



shake off our Allegiance and become independent ? No : I'm far from thinking it

__Remarks on the prospect of the colonies' independence, 1705-1767__

"Shake off our Allegiance and become independent" No: I'm far from thinking it . . ." So wrote an English emigrant in 1752 on the necessity of an educated citizenry to safeguard the colonies' liberties—not against a tyrannical Great Britain, but against despots that might arise among themselves. For despite the power struggles with Great Britain before the 1760s, the colonies did not view rebellion and independence as options. Not only were they too disunited and militarily weak to fight a war for independence,¹ they didn't *want* to be independent. And after Britain's victory in the French and Indian War in 1763, Americans were thrilled to be Britons. "Instead of national independence," notes historian Alan Taylor, "the colonists had wanted to preserve their privileged position within the empire as virtually untaxed beneficiaries of imperial trade and protection. Until the British began to tighten the empire in the 1760s, the colonists had a very good deal—and they knew it."² Presented here are thirteen statements by colonists and Englishmen, from 1705 to 1767, in which the idea of colonial rebellion is dismissed as "a great flight of Wit" and "the height of madness"—until the Stamp Act of 1765.

1705 "great flight of Wit . . . so silly"

In a tract encouraging town-building in Virginia, an Irish-born clergyman addresses potential objections to his position, including the prospect of colonial rebellion.

Objection 3. *In process of Time they will cast off their Allegiance to England and set up a Government of their own.*

Answer. This is a great flight of Wit and Policy with Some, but so silly . . . Such as know the Constitution³ of these Colonies can make no such Objection if they consider what a medley and mixture of Nations, Opinions, and Humours they consist of, that they can never be of one mind, even in smaller Matters, that really concern their Advancement and Felicity, no not in one Country . . .

Rev. Francis Makemie, *A Plain and Friendly Persuasive to the Inhabitants of Virginia and Maryland for Promoting Towns and Cohabitation*, 1705⁴

1721 "these weak infant Colonies"

A Boston clergyman rejects the possibility that the colonies would "declare themselves a free State."

. . . Tis said, that their Numbers and Wealth join'd to their great Distance from Britain will give them an Opportunity in the Course of some Years to throw off their Dependence on the Nation and declare themselves a free State, if not curb'd in Time by being made entirely subject to the Crown. Whereas in Truth there's no Body tho' but little acquainted with these or any of the *Northern* Plantations [colonies] who does not know and confess that their Poverty and the declining State of their Trade is so great at present that there's far more Danger of their sinking, without some extraordinary Support from the Crown, than of their ever revolting from it. So that I may say without being ludicrous, that it would be more absurd to place two of His Majesty's Beef Eaters to watch an Infant in the Cradle that it don't rise and cut its Father's Throat than to guard these weak Infant Colonies to prevent their shaking off the *British Yoke*. Besides they are so distinct from one another in their Forms of Government, in their

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Statement at top from William Smith, *Some Thoughts on Education*, 1752. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ See "Union?" in *Becoming American* (NHC) at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/american/text4/text4read.htm.

² Alan S. Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2001), p. 442.

³ I.e., makeup, temperament, not a formalized ordering of government.

⁴ Makemie *Persuasive* accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

Religious Rites, in their Emulation of Trade, and consequently in their Affections, that they can never be suppos'd to unite in so dangerous an Enterprize.

It is for this Reason I have often wondered to hear some Great Men profess their Belief of the Feasibleness of it, and the Probability of its some Time or other actually coming to pass, who yet with the same Breath advise that all the Governments on the Continent be form'd into one by being brought under one Vice-Roy and into one Assembly. For surely if we in earnest believ'd that there was or would be hereafter a Disposition in the Provinces to Rebel and declare themselves Independent, it would be good Policy to keep them disunited; because if it were possible they could contrive so wild and rash an Undertaking, yet they would not be hardy enough to put it in Execution, unless they could first strengthen themselves by a Confederacy of all the Parts.

Jeremiah Dummer, *A Defense of the New England Charters*, 1721⁵

1724 “they would soon wither and perish”

An English clergyman asserts that the colonies “depend entirely” on Great Britain and would never unite in rebellion.

There can be no room for real apprehension of danger of a revolt of the plantations [colonies] in future ages: Or if any of them should attempt it, they might very easily be reduced [defeated] by the others; for all of them will never unite with one another. For though all the plantations agree in this — that they all belong to and depend entirely upon Great Britain — yet they have each views different from one another and as strenuously pursue their separate interests by various and distinct methods. Besides, they can't possibly be without Great Britain, to which they owe their being at first made colonies, and afterwards have been always supported, maintained and employed by it.

