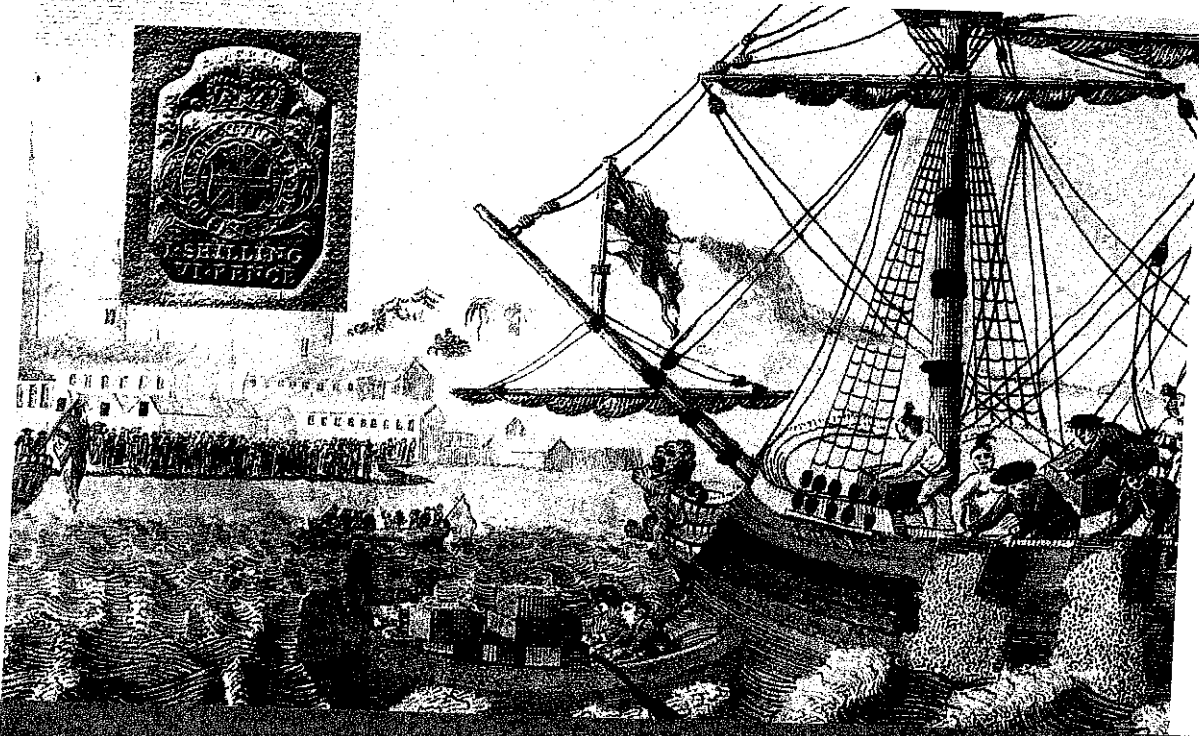
What George and his ministers wanted to do was to teach the colonists a lesson. So they levied taxes, they wouldn't listen when the colonists complained, and they sent soldiers to America. The soldiers had to be housed and fed by the Americans. The British claimed the soldiers were to protect the colonists—but from whom?

At first the Americans were bothered, then they were angered, and then they fought. That fight is called the American Revolution or the War of Independence.

In some ways it really was like a fight between parents and children. Sometimes those kinds of fights come about because parents don't realize their children are grown-up and can take care of themselves. Sometimes the children aren't as thoughtful as they could be. There was something to be said for both sides in this quarrel. But, almost everyone agrees, King George made some big mistakes. His pride



An English historian said of George III (above), "He was very stupid, really stupid...a clod of a boy whom no one could teach." George was furious when, in 1773, a group of men threw a shipful of tea into Boston harbor rather than pay tax on it (below). The inset shows a tax stamp for 1 shilling and 6 pence, proving that the correct tax has been paid for a certain amount of tea.



