

*Warfare and History*



THE WAR  
FOR INDEPENDENCE  
AND THE  
TRANSFORMATION  
OF  
AMERICAN SOCIETY

*Harry M. Ward*

The War for Independence  
and the Transformation  
of American Society

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# The War for Independence and the Transformation of American Society

Harry M. Ward

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but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

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## *Preface*

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This book assesses the impact of the War for Independence on the lives of Americans during the period of the conflict.

The Revolutionary War established a nation and confirmed American identity. The ideals expounded translated into guideposts for creating a Republican society, with emphasis on citizen responsibility and the promotion and protection of opportunity for freedom and equality. If societal reform seems minimal during the immediate war period, vistas were opened for continuity in progress. While the war during its span effected political reconstruction, stirred social mobility, brought economic self-sufficiency and expansion, and fixed in the American popular culture the “Spirit of ’76,” the war also had a negative side in the oppression of dissenting and ethnic minorities, further ingraining violence as endemic to the collective consciousness of the people, hardening class lines between the poor and the more affluent, bolting down more securely the institution of slavery, and accentuating even further sectional awareness and animosity. Yet most Americans united in spirit and action at least to some degree in support for the war. Like other wars in American history, however, there was the belief that the Revolutionary conflict could be easily won, making for less than adequate backing for the war effort and dissensions and frustrations. But total victory eclipsed in memory the dissonances. Largely overlooked in perceptions of the Revolutionary War is that during the war Americans were redefining themselves while forming expectations for the future.

Historians over time have searched for the meaning of the Revolution—its causes, objectives, and results. Historiography swerved from the celebratory tones of the nineteenth century to twentieth-century fathoming of the competing and conflicting forces that lay below the surface. “Progressive” historians exposed the theme of men on the make seeking to distract by a large war the underclass from their aspirations for a society

## PREFACE

more democratic and equal. From the imperialist historians there is the emphasis on colonies maturing economically and politically so that as a matter of course challenges rose against British rule. While historians have generally stressed the conservative side of the Revolution—the desire to preserve the entitlement of British Americans to the same liberties belonging to Englishmen in the realm—some recent historians have found much of the push toward rebellion in the persistence of constitutional crises depicted from the patriot view in libertarian rhetoric, influenced by the radicalism of English reformers.

Historians have taken as a cue for the study of Revolutionary society John Franklin Jameson's little book, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926). Despite providing a peripheral and very insubstantial analysis in four short essays (on land, status of persons, industry and commerce, and thought and feeling), Jameson sounded the alert for the need for an examination of the social dimensions of the American Revolution. Valuable work has now been accomplished on fragments of community, such as the soldiers, women, family, African Americans, Native Americans, camp followers, and the "lower sort," namely laborers and craftsmen.

There is something about the social complexion of the American Revolution that invites chronologically open-ended treatment rather than consideration of the Revolution in its immediate timeframe and on its own terms. The war-and-society phase is all but passed over. There has long been a need to study the Revolution and its relation to society within the context of the war itself. This is a challenging task since trends and activity cannot be neatly boxed, with social change having roots before the war and extensions into the postwar period. But the climate of war and its particular effects on the lives of those who lived through it can be analyzed. To clarify and evaluate wartime development, however, it is necessary to carry the discussion in some instances, particularly relating to institutional factors, into the immediate postwar decade.

Americans had a wide range of war-related experiences. In this study, besides examining the home front and how lives were affected and the military-civilian connections, it is important not to lose sight of the aim of the rebellion—*independence*. This work elicits aspects of wartime society during the Revolution that largely have been neglected and thereby should stimulate interest in further investigations.

I wish to thank Jeremy Black for bringing me into the Warfare and History Series and for helpful suggestions. The staffs of the Library of Virginia (the Virginia state library) and the Boatwright Library of the University of Richmond afforded great assistance, and especially I thank Nancy Vick and Noreen Cullen of the interlibrary loan department of the Boatwright Library for their prompt help, even securing rare materials from various institutions.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### *A people in rebellion*

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American colonists on the eve of the Revolution shared a common identity that set themselves apart from Britons elsewhere. The New World settlers had forged a society and culture from multi-ethnic elements (English, Dutch, German, Scots-Irish and other Europeans), affected also by contact with native Americans and African slaves. A sense of destiny beckoned from the lure of a spacious frontier. The recent victory in the French and Indian War, the culmination of a long duel for a continent, left impressions of pride and invincibility. If challenged to defend against external encroachment upon their liberties, Americans were capable of translating their commonality into independence and union.

A revolutionary movement for the repudiation of parliamentary authority had formed during the decade since 1763. Protest forced the British government to retreat from levying taxes upon the colonies. Parliament, though insisting on plenary power in America, conceded to demands of the colonists to refrain from internal taxation and eventually also external taxes for revenue. Without new provocation the patriot cause seemed on the decline. But new parliamentary measures, in response to American reaction to the Tea Act of 1773, triggered a war.

“An Act to allow a Drawback of the Duties of Customs on the Exportation of Tea . . .” renewed the 3d. tea impost duty (first imposed by the Revenue Act of 1767) and aimed at ensuring a monopoly of tea sold in America by the British East India Company. With inland duties rebated in England, tea could be sold cheaper than before in America, interfering with merchants’ profits made from retailing smuggled tea. Boston rebel leaders now saw the opportunity once again to exploit the “no taxation without representation” issue when East India tea arrived in Boston harbor. The destruction of the tea by a riotous assembly on the night of December 16, 1773 led to a get-tough policy from the home government. Because of the

impossibility of fixing culpability upon individuals parliament responded with punitive measures. More than submitting to a levy of import duties, colonists now faced strident curtailment of liberties.

