

## Benjamin Franklin's 'Examination' – The Attitudes in the Colonies in 1766

The French and Indian War (1754-1763) was the North American phase of a worldwide conflict between Britain, the French and Native Americans.

(The more-complex European phase was the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) involved all the great powers of Europe (generally, France, Austria, Saxony, Sweden, and Russia were aligned on one side against Prussia, Hanover, and Great Britain on the other.))

While the British won the war, the French and Indian War had been enormously expensive and left Great Britain with a heavy debt. And, the expense of protecting the English possessions in America seemed likely to increase rather than diminish.

The war and the British government's attempts to impose taxes on colonists to help cover these expenses resulted in increasing colonial resentment of British attempts to expand imperial authority in the colonies.

One of the early taxes to be imposed was the Stamp Act.

On February 13, 1766, Benjamin Franklin appeared before the British Parliament's House of Commons to advocate for a repeal of the Stamp Act of 1765. (Archives) Franklin provided evidence in the form of answers to 174 questions. The session, according to the Proceedings of Parliament, lasted for four hours.

Franklin shared his observations on the attitude of the colonists towards the British Empire before and after the imposition of the Stamp Act, and comments on issues of taxation, representation and the ability of the colonies to become economically independent from the mother country.



The following, as noted by the Massachusetts Historical Society, is some of that exchange ...

At the time, In North America there were about 300,000 white men from sixteen to sixty years of age. The population increase of "the inhabitants of all the provinces together, taken at a medium, double[d] in about 25 years."

"But their demand for British manufactures increased much faster, as the consumption is not merely in proportion to their numbers, but grows with the growing abilities of the same numbers to pay for them."

"In 1723, the whole importation from Britain to Pennsylvania, was but about 15,000 l. sterling; it is now [1766] near half a million."

### **Colonists' Attitude to Britain**

"In 1739 [the Colonists] were called upon to assist in the expedition against Carthagera, and they sent 3,000 men to join your army. It is true Carthagera is in America, but as remote from the Northern Colonies, as if it had been in Europe. They make no distinction of wars, as to their duty of assisting in them. I know the last war is commonly spoke of here as entered into for the defence, or for the sake of the people of America."

"I think it is quite misunderstood. It began about the limits of Canada and Nova-Scotia, about territories to which the Crown indeed laid claim, but were not claimed by any British Colony; none of the lands had been granted to any Colonist; we had therefore no particular concern or interest in that dispute."

"As to the Ohio, the contest there began about the right of trading in the Indian country, a right you had by the treaty of Utrecht, which the French infringed; they seized the traders and their goods, which were your manufacture; they took a fort which a company of your merchants, and their factors and correspondents had erected there, to secure that trade."

"Braddock was sent with an army to re-take that fort (which was looked on here as another incroachment on the King's territory) and to protect your trade."

"It was not till after his defeat that the Colonies were attacked. They were before in perfect peace with both French and Indians; the troops were not therefore sent for their defence."

"The trade with the Indians, tho' carried on in America, is not an American interest. The people America are chiefly farmers and planters; scarce any thing they raise or produce is an article of commerce with the Indians."

"The Indian trade is a British interest; it is carried on with British manufactures, for the profit of British merchants and manufacturers; therefore the war, as it commenced for the defence of territories of the Crown, the property of no American, and for the defence of a trade purely British, was really a British war - and yet the people of America made no scruple of contributing their utmost towards carrying it on, and bringing it to a happy conclusion."

"The Colonies are not supposed to be within the realm; they have assemblies of their own, which are their parliaments, and they are in that respect in the same situation with Ireland."

“When money is to be raised for the Crown upon the Subject in Ireland, or in the Colonies, the consent is given in the parliament of Ireland, or in the Assemblies of the Colonies.”

The “temper of America towards Great Britain before the year of 1763” was “The best in the world, they have submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament.”

“Numerous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost [Parliament] nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection.”