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Party On, George

It was now evening, and I immediately dressed myself in the costume of an Indian, equipped with a small hatchet...with which, and a club, after having painted my face and hands with coal dust in the shop of a blacksmith, I repaired to Griffin's Wharf, where the ships lay that contained the tea....I fell in with many who were dressed, equipped and painted as I was, and who fell in with me and marched in order to the place of our destination.... We then were ordered by our commander to open the hatches and take out all the chests of tea and throw them overboard, and we immediately



The tea rebels smeared their faces with red ocher and dressed as Indians.

proceeded to execute his orders, first cutting and splitting the chests with our tomahawks, so as to thoroughly expose them to the effects of the water.

—GEORGE HEWES, A PARTICIPANT IN THE BOSTON TEA PARTY

was more important to him than the valuable American colonies.

George wanted to be a good king. But to be a good king you need some wisdom, and George III didn't have much. He wasn't anywhere as smart as you are.

When George was 10 he was just beginning to learn to read. He never read well. His mother was often heard saying to him, "Be a king, George." Maybe she realized that he wasn't made of kingly material. Later in his life he became ill and hardly able to work. Sometimes he raged and screamed and scared his advisers. That is one of the problems with monarchies: you never know how those royal kids are going to turn out. George III wasn't a bad man;

he was actually quite nice. He just wasn't up to the job of being king.

Remember the Glorious Revolution that gave Parliament more power than the king? Well, George III wasn't happy with that arrangement. He wanted kings to have more power. He chose government officials who seemed to agree with him. One was Charles Townshend (TOWNS-end). Townshend was known to his friends as "Champagne Charlie." He was a likable man who sometimes got very drunk. Townshend enraged the Americans by sponsoring taxes they thought were unfair.

Nobody likes to pay taxes. In England, people had just protested over a tax on cider. (Cider was a very popular drink. It was alcoholic, unlike the sweet cider you may have tried.) But the British government was having problems with its budget; it needed money. Foreign wars had left England with big bills to pay. The British thought the colonies should help pay some of those bills, especially the ones from the expensive French and Indian War. And maybe we would have,

In 1774 a band of angry colonists tarred and feathered the British customs commissioner, Mr. John Malcomb, for doing his job—trying to collect customs duties on goods imported into America.



FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

but George III and his ministers didn't explain things well; they just demanded taxes. The colonists knew how European kings and barons taxed the peasants and kept them poor. They didn't want to risk that kind of treatment. People in America began to get nervous and angry.

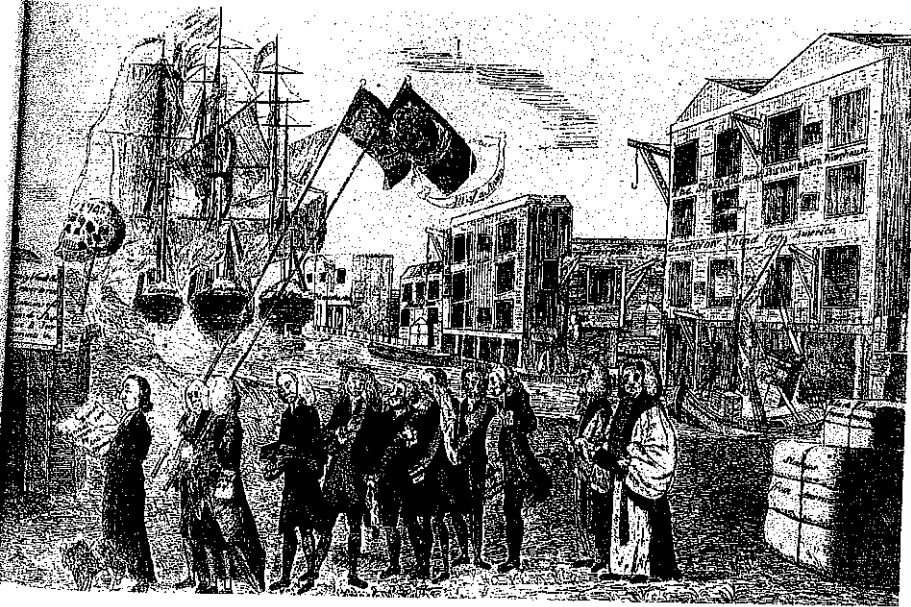
The colonists kept talking about Magna Carta and English rights. They said Englishmen had the right to vote on their own taxes. They expected that same right. But since no colonists served in Parliament, no colonists got to vote on taxes. The colonists complained that they were being taxed without being represented. They said, "No taxation without representation." That meant they wanted to vote on their own taxes, in their own assemblies, as they had been doing.