The Boston Port Act (March 31, 1774), to be rescinded only if Massachusetts indemnified the East India Company for its loss of property, provided for the closure of shipping in Boston harbor. The customhouse was moved to Marblehead and the seat of the Massachusetts government to Salem. The British ministry calculated that severe measures against one colony would not arouse hostility from others, given the well-known sectional rivalry among the northern, middle and southern colonies. To compound the harshness of the Port Act, parliament also enacted the Massachusetts Government Act, intended as a permanent reform, which made councillors appointed by the crown rather than elected by the lower house of the legislature, forbade town meetings without approval by the governor other than for the purpose of annual election, and conferred on the governor authority to appoint all judicial and other officials, including sheriffs and jurors. The Administration of Justice Act, considered also one of the Coercive Acts, allowed crown officials indicted for capital offenses to be tried in England or another province. The three laws collectively underscored the far reaching powers of parliament as infringements on the fundamental rights of Englishmen. Edmund Burke, a member of parliament, correctly gauged the issue that would confront parliament as a result of passing the acts of coercion: it was no longer a question of the “degrees of Freedom or restraint in which they [the colonists] were to be held, but whether they should be totally separated from their connexion with, and dependence on the parent Country of Great Britain.”<sup>1</sup>

### **“The Boston Suffering a Common Cause”**

Colonists everywhere made the plight of Boston and Massachusetts their own. On June 1, 1774, “being the day when the cruel act for blocking up the harbor of Boston took effect,” many Philadelphians, “to express their sympathy and show their concern for their suffering brethren in the common cause of liberty,” closed their shops and refrained “from hurry and business;” muffled church bells rang throughout the day in the city, crowds attended religious services, and flags of ships in the Philadelphia harbor were hoisted at half-mast.<sup>2</sup>

The Boston Port Act caused “innumerable hardships.” Provisions and other necessities could only be ferried into Boston by way of Salem or Marblehead, and other goods traveled a round about way by land through Boston neck. Wood boats had to load and unload at Marblehead. The inconveniences added to the price of commodities. “Our wharfs are entirely deserted,” complained a well-to-do Boston merchant; “not a topsail

vessel to be seen there or in the harbor, save the ships of war and transports." It was "no uncommon thing to hear the carriers and waggons," who brought goods in by land, "when they pass a difficult place in the road, to whip their horses and damn Lord North."<sup>3</sup>

The interruption of commerce at Boston put mariners and laborers out of employment. Propertyless and as wage earners, these underclass workmen, one fourth of Boston's population, did not have the resources for survival as did merchants and established artisans. The Boston town meeting on May 13, 1774 formed a Committee of Ways and Means, which along with the Overseers of the Poor, was charged with finding aid for the newly unemployed. The Overseers of the Poor, after a few weeks, won exemption from this responsibility since they already had the burden of caring for the regular indigent. Thus the town government revamped the Ways and Means Committee into a Committee of Donations, which had the primary functions of receiving aid sent to Boston and establishing a work relief program. The Committee of Donations interviewed applicants for eligibility for public assistance. From funds obtained, the committee put the new welfare recipients to work repairing roads, making bricks at a new brickyard, cleaning docks, building wharfs and houses, and digging wells for use at fires. Moneys were also spent to set up looms for spinning and to buy materials to supply ropemakers, blacksmiths, and shoemakers. Some of those in the relief program complained because they had "to work hard for that which they esteem as their right without work."<sup>4</sup>

New England towns quickly came to the aid of "the industrious poor" in Boston, sending grain, sheep, cattle, codfish, and money. "United we stand—divided we fall," declared the *New Hampshire Gazette* of July 22, 1774. "Supplies of provisions sent from all the Colonies are pouring into Boston for the support of the suffering poor there," wrote Reverend Ezra Stiles of Newport, Rhode Island. "All the Colonies make the Boston Suffering a common Cause, and intend to stand by one another."<sup>5</sup> The Continental Congress several months later resolved that "all America ought to contribute towards recompensing" the people of Boston "for the injury they may thereby sustain."<sup>6</sup>

Substantial contributions flowed from local committees in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Because of the difficulty of bringing commodities to Boston, goods were auctioned on the spot or carried to a New England port such as Providence and converted into cash or bills of exchange to be forwarded to Boston. Typical of cover letters accompanying gifts to the Boston Committee of Donations was that of a Bucks County, Pennsylvania committee, giving notice that it had resolved "That we hold it as our bounden duty, both as Christians and as countrymen, to contribute towards the relief and support of the poor inhabitants of the Town of Boston, now suffering in the general cause of all the Colonies." Philadelphia Quakers sent a total of £3,910 2s. Much of this money was dispensed

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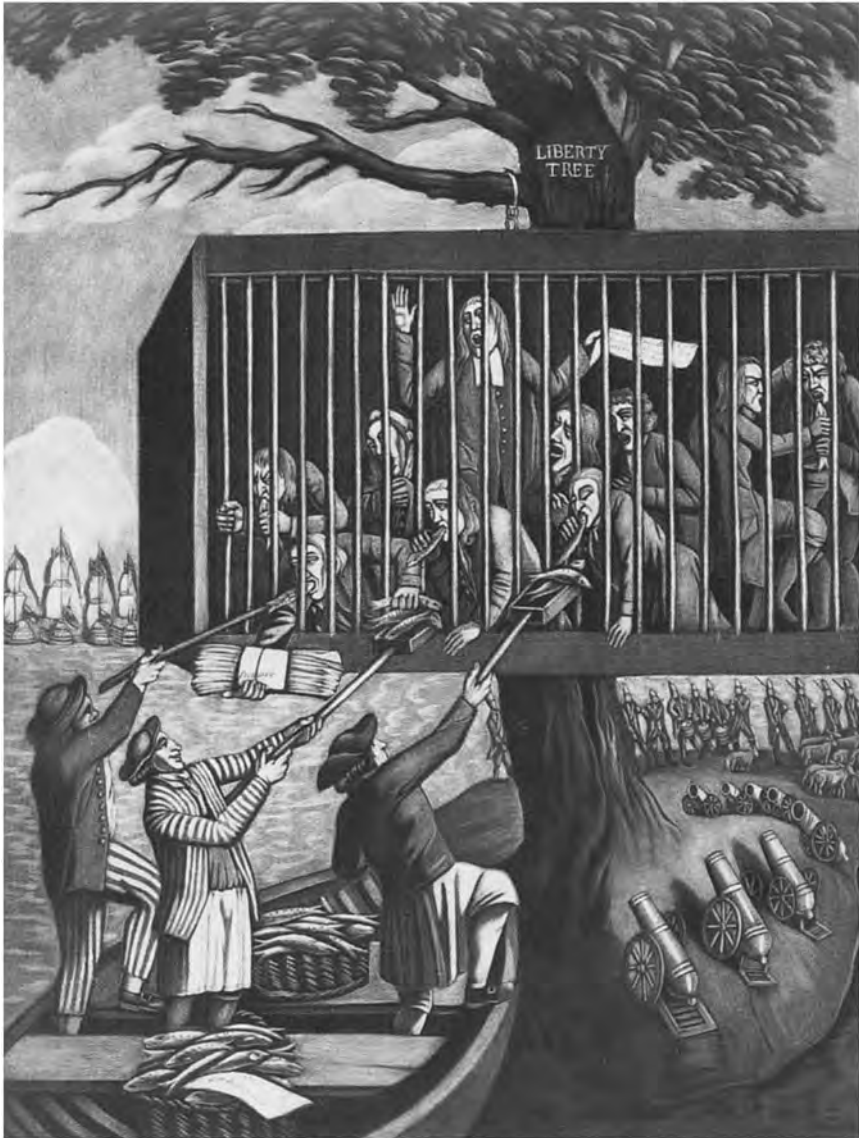