They can't live without this mart [market] for their manufactures and market, for supply of goods that they want; where they have a great interest, from whence they are descended, to which they are united by blood, religion, language, laws, and customs, and also they have and may always expect to find greater favour and encouragement and protection in England, than from any other nation in the world. The plantations cannot possibly subsist without some trade, correspondence, union, and alliance in Europe, and absolute necessity obliges them to fix these perpetually in Great Britain. Upon which, as upon a stock, they are ingrafted, spring forth, blossom and bear fruit abundantly, and being once lopped off from it, they would soon wither and perish. Thus is it the interest and safety, as well as the duty and inclination of the inhabitants of our plantations, always to be subservient to the government of England, by which they are planted, protected, supported, assisted, and encouraged.

Rev. Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia*, 1724⁶

1748 “colonies in due submission”

A visiting Swedish botanist is convinced that the colonies would never become “entirely independent of Old England.”

I have been told by Englishmen, and not only by such as were born in America, but also by those who came from Europe, that the English colonies in North America, in the space of thirty of fifty years would be able to form a state by themselves entirely independent of Old England. But as the whole country which lies along the seashore is unguarded, and on the land side is harassed by the French, these dangerous neighbors in times of war are sufficient to prevent the connection of the colonies with their mother country from being quite broken off. The English government has therefore sufficient reason to consider means of keeping the colonies in due submission.

Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America*, English ed., 1770⁷

⁵ Dummer *Defense* accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

⁶ Jones, *Virginia*, reprint by Joseph Sabin, New York, 1865.

⁷ Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1748-1749], *Containing its Natural History, and a Circumstantial Account of Its Plantations and Agriculture in General* . . . , English ed., 1770, Vol. I, pp. 139-140 (facsimile reprint: Dover Publications, 1966; replication of Wilson-Erickson publication, 1937); permission pending.

1752 “what, shake off our Allegiance . . . ?”

An English-born historian in New York concludes that the colonies could not “subsist in an independent State.”

The same Analogy of Reasoning which shows us that all Governments are subject to Death, shows also that these Provinces [colonies] may survive their Mother Country: — Here again, methinks, I hear the same Cry as against every other Effort to improve the Spirit of *Liberty and Virtue*; — what, shake off our Allegiance and become independent? No: I’m far from thinking it will ever be our Interest, or in our Power, to be independent of *Britain* while she is able to maintain her own Independency. But should she ever fall into the Way of other Nations, it is not to be supposed that we, like the chief Favourites of Easter[n?] Tyrants, would contentedly suffer [allow] ourselves to be laid in the same Grave with her. This is a Test of Affection which she will never require, and which, I hope, but a few here wou’d be dispos’d to give. Indeed, so far from being in a Condition to shake off our Dependency, in my sincere Judgement, we cou’d not at present even subsist in an independent State.

William Smith, *Some Thoughts on Education*, 1752⁸

1755 “it would be the height of madness”

An English cartographer publishes his observations on America with his new *General Map of the Middle British Colonies in America*.⁹

Supposing the Colonies were grown rich and powerful, what Inducement have they to throw off their Independency? National Ties of Blood and Friendship, mutual Dependencies for Support and Assistance in their civil and military Interests with England; each Colony having a particular Form of Government of its own, and the Jealousy of anyone’s having the Superiority over the rest, are unsurmountable Obstacles to their ever uniting, to the Prejudice of England, upon any ambitious Views of their own. But, that repeated and continued ill Usage, Infringements of their dear-bought Privileges, sacrificing them to the Ambition and Intrigues of domestic and foreign Enemies, may not provoke them to do their utmost for their own Preservation, I would not pretend to say, as weak as they are. But while they are treated as Members of one Body and allowed their natural Rights, it would be the height of madness for them to propose an Independency, were they ever were so strong. If they have any ambitious Views, a strong Colony, of a natural Enemy to England, on their Borders, would be the only Article that would render any Attempt of Independency truly dangerous; and for that Reason it becomes those who would regard the future Interest of Britain and its Colonies to suppress the Growth of the French Power, and not the English, in America.

Lewis Evans, *Geographical, Historical, Political, Philosophical and Mechanical Essays. The First, Containing an Analysis of a General Map of the Middle British Colonies in America . . .*, 1755.¹⁰

1759 “I do not mean an independent one”

A Boston minister envisions the colonies’ future in a thanksgiving sermon celebrating the British defeat of the French at Quebec during the French and Indian War.

