

“Why all this haste?": The Importance of the Moderates' Perspective in the
American Revolution

Bryan LaPointe
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On July 1, 1776, during the agitating days of the Continental Congress's contentious debate to separate from Great Britain, Pennsylvanian delegate John Dickinson passionately explained that to declare independence would be "to brave the storm in a skiff made of paper."¹ Throughout the tumultuous years before and during the start of the revolutionary war, Dickinson was the acclaimed leader of the "cool faction"² of colonial statesmen who, compared to those whom they considered to be radical delegates, respected the colonists' cause of opposing England's political oppression yet did not believe complete separation from the crown was necessarily essential at the time. The so-called "moderates," including John Jay, James Duane, and Robert Morris, alongside John Dickinson, are ignored in their role in the revolution because of the attention paid only to the patriotic radicals, like Samuel and John Adams, and the loyalist supporters of Britain. But the peaceful and diplomatically sound intentions of this faction of men were incredibly sincere in promoting the interests of the American colonies. The moderates' influence on the other Congressional delegates and the colonial population was crucially important in warning against drastic revolutionary steps that would hurt rather than help the American cause in initiating immediate repercussions from the British government and her military forces.

The general beliefs of these moderate colonial politicians were cemented primarily during the growing conflict between England and her colonies based on the various acts passed by the British Parliament. These acts of the 1760's, according to Parliament, were a logical way to raise revenue to help pay for the French and Indian War. The views of Pennsylvanian John Dickinson became extremely popular when he published a series of letters under the pseudonym

¹ Library of Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg004274%29%29>, IV 353.

² McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001. 93.

“the Farmer” from Pennsylvania, protesting the Townshend Acts of 1767.³ Published numerous times throughout all of the English colonies in North America, the vastly popular articles of “the Farmer” were widely known by any colonist who read the newspaper during the 1760’s and 1770’s. By writing as a farmer who was simply trying to get by in life with what he could produce, Dickinson appealed and connected to his countrymen by describing himself as “a Farmer, settled after a Variety of Fortunes...in the Province of *Pennsylvania*...received a liberal Education, and have been engaged in the busy Scenes of Life. My Farm is small; my Servants are few...I have a little Money at Interest; I wish for no more.”⁴ Dickinson automatically gained a popular reputation as a voice of protest for the colonists against the direction that their mother country was taking. Arguing that the taxes of the Townshend Acts were simply unconstitutional because their goal was only to gain revenue, Dickinson claimed that England was beginning to encroach on colonists’ liberties and opportunities to earn an honest living. Parliament had already passed such measures like the Sugar, Currency, Quartering and Stamp Acts in the early 1760’s to deal with the Seven Years’ War’s debt, prompting immense anger and unrest in the colonies.⁵ The evils of British policy were detrimental to the English colonies as a whole, and according to Dickinson, all inhabitants had to take this as a grim reality: “But whoever seriously considers the Matter, must perceive that a dreadful Stroke is aimed at the Liberty of these Colonies...for the Cause of *one* is the Cause of *all*.”⁶ Dickinson believed the colonists’ rightful liberties were at risk, and that it was time to do something to make Parliament listen. But to do

³ Ibid., 94.

⁴ “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, Penn. Dec. 3, 1767.

⁵ Rakove, Jack. *Revolutionaries*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2010. 19-26.

⁶ “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, Penn. Dec. 3, 1767.

this correctly, “the Farmer” made it clear that radical proposals (such as direct military conflict) were not the best option: “I am by no Means fond of inflammatory Measures; I detest them. I should be sorry that any thing should be done, which might justly displease our Sovereign, or our Mother Country.”⁷ As the prominent leader of the moderate politicians, Dickinson’s belief that the connection between mother country and her colonies was still important no matter what resentments dominated the “cool faction’s” attitudes. A 1774 article from the *Connecticut Courant*, quoting what “the American Farmer” had said in a letter, describes the unhappy situation in the colonies and what can be done about it:

To preserve [the] union and promote the happiness and prosperity of both countries, let us resolve to maintain our liberty. But in doing this, when any difference arises, on the present unhappy occasion, let us act so as to leave room for a return of the old good humour, confidence and affection, which has subsisted between Great Britain and this country, since the settlement of the colonies.⁸

This was the goal of moderate delegates like John Dickinson during the pre-revolution years: they wished to promote the cause of the colonies against these oversteps on their property and rights, but not to the point of fighting a war with the powerful British empire and eventually declaring independence.