Figure 1 “Bostonians in Distress.” A London cartoon depicts Bostonians caged because of the closing of the city’s port in 1774. The nearly starving inhabitants are fed codfish supplied from neighboring towns. *Library of Congress.*

among the some 5,000 refugees who had escaped to rural towns, thus enabling them to purchase food and firewood.<sup>7</sup>

Southern colonists joined in the relief effort for Boston. Baltimore sent rye and bread, and Queen Annes County, Maryland, one thousand

bushels of corn. Twenty Virginia gentlemen at Williamsburg subscribed £10 each, and Alexandria, Norfolk, and at least nine Virginia counties gave assistance. The German and Scots-Irish farmers of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley sent many barrels of flour along backcountry wagon roads to Alexandria for shipment. Elsewhere in Virginia, Chesterfield County collected 1,426½ bushels of grain, and Henrico County provided a shipload of provisions. Fairfax County pledged £273 in specie, 38 barrels of flour, and 150 bushels of wheat "for the benefit and relief of those (the industrious poor of the town of Boston) who by the late cruel act of Parliament are deprived of their daily labour and bread . . . to keep that manly spirit that has made them dear to every American, though the envy of an arbitrary Parliament." Settlers in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina dispatched a sloop loaded with provisions; South Carolina supplied several cargoes of rice, and from Georgia came 200 barrels of rice and £122 in specie.<sup>8</sup>

The gifts to Boston were gratefully acknowledged by the Committee of Donations, which used the opportunity to stress the mutuality of interests of all colonies in condemning the victimization of the people of Boston by the British Coercive Acts. Even before resistance hardened, Americans united in sympathy.

### **Organization for Resistance**

The united effort in providing material support for the citizens of Boston paved the way for the exercise of the popular will in the displacement of the established political authority in the royal and proprietary colonies. Massachusetts set the example by taking actions in violation of the Massachusetts Government Act. Town meetings convened in its defiance. Councillors and other officials appointed under the new system were intimidated to prevent them assuming office. Massachusetts also took the initiative to inaugurate an economic boycott of British goods.

On June 5, 1774 the Boston Committee of Correspondence, which had been in existence since 1772 when created by a Boston town meeting, drew up a Solemn League and Covenant, calling for merchants to pledge not to import British products after October 1, 1774. Many Massachusetts towns soon followed suit. Nine of 12 Massachusetts counties by the end of summer 1774 held county-wide conventions which issued declarations of rights and affirmed a boycott. A convention of Worcester County in late August proposed the convening of an extralegal Provincial Congress to act in place of the regular legislature. Mobs prevented holding sessions of the courts of common pleas and general sessions at Worcester, Springfield, Great Barrington, Taunton, and Plymouth.<sup>9</sup>

Mass meetings for the purpose of protesting against the Coercive Acts appeared throughout the colonies. In New York City, May 16, 1774, a large gathering voted to name 51 citizens "to be a Standing Committee" to



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correspond "with our sister Colonies," to take such "constitutional measures" for "the preservation of our just rights," to maintain the "public peace," and to support the formation of "a general union . . . throughout the Continent." A Committee of Mechanics, consisting mainly of craftsmen, pressured not too successfully the conservative Committee of 51 toward radical action. No effort was made to install a boycott, the matter being left to a general congress in the future. The Committee of 51 continued to direct the revolutionary movement in New York until spring 1775, when it was replaced by a committee of 60 persons, and then by another one of 100 members, and ultimately by a Provincial Congress. On July 19, 1775 a mass meeting in New York City elected delegates to a Continental Congress.<sup>10</sup> A large assemblage of Philadelphia citizens on June 18, 1774 gathered in the State House yard and chose 43 persons as a committee, which met in Carpenters Hall and adopted "six spirited resolves" denouncing parliament's usurpation of power. Mass meetings at Annapolis and Baltimore, Maryland, in May 1774 resulted in the establishment of committees of correspondence and a call for an economic boycott of Great Britain.<sup>11</sup>

During spring and summer 1774 seven colonies held provincial conventions or congresses. Virginia led the way in the use of a colony-wide convention to garner power away from the legislature, which would be similarly accomplished by other colonies in creating provincial congresses. When the Virginia General Assembly approved a resolution for observing a fast day on June 1 to show sympathy for the plight of Boston, Governor Lord Dunmore dissolved the legislature on May 26. The next day 89 of 103 burgesses met at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg and proceeded to condemn the Boston Port Act and British taxation and to recommend a boycott of "all Indie goods and whatsoever but saltpetre and spice."<sup>12</sup> A committee of correspondence was formed to keep in touch with actions of other colonies and to promote the creation of a general congress. On May 30 a rump meeting of burgesses called for a convention representing all the colony to be held on August 1. The first Virginia convention met August 1-7 at Williamsburg, with delegates from 60 of the 61 counties. The convention adopted complete non-importation to begin November 1 and, if this did not produce redress from the British government, also non-exportation commencing August 10, 1775. Counties were ordered to appoint committees to enforce the boycott and to keep merchants from raising prices. Delegates were elected to serve in the Continental Congress.

Maryland had the distinction of holding the first Provincial Congress, June 22-6, 1774, with 92 delegates from all the counties; trade relations with Great Britain were broken off, and delegates to a Continental Congress were selected. In July New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey followed with similar action. Seventy-one representatives from most of North Carolina's counties and boroughs met on August 25-7 at New Bern and decided to boycott East India tea immediately and other British goods

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after January 1, 1775; no slaves were to be brought into the colony after November 1, 1774.<sup>13</sup>

In Charleston, South Carolina's influential citizens, many of them members of the Common House of Assembly, had met periodically since 1773 to review British measures. From this arrangement came a meeting of a General Committee of 104 persons from the ranks of merchants, planters, mechanics, and backcountry settlers at the City Tavern in Charleston on July 6, 1774. The group considered what steps might be taken "in union with all the inhabitants of our Sister Colonies" to counter "the hostile acts of Parliament", but refrained from voting a boycott, waiting for such a decision by a general congress of the colonies. On November 9 the General Committee called for a Provincial Congress, which met on January 11, 1775, with a membership four times that of the legislature and representative of all localities of the colony.<sup>14</sup>

In most instances the extra-legal assemblies were created because governors had either dissolved or postponed sessions of legislatures. In Massachusetts, after Governor Thomas Gage had dissolved the legislature, delegates reconvened as a Provincial Congress at Concord on October 11, 1774. Upon removing to Cambridge the Provincial Congress dissolved itself and called for elections on February 1, 1775 to form a similar body. The provincial conventions and congresses brought more diverse social groups into government, especially from the backcountry in Pennsylvania and the Carolinas.