Yea, we may reasonably expect that this country, which has in a short time and under many disadvantages become so populous and flourishing, will, by the continued blessing of heaven, in another century or two become a mighty empire (I do not mean an independent one) in numbers little inferior perhaps to the greatest in Europe, and in felicity to none.

Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, Sermon, Boston, 25 October 1759.¹¹

⁸ Smith *Education* accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

⁹ See Evans map (zoomable) in American Memory, Library of Congress, at hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3710.ar070902.

¹⁰ Evans *Essays* accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

1759 “duty & interest of America to submit”

An English clergyman travelling through the colonies evaluates their potential for independence.

My first attachment, as it is natural, is to my native country; my next is to America; and such is my affection for both that I hope nothing will ever happen to dissolve that union, which is so necessary to their common happiness. Let every Englishman and American, but for a moment or two, substitute themselves in each other’s place, and, I think, a mode of reconciliation will soon take effect. — Every American will then perceive the reasonableness of acknowledging the supremacy of the British legislature; and every Englishman, perhaps, the hardship of being taxed where there is no representation or assent.

Expedients may still be found, it is to be hoped however, to conciliate the present unhappy differences and restore harmony again between Great Britain and her colonies; but whatever measures may be adopted by parliament, I am sure, it is the duty and interest of America to submit. . . .

An idea, strange as it is visionary, has entered into the minds of the generality of mankind that empire is traveling westward; and everyone is looking forward with eager and impatient expectation to that destined moment when America is to give law to the rest of the world. But if ever an idea was illusory and fallacious, I will venture to predict that this will be so.

America is formed for happiness, but not for empire. In a course of 1200 miles I did not see a single object that solicited charity; but I saw insuperable causes of weakness, which will necessarily prevent its being a potent state.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America* [1759-1760] . . . , 1775¹²

1760 “as I am a Briton”

Benjamin Franklin, in this oft-quoted statement, declares his pride as a citizen of the British empire—and his certainty that its future strength will “lie in America.”

No one can rejoice more sincerely than I do on the Reduction [defeat] of Canada; and this, not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton. I have long been of Opinion that the Foundations of the future Grandeur and Stability of the British Empire lie in America, and tho’, like other Foundations, they are low and little seen, they are nevertheless broad and Strong enough to support the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected.

Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Henry Home (Lord) Kames, London, 3 January 1760¹³

1763 “till Time shall be no more”

With Britain’s victory in the French and Indian War, a Massachusetts clergyman lauds the eternal bond between the colonies and “our indulgent Mother,” Great Britain.

Now commences the Era of our Quiet Enjoyment of those Liberties which our Fathers purchased with the Toil of their whole Lives, their Treasure, their Blood. Safe from the Enemy of the Wilderness, safe from the griping hand of arbitrary Sway and cruel Superstition; Here shall be the late founded Seat of Peace and Freedom. Here shall our indulgent Mother, who has most generously rescued and protected us, be served and honoured by growing Numbers, with all Duty, Love and Gratitude, till Time shall be no more.

Rev. Thomas Barnard, Sermon, Salem, Massachusetts, 25 May 1763¹⁴

¹¹ Mayhew, *Two Discourses Delivered October 25th, 1759* . . . , 1759; accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

¹² Burnaby, *Travels*: reprint of 3d. ed., 1798 (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970); permission pending.

¹³ The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Yale University and the American Philosophical Society; permission pending.

¹⁴ Barnard, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency, Francis Bernard, Esq; Governor and Commander in Chief* . . . 25 May 1763, 1763; accessed through Early American Imprints online, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

1764 “nothing is further from their nature”

An English colonial governor insists that the colonies will never become independent because “their spirit abhors” the idea of defection from the empire.

It has been often suggested that care should be taken in the administration of the plantations [colonies], lest in some future time these colonies should become independent of the mother country. But perhaps it may be proper on this occasion, nay, it is justice to say it, that if by becoming independent is meant a revolt, nothing is further from their nature, their interest, their thoughts. If a defection from the alliance of the mother country be suggested, it ought to be and can be truly said that their spirit abhors the sense of such. . . nothing can eradicate from their hearts their natural, almost mechanical, affection to Great Britain, which they conceive under no other sense, nor call by any other name, than that of *home*. Besides, the merchants are, and must ever be, in great measure allied with those of Great Britain. Their very support consists in this alliance. The liberty and religion of the British colonies are incompatible with either French or Spanish government, and they know full well that they could hope for neither liberty nor protection under a Dutch one. No circumstance of trade could tempt them thus to certain ruin. Any such suggestion, therefore, is a false and unjust aspersion on their principles and affections, and can arise from nothing but an entire ignorance of their circumstances.