“They were governed by this country at the expence only of a little pen, ink and paper. They were led by a thread.”

“They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce.”

“They consider themselves as a part of the British empire, & as having one common interest with it; they may be looked on here as foreigners, by they do not consider themselves as such.”

“They are zealous for the honour & prosperity of this nation, and, while they are well used, will always be ready to support it, as far as their little power goes.”

“Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old England-man, was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.”

And, in 1763, “it is greatly lessened” which was due to “a concurrence of causes; the restraints lately laid on their trade, by which the bringing of foreign gold and silver into the colonies was prevented; the prohibition of making paper money among themselves; and then demanding a new and heavy tax by stamps; taking away at the same time, trials by juries, and refusing to receive & hear their humble petitions.

Their temper in 1766? ... “O, very much altered.”

## **Parliament**

The colonists “considered the parliament as the great bulwark & security of their liberties and privileges, and always spoke of it with the utmost respect and veneration: arbitrary ministers, they thought, might possibly, at times, attempt to oppress them, but they relied on it, that the parliament, on application, would always give redress.”

“They remembered, with gratitude, a strong instance of this, when a bill was brought into parliament with the clause to make royal instructions laws in the colonies, which the house of commons would not pass, and it was thrown out.”

Before 1763, there was no “objection to the right of [Parliament] laying duties to regulate commerce; but a right to lay internal taxes was never supposed to be in parliament, as we are not represented there.”

"[W]henver the subject has occurred in conversation where I have been present, it has appeared to be the opinion of every one, that we could not be taxed in a parliament where we were not represented."

"But the payment of duties laid by act of parliament, as regulations of commerce was never disputed."

Previously, "there was never an occasion to make any such act, till now that [Britain has] attempted to tax us; that has occasioned resolutions of assembly, declaring the distinction, in which I think every assembly on the continent, and every member in every assembly, have been unanimous."

### **Taxes Versus Duties**

The difference between external taxes and internal taxes "is very great."

"An external tax is a duty laid on commodities imported; that duty is added to the first cost, and other charges on the commodity, and when it is offered to sale, makes a part of the price. If the people do not like it at that price, they refuse it; they are not obliged to pay it."

"But an internal tax is forced from the people without their consent, if not laid by their own representatives."

"The stamp-act says, we shall have no commerce, make no exchange of property with each other, neither purchase nor grant, nor recover debts; we shall neither marry, nor make our wills, unless we pay such & such sums; and thus it is intended to extort our money from us, or ruin us by the consequences of refusing to pay it."

There is a material difference between a duty on the importation of goods, and an excise on their consumption.

"[A]n excise ... they think you can have no right to lay within their country. But the sea is yours; you maintain, by your fleets, the safety of navigation in it; and keep it clear of pirates; you may have therefore a natural and equitable right to some toll or duty on merchandizes carried throughout that part of your dominions, towards defraying the expence you are at in ships to maintain the safety of that carriage."

### **Colonists Were Willing to Pay Their Fair Share**

"The proceedings of the people in America have been considered too much together. The proceedings of the assemblies have been very different from those of the mobs, & should be distinguished, as having no connection with each other."

"The assemblies have only peaceably resolved what they take to be their rights; they have taken no measures for opposition by force; they have not built a fort, raised a man, or provided a grain of ammunition, in order to such opposition."

"The ring-leaders of riots they think ought to be punished; they would punish them themselves, if they could. Every sober sensible man would wish to see rioters punished, as otherwise peaceable people have no security of person or estate."

“But as to any internal tax, how small forever, laid by the legislature here on the people there, while they have no representatives in this legislature, I think it will never be submitted to.”

“They will oppose it to the last. They do not consider it as at all necessary for you to raise money on them by your taxes, because they are, & always have been, ready to raise money by taxes among themselves, and to grant large sums, equal to their abilities, upon requisition from the Crown.”