The new provincial congresses and conventions established colony-wide committees (or councils) of safety to perform routine government duties during the interim between sessions. More importantly, in some colonies these agencies exercised executive authority that had belonged to the governor, particularly with the outbreak of the war in supervising military affairs.<sup>15</sup>

Proposals for a general congress of the colonies to give direction to the resistance movement had been prolific from the first call by the Providence, Rhode Island town meeting on May 17, 1774, which was immediately endorsed by committees of correspondence in Philadelphia and New York and Virginia's extra-legal meeting of burgesses on May 27. The colonists had a recent precedent in the Stamp Act Congress of 1765. Benjamin Franklin, upon learning that the Virginia House of Burgesses in March 1773 had established a committee of correspondence to be in touch with measures taken by other governments, wrote from London that he was glad for this action, and hoped that other colonies would do the same. "It is natural to suppose," Franklin said, "that if the Oppressions continue, a Congress may grow out of that Correspondence . . . if the Colonies agree to hold a Congress, I do not see how it can be prevented."<sup>16</sup>

The delegates to the Continental Congress from 12 colonies (Georgia not represented) who met at Carpenters Hall in Philadelphia on September

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5 to October 26, 1774, took charge of economic sanctions against Great Britain and military preparations. On September 17 Congress adopted unanimously the Suffolk County, Massachusetts Resolves presented by a local convention which had met in Dedham and Milton on September 6–9, calling for intercolonial action for alleviating “the distress” of the people of Boston. According to the resolutions of Congress, based on the Suffolk Resolves, the blocking of Boston harbor and all features of the Administration of Justice and Massachusetts Government Acts were contrary to the constitutional rights of British subjects and not to be obeyed. No taxes were to be paid until the “civil government” was again “placed upon a constitutional foundation” and economic sanctions should be levied against Great Britain. Militia commissions should be revoked and new officers elected by local citizens, and the people should “use their utmost diligence to acquaint themselves with the art of war” and “appear under arms at least once every week.”<sup>17</sup> John Adams, reporting from Congress to his wife, Abigail, said that “the Esteem, the Affection, the Admiration, for the People of Boston and the Massachusetts . . . were enough to melt an Heart of Stone. I saw the Tears gush into the Eyes of the old, grave pacific Quakers of Pennsylvania.”<sup>18</sup>

Congress, on October 20, adopted the Continental Association, signed by all delegates present. This declaration called for united actions by the colonies, with options “to establish such farther regulations as they think proper.” After December 1, 1774 no merchants could import British goods or East India tea from any port of the world. For such cargoes that might arrive in the meantime merchants had the choices of either reshipment, storage, or public auction, with profits designated for relief of the Boston poor. After February 1, 1775 all goods from Great Britain had to be returned without unloading. To afford time for colonists to dispose of their own commodities, non-exportation would not go into effect until September 10, 1775. Citizens were obliged not to consume British products. All levels of government should “encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts and the manufactures of this country, especially that of wool.” There should be a moral imperative to the revolutionary movement, and therefore it was necessary to “discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments.” To effect this censorship, a committee was to be formed in every county, city, and town “to observe the conduct of all persons touching this association.” Names of violators of both the moral and boycott sanctions were to be published in the newspapers so “that all such foes to the rights of British-Americans may be publicly known, and universally contemned as the enemies of American liberty; and thenceforth we respectively will break off all dealing with him or her.”<sup>19</sup>

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Figure 2 “The Alternative of Williamsburg.” R. Sanger and U. Bennett, London, February 16, 1775. Persons signing the Association, are mindful of the barrel of tar and a sack of feathers on a gibbet. *National Archives*.

All colonies except New York and Georgia quickly implemented the Continental Association. The legislatures of the two colonies refused to act. But eventually New York backed the Association, and when the Georgia Provincial Assembly met in January 1775 it ordered that committees be established in every parish, town and district to enforce the Association.<sup>20</sup>

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Implementation of the Association secured the revolutionary movement at the grassroots in two ways. All adult members of a community had to sign an Association agreement or face severe ostracism, and the proliferation of committees to enforce the Association made for broader political participation by citizens on behalf of the opposition to Great Britain. Persons throughout the colonies had to affix their signatures to such an agreement as used by one North Carolina community:

### ASSOCIATION

We the Subscribers, Freeholders and Inhabitants of the County of *Craven* and Town of *New-bern*, being deeply affected with the present alarming State of this Province, and of all *America*, do resolve that we will pay all due Allegiance to his Majesty King GEORGE the Third, and endeavour to continue the Succession of his Crown in the illustrious House of *Hanover*, as by Law established, against the present or any future wicked Ministry or arbitrary Set of Men whatsoever. At the same Time we determine to assert our Rights as Men; and sensible that by late Acts of Parliament the most valuable Liberties and Privileges of *America* are invaded, and endeavoured to be violated and destroyed, and that under GOD the preservation of them depends on a firm Union of the Inhabitants, and a steady spirited Observation of the Resolutions of the General Congress; being shocked at the cruel Scene now acting in the *Massachusetts-Bay*, and determined never to become Slaves to any Power upon Earth, WE do hereby agree and associate, under all the Ties of Religion, Honour, and Regard for Posterity, that we will adopt and endeavour to execute, the Measures which the General Congress, now sitting at *Philadelphia*, may conclude on, for preserving our Constitution, and opposing the Execution of the several arbitrary and illegal Acts of the *British* Parliament; and that we will readily observe the Directions of our General Committee for the Purposes aforesaid, the Preservation of Peace and good Order, and Security of Individuals and private Property.

