

Reaction to Townshend Acts; John Dickinson's Letters

John Dickinson's circular letters played a pivotal role in shaping colonial opposition to British policies in the 1770s. As a moderate yet firm advocate of colonial rights, Dickinson sought to unify the colonies and encourage thoughtful resistance to British authority through reasoned argument and appeals to shared values.

- ☐ The British Parliament imposed a series of taxes and regulations, such as the **Townshend Acts (1767)** and later policies that heightened tensions between Britain and its colonies.
- ☐ Colonists were divided between those advocating for outright rebellion and those seeking reconciliation with Britain.
- ☐ Dickinson, a lawyer and politician from Pennsylvania, advocated for a middle path: assertive, coordinated protest within the bounds of constitutional law.

The Circular Letters

1. Purpose:

- Circular letters were written communications sent to multiple colonial assemblies or leaders to promote unity and collective action.
- Dickinson used them to critique British policies and propose strategies for resistance, such as non-importation agreements or petitions for redress.

2. Core Themes:

- **Defense of Colonial Rights:** Emphasized the illegitimacy of taxation without representation and the importance of natural rights.
- **Appeals to Unity:** Urged colonies to act as a united front to present a stronger case against British policies.
- **Reconciliation over Revolution:** Advocated for peaceful methods to assert colonial rights, preferring negotiation to violent confrontation.

3. Famous Examples:

- Dickinson's **Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania (1767-1768)**, while not strictly circular letters, laid the intellectual groundwork for his later writings and influenced collective colonial opposition.
- His letters to various colonial legislatures often encouraged the formation of committees of correspondence and promoted collective boycotts of British goods.

Impact on the 1770s Resistance

1. Galvanizing Colonial Action:

- The letters helped articulate a coherent, persuasive argument against British policies, providing intellectual justification for resistance.
- They inspired colonial legislatures to pass resolutions opposing British measures, contributing to a sense of shared purpose.

2. Strengthening Intercolonial Ties:

- By encouraging dialogue and collaboration, Dickinson's circular letters were instrumental in laying the groundwork for institutions like the **First Continental Congress (1774)**.

3. Moderate Influence:

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- Dickinson's moderate tone offered a contrast to more radical voices like Samuel Adams, appealing to colonists hesitant about direct rebellion.
- His emphasis on legal and moral arguments bolstered the legitimacy of the colonial cause in the eyes of both Americans and sympathetic British observers.

The start of John Dickinson's career as the "Penman of the Revolution" began with a political pamphlet titled "The Late Regulations" which expressed Dickinson's thoughts on the Revenue Act (Sugar Acts) of 1764 which raised taxes on sugar. Many Americans, including John, felt Parliament was threatening the rights of the colonies and the "Acts," if carried out, would disturb the American economy.

Soon after, during the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765, Dickinson was a leading voice against the Parliamentary acts that imposed a tax on items by requiring the purchase of a stamp. During a gathering of the so-called Stamp Act Congress in New York City in October 1766, Dickinson was asked to write fifteen proposals. These proposals, now known as the "Declaration of Rights and Resolves," condemned the legislation as unconstitutional. This document, which was sent to the King of England, was the first official document drawn up and agreed upon by a combination of American colonies. Shortly thereafter, the Stamp Act was repealed after only four months of unsuccessful operation.

Victory over the repeal of the Stamp act was short lived. With yet more burdensome acts, Parliament continued to make life difficult for the colonies. The Declaratory Act stated that Parliament could pass laws on the American colonies because its authority was the same in America as in Britain. This was followed by a new Revenue Act in 1767 which taxed other goods besides sugar. The most danger, however, was presented by the Townshend Acts which, in addition to taxing yet more goods such as tea, threatened the integrity of the New York legislature.

The Letters

Dickinson's most famous contribution as the "Penman" and for the colonial cause was the publication of a series of letters signed "A FARMER." The letters were published over a period of ten weeks in late 1767 and early 1768 with the first letter appearing in the Pennsylvania Chronicle on December 2, 1767.