King George and his ministers were stubborn. They wanted to show the colonists who was boss. So they levied more taxes.

It was the Stamp Tax (passed in 1765) that enraged most Americans. The colonists were supposed to buy a British stamp for every piece of printed paper they used. That meant every sheet of the newspaper, every document, every playing card—everything. The colonists wouldn't do it. They got so angry they attacked some of the British stamp agents and put tar all over them and then feathers in the tar. It was a nasty thing to do, but George III and Parliament got the idea. The Stamp Tax could not be collected. It was repealed.

If you sell more than you buy, you prosper—right? That is the theory behind a system of trade called "mercantilism." Here is its basic idea: if you export more than you import you will be rich. That economic philosophy captivated the 18th century. Many English products (such as furniture, tools, and fabrics) were made from raw materials (lumber, iron, and cotton) shipped from the colonies. Those finished products were then sold in the colonies and around the world. England wanted to keep Americans from making and trading their own finished products. For mercantilism to work well, one nation has to be in charge. When the colonies tried to make its own products and control its own commerce, relations with England turned icy.

This famous cartoon portrayed the repeal of the Stamp Act as a solemn funeral for "Miss Stamp." She didn't last long—less than a year.



Then "Champagne Charlie" Townshend decided to tax lead, glass, paper, paint, and tea. That upset the colonists so much they decided to get even by not buying anything made in England. It was the English merchants who got angry about that—it cost them a lot of money—and they demanded that the Townshend taxes be repealed. They were, in 1770, except for the tax on tea. It was a small tax, but King George wanted to prove that he and Parliament could tax Americans if they wished to.

To the colonists, that tea tax was an example of taxation without representation. So, in 1773, some people in Boston decided to show King George and Parliament and Lord Townshend what they thought of the tax on tea. They dressed up as Indians and climbed on a ship in Boston harbor and threw 342 chests of good English tea into the water. Americans called it the Boston Tea Party, but the English didn't. They called it an outrage.

King George was furious! His prime minister, Lord North, ordered Boston harbor closed. Now Lord North was described by another lord as a "great, heavy, booby looking" fellow. He was also called "indolent," which means lazy. Later, a historian wrote that Lord North was "ready to say yes to whatever his royal master might thunder." And poor King George was doing a lot of thundering. The king was ill. Today doctors

think he was suffering from a rare disease that affected his mind and emotions: he often lost his temper and went into rages. When he did, Lord North tried to please the king, not the colonists.

Closing Boston harbor meant no ships could enter or leave. That put half the citizens of Boston out of work. They weren't even able to fish in their own waters. Boston lived on its sea trade, and people worried that they might starve. Suddenly the other colonies, which had



John Rutledge Visits

What should they do about the Stamp Tax? Twenty-six-year-old John Rutledge sailed from South Carolina to New York in 1765 to meet in a congress with leaders from nine other colonies. Perhaps they could figure out a common plan of action. Young as he was, Rutledge was already known as an eloquent speaker and a power in South Carolina politics.

"It is my first trip to a foreign country," Rutledge wrote to his mother in New York. London was the capital of his world; he had been schooled as a lawyer there.

New York, like his own Charleston, was a great port bounded by two rivers. Each city had about 14,000 residents. But in New York 2,000 were slaves; in Charleston 8,000 were enslaved. (What percentage of the population is that?) That made the cities seem like different worlds.