(May 31, 1775)<sup>21</sup>

With the committee system (committees of observation, inspection, or safety) inaugurated by the Continental Association, many more persons could now vote for and hold elective office than before. Political power shifted downward. The new committeemen came from all walks of life: obscure shopkeepers, farmers, and mechanics served along with wealthy merchants, large landholders, and lawyers. Typically, in summer 1775, the third Virginia Convention called for annual election of 21 freeholders in each county to serve as committees of safety. In Virginia and Maryland

committeemen totalled about 1,100, and in Massachusetts, 1,600 in 160 towns, with expanded opportunity in all the other colonies as well. Including the increase in the number of delegates in the Provincial Congresses over the former legislatures, it is estimated by spring 1775 there were 7,000 additional officeholders in all the colonies.<sup>22</sup>

The committees had primarily an administrative function in getting everyone to back the boycott and in watching for and censoring disaffection to the patriot cause by word or deed. While courts under royal authority were not permitted to meet, the committees assumed certain judicial authority in their trying and punishing violators of the Association. Committee members made the rounds to inspect ledgers of merchants, and those charging excessive prices or who had trafficked in goods contrary to the boycott had to explain themselves before a full committee. So did those engaging in prohibited speech, with public apology being demanded. Unrepentant culprits had themselves singled out for ostracism—citizens were to avoid them and have no dealings with them. Names of offenders were published in newspapers. Worst-case scenarios involved heavy-handed intimidation and even tarring and feathering.

A usual inquisitorial proceeding was much like that of the case of Thomas Loosly, a Philadelphia shoemaker, who

was brought to the Coffee House, and there being exalted as a spectacle to a great number of reputable citizens, he there very humbly and submissively asked and entreated their pardon and forgiveness for his illiberally and wickedly villifying the measures of Congress, the Committee, and the people of New England, sincerely promising that his future conduct should be just, true, and equitable, as should recommend him to the particular notices of all those whom he had so unjustly, falsely, and wickedly villified. On those assurances and promises, the company discharged him.<sup>23</sup>

Being branded, however, as one who was “inimical to the liberties of America” or a “wicked enemy of America and [to] be treated as such” (in the case of a Scottish schoolteacher in Westmoreland County, Virginia) meant that one had not much choice other than to leave his or her locality. An Exeter, New Hampshire committee of safety voted that if ostracism proved “ineffectual . . . an experiment ought to be made of Tar and Feathers.”<sup>24</sup> Some committees more zealously kept inquisitorial watch than did others on public morals; one casualty was an end to horse-racing, at least until toward the end of the war.

The effects of the economic boycott under the Continental Association were severe. A Philadelphia lawyer observed, as early as December 1774, that “every cargo arriving from Great Britain and Ireland, or the British plantations has been delivered into the hands of this committee, to be sold

or stored,” and “so great is the unanimity and prevailing spirit of the inhabitants, that no individuals have thought proper to refuse or decline a compliance with the self-denying ordinance of the General Congress.”<sup>25</sup> From September 10, 1775, when non-exportation began, to March 16, 1776 only 32 vessels entered Baltimore harbor. South Carolina imports fell from a value of £378,116 in 1774 to £6,245 the next year.<sup>26</sup> Total value of imports from Great Britain declined from £2,953,000 in 1774 to £226,000 in 1775, and about nil thereafter. Colonial exports to Great Britain fell from a value of £2,457,000 in 1775 to £186,000 the next year.<sup>27</sup>

Great Britain retaliated in kind to the American trade sanctions. The New England Trade and Fishery (also known as the New England Restraining) Act of March 30, 1775 prohibited New England’s access to the Newfoundland fisheries and confined its trade to Great Britain, Ireland, and the West Indies. A second Restraining Act of April 13, 1775 extended the same restrictive provisions to the other nine colonies. Congress, on May 17, 1775, interdicted “provisions of any kind” from going to British fisheries in North America and all exportations to Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland.<sup>28</sup> Britain’s Prohibitory Act of December 22, 1775 aimed at closing off all trade with the colonies. The mutual recrimination that had been brought on by the determination of Americans in their Continental Association contributed to a *de facto* status of belligerency between the colonies and the home government.

### Call to Arms

From fall 1774 to spring 1775 efforts to secure munitions moved the impasse between the colonies and Great Britain into the arena of armed conflict. On September 2, a British detachment from Boston carried away 250 half barrels of powder and two cannon from the Provincial Powder House, six miles northwest of Boston. Soon rumors spread that a fight had taken place in Cambridge and six rebels killed and that the Boston garrison was marching into the countryside; British ships were reported to have bombarded Boston. The so-called “Powder Alarm” alerted 30,000 New England militia who prepared to march towards Boston. Governor (General) Gage wrote to the British Secretary at War, Lord Barrington, that “no People are more determined for a Civil War, the whole Country from hence to New York armed, training and providing Military Stores.”<sup>29</sup> Before the false report of fatalities and the bombardment of Boston was defused, it had spread widely, stirring up a martial spirit. Upon hearing the rumor, Virginia militia on an Indian expedition in the Ohio country resolved to lend their services to the rebel cause. The “horrid News” had greatly excited the members of the new Continental Congress. “WAR! WAR! WAR! was the Cry,” John Adams wrote to his wife, “and it was

pronounced in a Tone, which would have done Honour to the Oratory of a Briton or a Roman. If it had proved true, you would have heard the Thunder of an American Congress.”<sup>30</sup>

Patriots hauled off munitions from the king’s stores. On December 9 and 10, 1774 most of the cannon at Fort George, in Newport Harbor, Rhode Island were seized and “conveyed into the Country,” and on December 14, local citizens in Portsmouth, New Hampshire captured 200 barrels of powder belonging to the British army, transporting their prize to Exeter.<sup>31</sup> On February 26 an assemblage of militia deterred a British detachment under Colonel Alexander Leslie from destroying cannon at Salem. Fighting almost erupted in Virginia over Governor Lord Dunmore having royal marines carry off to a British ship 20 kegs of powder from the public magazine at Williamsburg. Patrick Henry rallied militia from Hanover and neighboring counties for a confrontation with the governor’s little military force. The crisis diminished when Dunmore made recompense for the seized powder. Dunmore thereafter kept to the safety of the warship *Fowey* in Chesapeake Bay, itself indicative that Virginia was on the verge of armed rebellion. Militia in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775 resisted British troops sent to destroy munitions at Concord, resulting in the opening round of the war.<sup>32</sup>

As events progressed toward a military showdown that began on Lexington Green, the colonists realized the necessity of having their own military capabilities. Averse at the time to the idea of creating a patriot standing army which would cause further strengthening of British forces in America, the new makeshift governments searched for means of quick and effective military responses that did not require complete mobilization. The militia historically had enrolled all able bodied men, and service hardly involved more than attendance at an annual muster. Organizationally, the militia system was incapable of putting trained men instantly into the field.