While the ideas of how to force England to listen to her colonies varied for colonial statesmen, moderates and radicals definitely had their similarities. The most obvious consensus among these politicians (from Dickinson to Sam Adams) was that Britain’s actions were clearly intruding into colonists’ lives by threatening their rightful liberties as Englishmen; they were being defied by the extremely unpopular acts that England had passed for the colonies, mostly to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “The following is a Copy of a letter...,” *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), Feb. 1-8, 1774.

raise revenue for the heavy debts created from the Seven Years' War.⁹ In a 1772 Massachusetts newspaper article, the journalist explains that he cannot

conceive what *greater marks* of the insecurity of our freedom, we possibly can have, than what have been *erouding* on us...they have...wrested from the industrious farmers the *fruit* of their labours and the *sweat* of their brow, and *turned out their wives and little ones to starve*...so notoriously unfriendly to the Liberties of *all* America.¹⁰

The English inhabitants on the eastern coast of North America had reason to consider Parliament as a threat since it was being so “unfriendly” to their interests. Most colonial delegates to the Continental Congresses in 1774 and 1775 recognized this as a huge concern and were thus looking out for the economic well being of their fellow colonists. But the resolution of these taxing concerns was hotly debated between delegates. Most statesmen, other than the moderates like Dickinson, favored defending themselves with weapons if it was necessary: “if that *same magnanimity* of soul, which preserved them so *resigned* to the first appearance of oppression, *obliges* them at last to appeal to the sword, their conduct, in *each* situation would be estimable.”¹¹ Radical delegates, especially Samuel Adams who had expanded the formation of committees of correspondence, favored activities that would bring revenge and physical harm (such as tarring and feathering) to British administrative officials in the colonies; Adams claimed that Britain’s leaders wanted to have dominion over America because of their love for power and thus limit the rights of colonists.¹² The cause for the colonies was serious in that “they only deserve liberty, who *so well understand* it, *so passionately love* it, *so temperately enjoy* it, and *so wisely, bravely* and *virtuously assert, maintain* and *defend it*.”¹³ Moderates were unsure and reluctant to assert violence against Britain that would result in a full-scale war that the colonies

⁹ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 20-21.

¹⁰ “Massachusetts Spy,” *Essex Gazette* (Salem, Massachusetts), Jan. 7-14, 1772. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 101.

¹³ “Massachusetts Spy,” *Essex Gazette* (Salem, Massachusetts), Jan. 7-14, 1772. 2.

were not ready for; they had to face the dilemma of combining military action, with George Washington's appointment to organize a Continental Army, with the desperate hope that Britain would begin serious negotiations.

King George III's complete ignoring of the Second Continental Congress' Olive Branch Petition of 1775, urged notably by moderates under Dickinson to avoid a war, proved to be an overlooking of the good intentions of the "cool faction." Immediately after the devastating events at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, a Connecticut newspaper quoting a London letter explained how "the death warrant was passed" in Parliament, "and the colonies declared rebels. The petitions and all attempts have failed."¹⁴ In a letter to Arthur Lee on April 29 of that same year, John Dickinson wrote, "Why have We been so rashly declared Rebels? Why have Divisions been sent to disarm Us? Why Orders to commence Hostilities?"¹⁵ The misfortune Britain was inflicting on the colonies was now caused by deliberate armed force, when it had been by legislation the decade before. Dickinson continued to wonder "what Topicks of Reconciliation" could now be proposed to their countrymen, and what "Reason to hope, that those Ministers & Representatives will not be supported throughout the Tragedy as They have been thro the first Act?"¹⁶ Suggestions for negotiating with Parliament and the crown for peaceful resolutions appeared increasingly unlikely after this first violent battle at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. One article from the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* quoting a London letter read "from present appearances a reconciliation between us and Great Britain is at further

¹⁴ "New York, Extract of a Letter from London," *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, Conn.), May 3, 1775.

