

## The Uncle of the Revolution

People have a tendency to memorialize the agitators of history, often at the expense of more subtle actors. We are likely to remember the firebrand Samuel Adams, “Father of the Revolution”, and righteous George Washington, “Father of the Country”, but less well known is John Dickinson, the courteous and conservative Pennsylvania lawyer who laid the foundations of the American Revolution’s ideology. As the historian Robert Natelson put it, “If James Madison was the ‘Father of the Constitution’, then John Dickinson was at least a kindly uncle” (Natelson 476). Though he was demonized by his contemporaries for his commitment to peaceful reconciliation with Britain and has been largely forgotten today, Dickinson’s notable common touch, his contributions to the idea of just taxation, and his emphasis on the need for unity changed the course of the Revolution.

A prosperous lawyer and a Quaker, John Dickinson was elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1762 and quickly distinguished himself as a fierce opponent to the proposed change of colonial government from a proprietorship under the Penn family to a royal charter. Chief among his concerns was the possible loss of traditional Quaker rights under the new government, including freedom of religion and the ability for dissenters to participate in politics. As he himself put it, “if the change of government now meditated can take place, with all our privileges preserved, let it instantly take place; but if they must be consumed in the blaze of Royal authority we shall pay too great a price” (Jacobson 64). In doing so, he clearly demonstrated his commitment to the commoners most affected by political decisions above all else, as his position in this and other matters created many illustrious enemies for him, including Benjamin Franklin, who supported the royal charter. Throughout his career, Dickinson

strived to make ongoing political developments accessible and understandable to the common people, especially during the upheaval prior to the Revolution. Almost a decade before Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*, Dickinson's "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania" proved to be an essential factor in mobilizing common support against the increasingly overt encroachment of British power in the colonies. In these essays, he adopted the persona of an average rural colonist for the purpose of drawing attention to how accepting Britain's taxation of imported goods would lead to continued financial exploitation in the future. At one point, he urged his countrymen to "behold the ruin hanging over your heads", for "if you once admit that Great Britain may lay duties upon her exportations to us...she then will have nothing to do but to lay those duties on the articles which she prohibits us to manufacture" ("Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania" 20). Yet what set him apart from later propagandists was his belief that the people should not be given a simplified version of the truth inundated with rhetoric. According to Mel Bradford, "the manner of Dickinson's twelve letters is well suited to their matter. In form they belong to the 'high' or 'sober' tradition of English political pamphleteering", in contrast to the more "popular" and "rough" works of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere that focused primarily on evoking an emotional response by demonizing the behavior of British soldiers. In short, Dickinson's efforts to protect the wellbeing of the American people as well as his respect for their ability to comprehend the significance of political developments helped to bring about widespread public participation in the Revolution for years to come.

Dickinson's importance was far from limited to his ability to connect with the common man, as his arguments regarding the nature of just taxation helped the leaders of the Revolution to form a coherent ideology against intrusive British tariffs. At the 1765 Stamp Act Congress, his *Declaration of*

*Rights* stated that since “all supplies to the crown [are] free gifts of the people, it is...inconsistent with the principles and spirit of the British constitution for the people of Great Britain to grant to His Majesty the property of the colonists”. In Dickinson’s view, “government was instituted to promote the welfare of mankind” so taxes not used to benefit colonial interests were confiscatory and illicit (*The Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*). For example, he argued that the taxes collected to pay Britain’s debt from the French and Indian War were illegitimate because Britain alone received any benefit from the acquired territories of “Canada, Nova-Scotia, and Florida; and therefore she alone ought to maintain them” (“Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania” 42). In order to combat this unjust taxation, Dickinson was one of the strongest advocates for civil disobedience, serving as a member of a Committee of Public Safety (Calvert). Furthermore, as a member of the First Continental Congress, he composed four of its six publications. While Dickinson may not have been the only colonial leader to oppose British taxation on purely legal grounds, he was certainly one of the most influential, and his ideas were incorporated into a variety of documents and resolutions that advanced the agenda of the American Revolution.

Like many of his contemporaries, Dickinson placed great emphasis on the need for colonial unity. Early on, he recognized that Britain’s targeted punitive measures constituted a strategy of sowing division among the colonies, which he called “the first political maxim in attacking those who are powerful by their union” (“Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania” 16). However, what distinguished Dickinson from the majority of the colonial leaders was his dedication to the idea of unity in the form of reconciliation with Britain. Even in his *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*, he hastened to assure the British “that we mean not to dissolve that union which has so long and so

happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored” because of his fear that anarchy would result without British rule. At the Second Continental Congress, Dickinson forbade his fellow Pennsylvania delegates from signing the Declaration of Independence, promising that “from the moment when our separation shall take place, everything will assume a contrary direction” (“A Speech Against Independence”). In the end, his belief in the need for colonial unity prevailed. Though his conscience prevented him from casting a vote on the document, he allowed the convention to proceed, thereby sacrificing his own dearly held convictions for the will of the country.

Today, the word “prudence” is often associated with “prude” and carries the same negative connotations of hesitation, indecision, and a lack of imagination. In general, historical figures known for their patience and carefulness are either relegated to the dustbin of history or vilified for their inaction, and the life of John Dickinson has faced both fates at various points in time. But Dickinson’s contributions to the ideas and the organization of the American Revolution make these treatments undeserved in spite of his infamous abstention. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in response to Dickinson’s death, “a more estimable man, or truer patriot, could not have left us” (“UD Library”).

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