To overcome this deficiency, the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts ordered the formation of volunteer independent companies to be in constant readiness. The Worcester County convention, representing 45 towns, on September 21, 1774 had provided the model. It established seven regiments of 1,000 men each who would “turn out twice a week to perfect themselves in the military art—which are call’d minute men . . . to be ready at a minute’s warning with a fortnight’s provision, and ammunition and arms.” Each minute company contained 50 privates and a captain elected from the lieutenants and ensigns who in turn were elected by the men; field officers were chosen by the other officers. The Committee of Safety, created by the Provincial Congress, had responsibility “to alarm, muster, and cause to be assembled” as many of these voluntary troops as were needed for any situation.<sup>33</sup>

Most colonies, after the commencement of the war, followed Congress’s directive of July 18, 1775 that one-fourth of “all able bodied effective



men” between the ages of 16 and 50 “be selected for minute men, of such men as are willing to enter into this necessary service . . . to be ready on the shortest notice, to march to any place where their assistance may be required, for the defence of their own or a neighbouring colony.”<sup>34</sup> New England incorporated this system, with enlistments in a minute-man company usually for about four months. Other colonies, after Lexington and Concord, provided for frequent drills of militia; in New Jersey militia trained once a week at Newark and daily in Cumberland and Somerset counties. In one village in northwestern Virginia the men mustered each morning at 5 a.m. to the beating of drums and “heroic Tunes.”<sup>35</sup> New England towns also had “alarm companies,” which in contrast to this designation, were the leftovers of militia, consisting of boys and old men and those otherwise exempt, such as ministers and magistrates, who were the last to turn out.<sup>36</sup>

Volunteer militia companies on instant alert were found in the other colonies outside New England, usually referred to as independent companies. The second Virginia Convention on March 25, 1775 called upon counties each to form one or more volunteer companies of 86 men, 68 of whom were to be privates. The minute and independent companies mostly disappeared as separate entities as war reached full scale by the end of 1775. The volunteer soldiers, if they so chose, wound up in regular regiments of the Continental army, and all militia were presumed to be on a readiness status. The third Virginia Convention in July 1775 dissolved its volunteer companies in connection with raising regular army units, but provided that 16 regiments of “minutemen,” about 8,000 men, be selected groups of militia who received more training than ordinary militia.<sup>37</sup>

The activation of certain units of citizen-soldiers and the increased training and participation of militia in general during the period leading to hostilities and afterwards proved an effective way to enlist support for the Revolutionary War. As John Shy has written: “The broad popular basis of military organization forced thousands of more or less unwilling people to associate themselves openly and actively with the cause. In an age when single-shot muzzle-loaders were the standard instrument of coercion, sheer numbers were most important, and naked majoritarianism could grow from the barrels of muskets.”<sup>38</sup>

### Joining the War Effort

As radical patriot leaders strived to mould public opinion for separation from Great Britain and war, they found no greater ally than religion. By contrasting American morality and English corruption, patriot clergy evoked a sense of holy crusade. Traditionally New England clergy had backed defensive war—one in which Americans in 1774–5 were entering because of

invasion of their liberties. Days of thanksgiving and of fasting and humiliation had long been a tradition in colonial New England. With the coming of the Revolution, New England preachers turned the annual spring fast day and fall thanksgiving day into occasions for religious patriotic oratory. Sermons delivered on annual militia days throughout colonial history appealed to the joining of faith and arms. Christian soldiers had driven out the Antichrist (the French) from the North American continent; now a new enemy had appeared.

Colonists observed special fast days to protest against the Boston Port Act. On May 17, 1774 Dutch Reformed congregations in New York and New Jersey kept a "Day of Fasting and Prayer" to express dissatisfaction with the Coercive Acts.<sup>39</sup> Upon news of the Boston Port Act reaching Virginia, Thomas Jefferson and seven other members of the House of Burgesses, wishing to arouse "our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen" and thinking "that the appointment of a day of fasting and prayer would be most likely to call up and alarm their attention . . . rummaged over for the revolutionary precedents and forms of the Puritans" and "cooked up a resolution, somewhat modernizing their phrases." The House of Burgesses, on May 24, scheduled "a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer" to coincide with the day that the Boston Port Act went into effect, June 1.<sup>40</sup> Governor Dunmore considered the burgesses's action an encroachment upon the executive authority and tantamount to "sedition," as it was the governor's prerogative to declare public observance days. The legislature, dissolved by the governor for its infraction, met on its own, and Virginia had taken a first step toward revolution. Similarly, when Governor Gage refused to proclaim a day of fasting and prayer, the Massachusetts clergy went ahead and did so for July 14, 1774, with ministerial groups in New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island achieving the same. The South Carolina Provincial Congress decreed a day of fasting and prayer for the colony for February 17, 1775. The Continental Congress arranged for a national day of humiliation and prayer, which was observed on July 20, 1775 ("Congress Sunday") everywhere. Again, on May 17, 1776 another such day was kept by recommendation of Congress, to implore God's aid "to frustrate the cruel purposes of our unnatural enemies . . . it may please the Lord of Hosts, the God of Armies, to animate our officers and soldiers with invincible fortitude . . . and to crown the continental arms . . . with victory and success."<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, during the war, Congress declared regular annual fast and thanksgiving days.

Congregational and Presbyterian pastors especially proved to be effective agents for revolutionary propaganda. Clergy harped on three themes in their preaching: the wickedness of British measures and society; the need to adhere to Congressional measures, otherwise disunion would follow; and the defense of liberty required taking up arms. Preachers did not hesitate to include a political agenda in church services. Some New England

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clergy placed the Solemn League and Covenant, which declared a boycott on British goods, on the communion table, and at least one New England minister “told his people that they who refused to sign were not worthy to come to the table.”<sup>42</sup> Typically Samuel Langdon, president of Harvard, declared in a May 1775 election sermon that “our firm opposition to the establishment of an arbitrary system is called rebellion, and we are to expect no mercy. . . . therefore we have taken arms in our own defence . . . Let us praise our God for the advantages already given us over the enemies of liberty.”<sup>43</sup> Reverend David Caldwell of Guilford County, North Carolina, in a 1775 sermon titled “The Character and Doom of the Sluggard,” told his parishioners that:

I should have no difficulty in persuading you to shake off your sloth, and stand up manfully in a firm, united, and persevering defence of your liberties . . . and we expect that none of you will be wanting in the discharge of your duty, or prove unworthy of a cause which every patriot and every Christian should value more than wealth, and hold as dear as his life.