“They have not only granted equal to their abilities, but, during all the last war, they have granted far beyond their abilities, and beyond their proportion with this country, you yourselves being judges, to the amount of many hundred thousand pounds, and this they did freely and readily, only on a sort of promise from the secretary of state, that it should be recommended to parliament to make them compensation.”

“It was accordingly recommended to parliament, in the most honourable manner, for them. America has been greatly misrepresented and abused here, in papers, and pamphlets, and speeches, as ungrateful, and unreasonable, and unjust, in having put this nation to immense expence for their defence, and refusing to bear any part of that expence.”

“The Colonies raised, paid and clothed, near 25,000 men during the last war, a number equal to those sent from Britain, and far beyond their proportion; they went deeply in debt in doing this, and all their taxes and estates are mortgages, for many years to come, for discharging that debt. Government here was at that time sensible of this. The Colonies were recommended to parliament.”

“Every year the King sent down to the house a written message to this purpose. That his Majesty, being highly sensible of the zeal and vigour with which his faithful subjects in North-America had exerted themselves, in defence of his Majesty's just rights and possession, recommended it to the house to take the same into consideration, and enable him to give them a proper compensation.”

“You will find those messages on your own journals every year of the war to the very last, and you did accordingly give 200,000 Pounds annually to the Crown, to be distributed in such compensation to the Colonies.”

“This is the strongest of all proofs that the Colonies, far from being unwilling to bear a share of the burthen, did exceed their proportion, for if they had done less, or had only equaled their proportion, there would have been no room or reason for compensation.”

“Indeed the sums reimbursed them, were by no means adequate to the expence they incurred beyond their proportion; but they never murmured at that; they esteemed their Sovereign's approbation of their zeal and fidelity, the approbation of this house, far beyond any other kind of compensation”.

“[T]herefore, there was no occasion for this act, to force money from a willing people, they had not refused giving money for the purposes of the act: no requisition had been made; they were always willing and ready to do what could reasonably be expected from them, and in this light they wish to be considered.”

If Great-Britain should be engaged in a war in Europe, I think North-America would contribute to the support of it, “as far as their circumstances would permit.”

The Colonists “consider themselves as a part of the whole.”



## The Colonies Were Not Represented in the British Parliament

“No power, however great, can force men to change their opinions.”

“[The Colonists] think the parliament of Great-Britain cannot properly give that consent till it has representatives from America; for the petition of right expressly says, it is to be by common consent in parliament, and the people of America have no representatives in parliament, to make a part of that common consent.”

“The people will pay no internal tax; and I think an act to oblige the assemblies to make compensation it unnecessary, for I am of opinion, that as soon as the present heats are abated they will take the matter into consideration, and if it is right to be done, they will do it of themselves.”

If the stamp-act is repealed, the North-Americans will be satisfied. “I think the resolutions of right will give them very little concern, if they are never attempted to be carried into practice.”

“The Colonies will probably consider themselves in the same situation, in that respect, with Ireland; they know you claim the same right with regard to Ireland, but you never exercise it.

And they may believe you never will exercise it in the Colonies, any more than in Ireland, unless on some very extraordinary occasion.”

“Though the parliament may judge of the occasion, the people, will think it can never exercise such a right, till representatives from the Colonies are admitted into parliament, & that whenever the occasion arises, representatives will be ordered.”

“They will not find a rebellion; they may indeed make one.”

The pride of the Americans used to be “To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of G. Britain.”



What is now their pride? “To wear their old cloaths over again, till they can make new ones.” (Benjamin Franklin) (Information here is from Massachusetts Historical Society)

## **Repeal of Stamp Act**

Delegates from the colonies convened in New York City at the Stamp Act Congress, where they drew up formal petitions to the British Parliament and to King George III to repeal the act. It was the first unified colonial response to British policy and it provided the British a taste of what would come soon thereafter.

Realizing that it actually cost more to enforce the Stamp Act in the protesting colonies than it did to abolish it, the British government repealed the tax in 1766.

Information here is primarily from Massachusetts Historical Society; National Archives

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young