Gov. Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the Colonies*, 1st ed., 1764¹⁵

1766 “no, they will never submit to it”

Benjamin Franklin, however, warns the British Parliament that its colonial policies since victory in the French and Indian War, especially the passage of the Stamp Act, are alienating the colonies.

The EXAMINATION of Doctor BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, before an August Assembly, relating to the Repeal of the STAMP-ACT, &c. [13 February 1766]

...

Q. What was the temper of America towards Great-Britain before the year 1763?

A. The best in the world. They 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 you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense 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. 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.

Q. And what is their temper now?

A. O, very much altered.

Q. Did you ever hear the authority of parliament to make laws for America Questioned till lately?

A. The authority of parliament was allowed to be valid in all laws, except such as should lay internal taxes. It was never disputed in laying duties to regulate commerce.

...

Q. In what light did the people of America use to consider the parliament of Great-Britain?

A. They considered the parliament as the great bulwark and 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

¹⁵ Pownall, *Colonies*, 1st ed., accessed through Early Canadiana Online (canadiana.org), Library and Archives Canada; permission pending.

brought into parliament with a clause to make royal instructions laws in the Colonies, which the house of commons would not pass, and it was thrown out.

Q. And have they not still the same respect for parliament?

A. No; it is greatly lessened.

Q. To what causes is that owing?

A. 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 and hear their humble petitions.

Q. Don't you think they would submit to the stamp-act, if it was modified, the obnoxious parts taken out, and the duty reduced to some particulars, of small moment?

A. No; they will never submit to it.

...

Q. Have you not heard of the resolutions of this house, and of the house of lords, asserting the right of parliament relating to America, including a power to tax the people there?

A. Yes, I have heard of such resolutions.

Q. What will be the opinion of the Americans on those resolutions?

A. They will think them unconstitutional, and unjust.

Benjamin Franklin, testimony before a committee of the British House of Commons, London, 13 February 1766¹⁶

1767 "hasten their final Revolt"

In a more urgent tone, Benjamin Franklin reiterates his position to an English friend, stating his distress that Britain lacks the "Quantity of Wisdom" to forestall revolt.

Upon the whole, I have lived so great a Part of my Life in Britain and have formed so many Friendships in it that I love it and wish its Prosperity, and therefore wish to see that Union on which alone I think it can be secur'd and establish'd. As to America, the Advantages of such an Union to her are not so apparent. She may suffer at present under the arbitrary Power of this Country. She may suffer for a while in a Separation from it, but these are temporary Evils that she will outgrow.

Scotland and Ireland are differently circumstanc'd. Confin'd by the Sea, they can scarcely increase in Numbers, Wealth and Strength so as to overbalance England. But America, an immense Territory, favour'd by Nature with all Advantages of Climate, Soil, great navigable Rivers and Lakes, &c. [etc.] must become a great Country, populous and mighty; and will in a less time than is generally conceiv'd be able to shake off any Shackles that may be impos'd on her, and perhaps place them on the Imposers.

In the meantime, every Act of Oppression will sour their Tempers, lessen greatly if not annihilate the Profits of your Commerce with them, and hasten their final Revolt: For the Seeds of Liberty are universally sown there, and nothing can eradicate them. And yet there remains among that People so much Respect, Veneration and Affection for Britain, that, if cultivated prudently, with kind Usage and Tenderness for their Privileges, they might be easily govern'd still for Ages, without Force or any considerable Expense. But I do not see here [Britain] a sufficient Quantity of the Wisdom that is necessary to produce such a Conduct, and I lament the Want [lack] of it.

Benjamin Franklin, Letter to Henry Home (Lord) Kames, London, 23 February 1767¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Examination of Doctor Benjamin Franklin, before an August Assembly, relating to the Repeal of the Stamp Act, &c.* [Philadelphia, Hall and Sellers, 1766], Q&As #36-38, 40-44, 48-49; Franklin's Notes, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Nathaniel Ryder's Notes, transcription of shorthand MS: Harrowby Manuscript Trust, The Earl of Harrowby, Sandon Hall, Stafford. [February 13, 1766]; in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University and the American Philosophical Society; permission pending.

¹⁷ *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University and the American Philosophical Society; permission pending.