One British official remarked in September 1776, concerning his experience in Connecticut, that the “Dissenting Preachers . . . inculcate War, Bloodshed and Massacres, as though all these were the express Injunctions of Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

Preachers were often successful recruiters for the army. One army corporal reported on a sermon by Reverend William Emerson of Concord in late April 1775: “He incordiged us to go And fite for our Land and Country: Saying we Did not do our Duty if we did not Stand up now.”<sup>45</sup> Sometimes men signed up during church service, and occasionally a pastor not only recruited soldiers from his congregation, but marched away with them, himself joining the army. The most famous of the parson-soldiers, General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, a Lutheran clergyman at Woodstock in western Virginia, preached his farewell sermon in his robes, which he discarded at the end of the service, revealing his army uniform; Muhlenberg recruited the eighth Virginia Regiment of German Americans, 300 of whom came from his congregation.<sup>46</sup> Two New Jersey Presbyterian ministers, in the pay of Congress, were dispatched to the North Carolina backcountry in late 1775–early 1776 to persuade the Scots and Scots-Irish settlers to remain loyal to the American cause and to enlist as soldiers with a \$40 bounty.<sup>47</sup>

As war became reality, civilian volunteers provided necessities for the militia. During the early powder crisis of September 1774, “at every house Women & Children” made cartridges and bullets and baked biscuits.<sup>48</sup> The “first provisions” obtained for the New England militia army in the Cambridge area the day after the battles of Lexington and Concord were “all the

eatables" that "could be spared" from the local households, "some carcasses of beef and pork prepared for the Boston market," and "a large quantity of ship-bread" taken from British naval supplies.<sup>49</sup> A British ship surgeon wrote on May 26, 1775 that the American troops were "plentifully supplied with all sorts of provisions, and the roads are crowded with carts and carriages, bringing them rum, cyder, &c. from the neighbouring towns."<sup>50</sup>

Not until 1777 did Congress assume responsibility for supply of the Continental army, with purchasing through the military quartermaster and commissary departments. Provincial and state governments until that time had to round up war materiel the best they could, relying on slender funds to obtain goods at prices that guaranteed profits and encouraging production of essential items by various means. Localities offered premiums and bounties and also solicited donations. Virginia counties, in compliance with a resolution of the second Virginia convention of March 25, 1775, collected either by a small tax levy or by donations the equivalent of a half pound of gunpowder and one pound of lead from each taxpayer.<sup>51</sup> In early 1775 Northampton County, Virginia, and Chowan County, North Carolina, among other localities, offered cash bonuses to persons who made a certain amount of wool cards, gunpowder or other items within a stated time period. The North Carolina Provincial Congress in September 1775 offered premiums totaling £2,965 to promote local manufacturing.<sup>52</sup> Urban artisans found plenty of employment under government contracts, aided by seed money and guaranteed prices. Thus, for example, William Barry a potash-maker in Charleston, South Carolina, received a grant of £500 for equipment for making gunpowder and was promised 10s. for every pound of powder produced.<sup>53</sup> At the beginning of the war the provincial congresses and conventions established public arms manufactories, as in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and many small private ventures sprouted up for the making of weapons.

Following Congress's recommendation for development of self-sufficient industry, several attempts were made in 1775 in the cities to establish stock-company ventures for manufacturing. "The New York Society for employing the Industrious Poor and Promoting Manufactory" for making textiles and nails did not obtain enough capital to succeed, even with a subsidy from the New York City Committee of Safety.<sup>54</sup> The most ambitious and successful of such enterprises was the "United Company of Philadelphia for promoting American Manufactures," organized on March 16, 1775 and in operation by the end of April. Its purpose was not only to remove dependence upon Great Britain but also to provide employment for the poor. Newspaper advertisement for the project appealed to women who would have the "opportunity not only to help to maintain your families, but likewise to cast your mite into the treasury of the public good . . . strangers, who apply, are desired to bring a few lines, by way of recommendation, from some respectable person in their neighborhood." Two

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hundred persons invested in the company at £10 a share. The workers tended 400 spindles in the production of woolens, linen, and cotton cloth.<sup>55</sup>

A *rage-militaire* characterized the emotions of many Americans after Bunker Hill in June 1775. Citizens were eager to take up arms against the proven enemy. Volunteers made up a 15,000 man army besieging Boston. Congress created a Continental army, hoping for 75,000 recruits, a goal never even remotely achieved. An invasion of Canada began, and fighting erupted in Virginia and the Carolinas. The traditional aversion to a standing army persisted, and recruits were hard to find for the Continental army, though many persons were quite willing to engage in short-term militia service. The strict discipline of Washington's new army discouraged recruitment. Congress had to promise pay and bounties, creating a military force not so much out of patriotism as for hire. In spite of the difficulties of keeping a respectable army in the field, the stakes were high. Americans discovered that their lives changed; they were in the midst of war for a long duration, and extraordinary effort was required on the home front and in military service in order to achieve victory.

## CHAPTER TWO

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### *Reinventing the body politic*

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The civil war that erupted in 1775 progressed into a war for independence. The separation from ties to the British government, evident from the creation of the extra-legal local committees, provincial conventions and assemblies, and a Continental Congress, necessitated a transformation of the colonies into states. As Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* stated, it was an absurdity for a people, three thousand miles distant, to give allegiance to a monarchy that made war upon them or seem to support what was perceived as a decadent, corrupt political system of the mother country.