¹⁵ Library of Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg001267%29%29,I332>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

distance than we of late had reason to hope.”¹⁷ Moderate statesmen felt despair as the escalating conflict with their mother country was taking place. Hopes for some sort of peace resolution still dictated the attitudes of moderates like John Dickinson, yet the radicals like John Adams believed war and eventually independence were inevitable since the British were not to be trusted. John Adams had wrote, “powder and artillery are the most efficaciously sure and infallible conciliatory measures we can adopt.”¹⁸

With the onset of the war against Britain in 1775, moderates’ fears grew as the prospect of declaring independence began to be debated in public and in the Continental Congress. The publication of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* in January 1776 completely riled the colonists in the war effort against England and changed the political situation in the Continental Congress. Paine outright ridiculed the moderates’ goals for reconciliation; delegates favoring it were “interested men, who are not to be trusted; weak men, who *cannot* see; prejudiced men, who *will not* see; and a certain set of moderate men, who think better of the European world than it deserves; and this last class...will be the cause of more calamities to this continent, than all the other three.”¹⁹ While moderates refuted these allegations that insinuated that they were loyalists since they were just as critical of British policies as were the radicals, calls for independence began springing up in the Continental Congress.²⁰ After John Adams submitted a preamble that called for no reconciliation and a path to being independent, moderate James Duane demanded, “Why all this haste? Why all this driving?”²¹ Moderates did not necessarily think that now was the time to declare independence; they ultimately worried that the timing of such a drastic event

¹⁷ “Extract of a letter from New York,” *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia, Penn.), Apr. 24, 1775.

¹⁸ McCullough, *John Adams*, 95.

¹⁹ Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. 91.

²⁰ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 95.

²¹ McCullough, *John Adams*, 109.

would initiate disastrous repercussions for the colonies in terms of their own governments being extremely weak, or not having the ability to defend themselves against the notorious British army if alliances with other colonies and even France and other nations were not worked out properly. A *Virginia Gazette* article from April 12, 1776 read

The *name of independence* is accompanied with the terrifying ideas of an *everlasting* separation from Great Britain, of the destruction of the *finest constitution in the world* (as the phrase is) and of the substitution of republican governments in the colonies. Then follow a dreadful train of domestick convulsions in each republick, of jealousies, dissentions, wars, and all their attendant miseries...²²

Independence might be able to unite all colonists to fight against the approaching British army, but moderates knew it had the potential of causing domestic problems of weakness and differing factions. (After refusing to support the resolution for independence of July 2, 1776 that eventually passed, Robert Morris wrote that the decision to separate “has caused division when we wanted Union.”²³) Not only were measures supporting independence threatening the colonies’ unity, but also statesmen would be getting rid of the world’s “*finest constitution.*” Additionally, all colonial delegates knew that declaring independence had to be legitimate and strategic. The debating statesmen had to be sure that colonists felt that the relationship with the king was broken since this ensuing war was practically being created by the refusal of George III to protect his colonies. The other reason to publicly express being independent was to secure the aid of foreign countries through alliances.²⁴ These reasons proved vitally important in the final decision to declare independence. While a majority of moderates did not support the resolution to separate from England, they came to agree with radicals in that independence was strongly influenced by Britain’s missteps in the first place since Parliament and the crown miscalculated

²² “To Mr. Alexander Purdie,” *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Virg.), April 12, 1776.

²³ Library of Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28dg001267%29%29, IV 511>.

²⁴ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 99.

the volatility of the colonists' concerns and the faction of loyalists and delegates wanting reconciliation.²⁵ Moderate delegate Robert Morris had wrote

Great Britain may thank herself for this Event, for whatever might have been the original designs of some Men in promoting the present Contest I am sure that America in general never set out with any View or desire of establishing an Independant Empire. They have been drove into it step by step with a reluctant on their part that has been manifested in all their proceedings, & yet I dare say our Enemies will assert that it was planned from the first movements.²⁶

Here, Morris was most likely talking about the Adamses when he mentioned “some Men.”

Moderates believed that Parliament and the crown, not American interests, caused this struggle and eventual separation with Great Britain. Delegates like Dickinson, Morris, and Duane had been consistently favorable to colonists' interests in warning against a war with England, and their views were ultimately reinforced with this general consensus that Britain had miserably ignored chances for negotiation. Their major role in maintaining an alternate perspective on the conflict with England forced serious debate about the risks of war in the colonies.

What might the American Revolution have looked like without the moderate statesmen's influence? Hostilities with the British army might have begun earlier, more risks would probably have been taken, and the war could have even been lost if the consistent pessimism and sincerity of the moderates was not present in the Continental Congress in supporting steps to ultimately separate from their mother country. It could even be argued that the revolution could have turned out as bloody as later revolutions in France and Haiti. The influence of the moderates truly made the revolution a lot more conservative than it could have been, and in comparison to the French and Haitian revolutions, that is probably a good thing.

²⁵ Ibid., 102.

²⁶ Library of Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*,