In the letters, Dickinson argued, amongst other things, that the Townshend Acts were illegal because they were intended to raise revenue, a power held only by the colonial assemblies. His arguments were a collection of ideas that were written in a clear and concise manner which the general population could understand. Collectively, the letters were called "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies."

The letters were shortly thereafter published in pamphlet form and reprinted in almost all of the colonial newspapers. They were read widely across the colonies and in Britain and France. This quickly made John Dickinson famous. After reading the "Letters", Voltaire, the

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French philosopher, compared Dickinson to Cicero, an honored Roman statesman, orator, and philosopher. At the Boston town meeting in March of 1768 Samuel Adams and others spoke of the author by saying:

"that the thanks of the town be given to the ingenious author of a course of letters... signed 'A FARMER,' wherein the rights of the American subjects are clearly stated and fully vindicated: ...members of a committee [are] to prepare and publish a letter of thanks."

As a direct result of the popularity of Dickinson's letters, there were calls and petitions for the boycotting of imported goods throughout the colonies. The eventual result of the unity amongst the colonies against a common enemy was the First Continental Congress. When the Congress was called, however, Dickinson quickly realized that much progress needed to be made towards the solutions that he wrote about in his letters.

John Dickinson's Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, published in 1767-1768, were a series of twelve essays that articulated a powerful critique of British policies toward the American colonies. Dickinson wrote in a measured and reasoned tone, appealing to both educated elites and the broader public. Below are key points from the letters, along with notable excerpts:

1. Opposition to Taxation Without Representation

Dickinson argued that the colonies could not be taxed by Parliament without their consent, as they lacked direct representation in that body. He distinguished between taxes for regulation of trade (acceptable under British constitutional practice) and taxes solely for revenue generation (unconstitutional).

"The parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to regulate the trade of Great Britain, and all her colonies. I have looked over every statute relating to these colonies, from their first settlement to this time, and I find every one of them founded on this principle, till the Stamp Act administration. All before are calculated to regulate trade, and preserve or promote a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire."

2. The Danger of Precedent

Dickinson warned that even small impositions, like the Townshend duties, set dangerous precedents. He argued that once the principle of taxation without representation was accepted, there would be no limit to future encroachments.

"If they may be legally taken [our money] from us, without our consent, there is no limit to their power over us. All that we possess is theirs. What is to defend us against so enormous, so unlimited a power? Not a single man of those who assume it, is chosen by us; or is

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subject to our control or influence; and yet such is the moderation of the colonists, that we are willing to take up with a share of legislation."

3. Advocating Peaceful Resistance – Petition, Boycott, Non-importation

Dickinson urged the colonies to resist the unjust laws, but he emphasized peaceful and legal means, such as boycotts of British goods and petitions for redress. He rejected violence or hasty rebellion, seeking to preserve ties with Britain.

"Let us behave like dutiful children who have received unmerited blows from a beloved parent. Let us complain to our parent; but let our complaints speak at the same time the language of affliction and veneration."

"To expend money on such goods is to contribute to our own oppression. Every virtue calls upon us to renounce them, and to try the experiment of a general refusal."

4. Encouragement of Unity Among the Colonies

Dickinson stressed that unity was essential for the colonies to effectively oppose British policies. Fragmentation, he argued, would weaken their ability to defend their liberties.

"There is no evil more to be dreaded than disunion. Nothing but disunion can defeat us. It will be fatal to our liberties."

5. The Fundamental Role of Liberty

Throughout the letters, Dickinson framed the conflict in terms of natural rights and the preservation of liberty. He saw the British encroachments as not just an attack on the colonies, but a threat to the principles of freedom that should guide all governments.

"We are taxed without our own consent; we are therefore slaves. I hope we shall never be so unwise as to refuse to submit to the government of our mother country. But let us distinguish between the government and the tyranny of Great Britain."

6. Addressing Trade and Economic Pressure

Dickinson criticized the Townshend Acts for placing duties on everyday items like paper, glass, and tea, which economically burdened the colonists while undermining their autonomy.

"The desire of obtaining revenue from America has produced many acts of parliament injurious to our commerce, and one affecting it in a manner so cruel and unjust as to excite universal indignation."