Responding to a petition for advice of October 18, 1775 from the New Hampshire convention, Congress, two weeks later, recommended to the colony's citizens that they arrange for "a full and free representation of the people" in assembly to "establish such a form of government, as, in their judgment, will produce the happiness of the people, and most effectually secure peace and good order in the province" during the duration of "the present dispute between Great Britain and the colonies." The next day the same invitation was extended to South Carolina, and on December 4 also to Virginia, where the royal governor, Lord Dunmore had declared martial law.<sup>1</sup> John Adams greeted Congress's decision with enthusiasm:

Who expected to live and see the Principles of Liberty Spread and prevail so rapidly, human Nature exerting her whole Rights, unshackled by Priests or Kings, or Nobles, pulling down Tyrannies like Sampson, and building up what Governments the People think best framed for human Felicity.<sup>2</sup>

The remote possibility of reconciliation lingered until spring 1776. As the moment for declaring independence neared, Congress, recognizing that "the exercise of every kind of authority under the said crown should be

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totally suppressed,” forthrightly in resolutions of May 10 and 15 called upon all colonies to establish state governments.<sup>3</sup> “A Revolution in Government” was “about to take Effect,” wrote Congressman Oliver Wolcott of Connecticut; “There will be an instance Real not implied or Ideal, of a Government founded in Compact, Express and Clear Made in its Principles by the People at large.”<sup>4</sup>

While the Declaration of Independence prodded the American people into a common crusade and to lay claim to a new nation among nations, the challenge presented itself of reinstating the body politic expressive of the liberties of the people. Americans could clear the government slate and establish a political order more to their liking than the one they had repudiated. “Few opportunities have ever been offered to mankind of framing an entire Constitution of Government, upon equitable principles,” an anonymous writer noted in March 1776. “Perhaps America is the only country in the world wholly free from all political impediments, at the very time they are under the necessity of framing a civil Constitution.”<sup>5</sup>

### **A New Social Contract**

True to Lockean principles, American Revolutionary leaders believed in the right of a community to reinvent government from the foundations of an existing one. Government was to be instituted, not imposed. While the American Revolution went beyond John Locke’s bloodless Glorious Revolution and severed all connections with the governmental superstructure, in reality the situation was much the same. The rebels merely had to reaffirm the best parts of their colonial constitutions, shearing them of royalist and other prerogative trappings. The Revolution meant that the colonists could proceed with an already established consensus regarding the viability of representative government.

The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which became the model of other states and even the national government for revising their constitutions, in its preamble defined a new social contract resulting from justifiable revolution, principles already announced in the Declaration of Independence. On revolution:

The end of the institution, maintenance, and administration of government, is to secure the existence of the body politic, to protect, it, and to furnish the individuals who compose it with the power of enjoying in safety and tranquillity their natural rights, and the blessings of life; and whenever these great objects are not obtained, the people have a right to alter the government, and to take measures necessary for their safety, prosperity, and happiness.

## On the social compact:

The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good. It is the duty of the people, therefore, in framing a constitution of government, to provide for an equitable mode of making laws, as well as for an impartial interpretation and a faithful execution of them; that every man may, at all times, find his security in them.<sup>6</sup>

Americans preferred to put their full trust in the legislatures as the repository of the will of the people, while recognizing a need for minimal checks and balances on the lower houses of assembly by an upper house and an executive branch; the idea of an independent body, such as the judiciary, to decide on the constitutionality of laws was not yet generally accepted. There was an overriding fear of power distancing itself from the people, as the colonists had thought to have been the case in their relationship to the British crown and parliament. Patriot leaders felt compelled to cast about for a simple and refined political system that had guarantees for government to be held to constant accountability by the people, yet one that would not fall victim to the manipulations of powerful factions. A new contractual relationship between those who governed and the people would ensure safety for expression of the popular will. "A civil constitution or form of government," so read a resolution of the freemen of Lexington, Massachusetts, "is of the nature of a most sacred covenant or contract entered into by the individuals which form society."<sup>7</sup>

The most important ingredient of a new social contract was the preservation of the principle of popular sovereignty. Various writings as well as county instructions to delegates to the provincial congresses or conventions charged with the formation of state constitutions stressed the requirement to keep ultimate power with the people at large. "The people best know their own wants and necessities, and therefore are best able to rule themselves," advised the anonymous author of *The People are the Best Governors* (1776). "The more simple, and the more immediately dependent . . . the authority is upon the people the better, because it must be granted that they themselves are the best guardians of their own liberties."<sup>8</sup> Another anonymous writer of 1776 noted that the best government is that "which is most natural, easy, cheap, and which best secures the rights of the people."<sup>9</sup> It was important that the people themselves have the ultimate authority to make any corrections in government. The writer of "Four Letters on Interesting Subjects" (1776) wanted an elected "Provincial Jury" to have power to correct any "inroads" on a constitution, "but not to make alterations, unless a clear majority of all the inhabitants shall so direct."<sup>10</sup>



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At the outset of constitution-making, Americans considered their choices for government as one that was republican, with indirect checks on the electorate, or a purely democratic solution. They rejected what they viewed as the only other alternatives—aristocracy, monarchy, or despotism. John Adams, who admired the checks and balances of the Massachusetts colonial government under a royal charter, strongly advocated republicanism and feared that state constitution-making would not go far enough in that direction. “The new governments we are assuming,” he wrote to his wife in July 1776, “will require a Purification from our Vices, and an Augmentation of our Virtues or they will be no Blessings. The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are estreamly addicted to Corruption and Venality.”<sup>11</sup> Carter Braxton advised his fellow delegates of the Virginia Convention, as they prepared to establish a constitution, that “however necessary it may be to shake off the authority of arbitrary British dictators, we ought, nevertheless, to adopt and perfect that system which England has suffered to be grossly abused, and the experience of ages has taught us to venerate.” A “simple Democracy” existed only in theory and was “never confirmed” by experience.<sup>12</sup>

Americans, however, did use the term democracy to convey the meaning of the people’s participation in government in an orderly way, as contrasted to mobocracy. A writer in the *Providence Gazette* of August 9, 1777 simply viewed democracy as a “form of government where the highest power of making laws is lodged in the common people, or persons drawn out from them.” As formerly good Britons, American patriots, the more so those who already were ensconced in positions of leadership and social distinction, were apprehensive of entrusting too much power to the people at large, which might cause further revolutionary tendencies that would threaten social stability and property rights.

Thomas Paine, in his *Common Sense* of January 1776, called attention to the conception of republican government. To Paine, the “corrupt influence of the crown” had “eaten out the virtue of the house of commons” (the “republican part” in the British constitution). “It is the republican and not the monarchical part of the constitution of England which Englishmen glory in, viz. the liberty of choosing an house of commons from out of their own body—and it is easy to see that when the republican virtue fails, slavery ensues.”<sup>13</sup>

American leaders began to perceive republicanism as a grade above democracy. Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1792) referred to republicanism as government designed to serve the “public good” and which “most naturally associates with the representative form.” Although Paine favored a pure democracy, he recognized it was only feasible for small populations, and was “incapable of extension, not from its principle, but from the inconvenience of its form.” Although Paine went further than most of his contemporaries in wanting to keep the state governments more directly