Rutledge hardly had time to walk about and consider the differences when there was great excitement in the city. Sir William Johnson had arrived with 200 Indians to buy supplies for his 30 trading posts. It was the most important event of the year for New York's merchants. It seemed

A rioting mob in Boston (left) protests the Stamp Act by throwing stamped documents on a bonfire.

Visit a Foreign Country and Attends a Stamp Act Congress

far more important—at the time—than a congress called to discuss the Stamp Act. The Iroquois had come down the post road from Albany and a drum and fife corps greeted them as they rode their horses onto Manhattan Island. Johnson camped with his Indian friends in a meadow by a stream near tiny Greenwich Village.

John Rutledge was lodged at the King's Arms tavern, the finest inn in the city. He hired a coach and went to visit Sir William. The Mohawk lord was now one of the most famous of all Americans. Everyone knew he had saved the land west of the Appalachians from French rule.

After they talked of the Stamp Act and politics and England, Sir William told the young southerner of the Haudenosaunee (ho-din-no-SHAW-nee), which was the name for the parliament of the Iroquois nations. "If England is to become a great nation," said Johnson, "she must go to school with the Iroquois." By that Johnson meant that the six Iroquois nations had an idea of government that worked so well that the Europeans needed to learn about it. The idea was this: each Iroquois nation governed

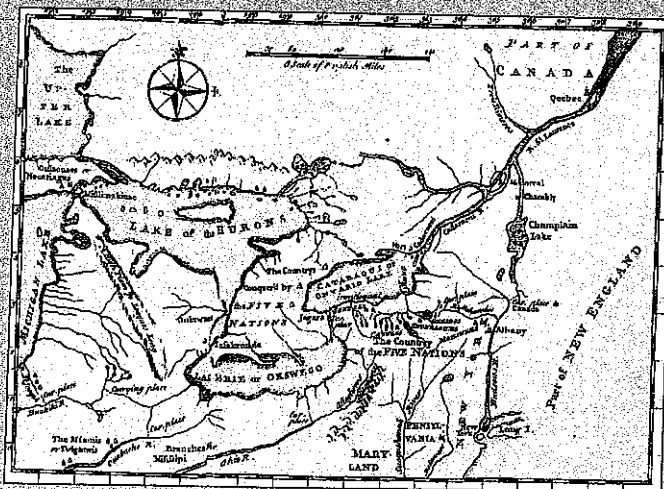
itself but all were linked together in time of war or when there was business affecting them all. It was that linkage that had made the Iroquois the strongest Indians in the land. Benjamin Franklin had been impressed with that idea when he met with the Iroquois at Albany. Now Rutledge was impressed.

He visited the Mohawk camp again and again, and Sir William came to dinner at the King's Arms. Johnson's ideas startled the brilliant young lawyer. In South Carolina no one thought of Indians as partners on the continent. Rutledge listened and learned.

New York no longer seemed a foreign nation. He had more in

common with these colonists from places like Boston and Philadelphia and Albany than he had imagined possible. The delegates to the Stamp Act Congress sent a petition to England's Parliament saying that colonial taxes should be raised only by colonial legislatures. That was the way it had always been done. Besides, it was a right of all British subjects to have their own representatives voting on their own taxes. John Rutledge approved the petition.

Then he went home, taking some new thoughts to South Carolina. Soon he would head north again, to Philadelphia, for a much bigger congress.



The country of the five Iroquois nations—before the sixth, the Tuscaroras, joined.

never before paid much attention to one another, all felt sorry for Boston and angry with the king and Lord North. They sent supplies and encouragement. Connecticut sent money; South Carolina sent rice; New York sent sheep. Virginia set aside a day to pray for Boston. During that day the Virginians began to talk about independence. At first the colonists had just wanted England to treat them like grown-ups. Now that wasn't enough. Now they were thinking seriously about breaking away, about being free.

In 1773, Parliament gave the East India Company the right to sell tea in the colonies for less than the smuggled tea Boston merchants were selling. That's what really made them angry.