

WEEK TWO

THE RIGHTS OF ENGLISHMEN

Whig Liberty and the Coming of Independence

THE FOUNDING DEBATE READING GROUP

Summer 2026

Selected and edited by Mason Melead

This reader gathers public-domain texts spanning the half-century from Cato's Letters (1720–1722) to the Declaration of Independence (1776). Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are substantially preserved; long s is modernized and emphatic full capitals are rendered in small capitals. Latin and Greek are translated in the footnotes. Sources: Wikisource (Cato's Letters, the Virginia Declaration of Rights, and the Dunlap broadside of the Declaration of Independence), the Avalon Project (Patrick Henry), and Project Gutenberg (John Dickinson).

This reader was selected, introduced, and typeset by Mason Melead for the Founding Debate Reading Group. masonmelead.com

INTRODUCTION

The colonists who resisted Great Britain in the 1760s and 1770s rarely spoke of themselves as revolutionaries. They believed they were defending an inheritance. The rights they claimed—to their property, to trial by jury, to be taxed only by their own representatives—were, in their view, the ancient rights of Englishmen, secured by the common law and confirmed by the settlement of 1688. The documents gathered in this volume trace how that inheritance was understood, argued, and at last transformed into a claim of independence.

The volume opens in London, a half-century before Lexington. Between 1720 and 1723 two English radical Whigs, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, published a series of newspaper essays under the name of Cato, the Roman republican who died rather than live under Caesar. *Cato's Letters* found a far larger audience in the colonies than at home. Reprinted in American newspapers and quoted in pamphlets, they supplied a vocabulary—of liberty and power as natural enemies, of the corruption that follows unchecked authority, of the citizen's duty to watch his governors with a jealous eye. The two letters printed here take up the encroaching nature of power and the meaning of liberty itself. A reader who knows the later American arguments will recognize their seedbed.

From this English inheritance the volume turns to its first great American application. In 1767 Parliament, having retreated from the Stamp Act, tried a subtler expedient: duties on glass, paper, and tea, defended as regulations of trade. John Dickinson, writing as a Pennsylvania farmer, answered in letters that were themselves reprinted throughout the colonies. His achievement was to hold two commitments together—loyalty to the empire and a refusal of Parliament's claim to tax—by

drawing a careful line between the regulation of commerce and the raising of a revenue without consent. The three letters selected here contain the heart of that argument.

The remaining documents belong to the years when argument gave way to decision. Patrick Henry's speech to the Virginia Convention in March 1775 urged the colony to arm; it survives only in a reconstruction assembled decades afterward, and should be read with that caution in mind. In June 1776 George Mason drafted the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the first bill of rights framed by an American state, whose opening article would echo through Jefferson's more famous sentences a few weeks later. The volume closes with the Declaration of Independence in the form of the Dunlap broadside, the first printing struck off on the night of the fourth of July.

Read in sequence, these texts pose a single question under changing circumstances: on what terms may a free people be governed, and what may they do when those terms are broken? Cato asks it as a matter of political psychology, Dickinson as a matter of constitutional law, Henry as a matter of the sword, and Mason and Jefferson as a matter of founding a new order. The reader is invited to notice not only where they agree but where the ground shifts beneath them—how the rights of Englishmen become, by 1776, the rights of man.

A TIMELINE OF THE FOUNDING

The works in this volume belong to a sequence of stages that carried the colonies from empire to independence, and at last to a constitution of their own. The opening essays—*Cato's Letters*, of the 1720s—precede these stages by a generation; the remaining works fall within them, and each introduction notes where its document stands.

1756–1763	●	THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR Britain's costly victory over France doubles her empire and her debt; the effort to make the colonies share it begins the quarrel.
1763–1776	●	THE PAMPHLET WAR A decade of argument over taxation and consent, its rhetoric and its tensions rising steadily—from Dickinson's measured <i>Farmer's Letters</i> (1768) to Patrick Henry's call to arms (1775).
1776–1783	●	THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE Opened by the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Declaration of Independence (1776); closed by the Peace of Paris.
1783–1788	●	THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION The states, bound only by a weak league, struggle through the unsettled "critical period" that followed the war.
1788–	●	THE CONSTITUTION A stronger national government, framed at Philadelphia, ratified in 1788, and inaugurated in 1789.

CATO'S LETTERS

Thomas Gordon

TWO ESSAYS · 1721–1722

Cato's Letters appeared in the London press between 1720 and 1723, at the height of the panic that followed the collapse of the South Sea Company. Their authors, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, wrote under the name of Cato the Younger, the Roman who preferred death to Caesar's rule; the pseudonym announced their subject, which was the survival of liberty under governments prone to corruption. Reprinted for decades, the essays found a far larger audience in the American colonies than at home, supplying a vocabulary—of liberty and power as natural enemies, of the corruption that follows unchecked authority, of the citizen's duty to watch his governors with a jealous eye—that the revolutionary generation would claim as its own.

Two of the essays, both Gordon's, are printed here. The first, No. 33, examines the thing that liberty must guard against: power, considered not as an office but as a tendency in human nature, restless and encroaching, to be restrained rather than trusted. Its distinction between a people's wholesome jealousy of its rulers and a ruler's dangerous jealousy of his people became a settled assumption of American constitutionalism. The second, No. 62, undertakes to say plainly what liberty is—"the power which every man has over his own actions, and his right to enjoy the fruit of his labour"—in language that runs strikingly close to the natural-rights formulas Mason and Jefferson would use in 1776.

Readers should attend to the essays' psychology as much as their politics: their claim is that constitutional design must begin from what men are likely to do with power, not from what one hopes they will do. On the timeline at the front of this reader, Cato stands before the first stage—a generation earlier than the Seven Years' War—part of the inheritance rather than the quarrel.

NO. 33

CAUTIONS AGAINST THE NATURAL ENCROACHMENTS OF
POWER

SIR,

Considering what sort of a creature man is it is scarce possible to put him under too many restraints, when he is possessed of great power: He may possibly use it well; but they act most prudently, who, supposing that he would use it ill, inclose him within certain bounds, and make it terrible to him to exceed them.

Men that are above all fear, soon grow above all shame. *Rupto pudore ac metu, suo tantum ingenio utebatur*,¹ says Tacitus of Tiberius. Even Nero had lived a great while inoffensively, and reigned virtuously: But finding at last that he might do what he would, he let loose his appetite for blood, and committed such mighty, such monstrous, such unnatural slaughters and outrages, as none but a heart bent on the study of cruelty could have devised. The good counsels of Seneca and Burrhus were, for some time, checks upon his wolfish nature; and doubtless he apprehended, that if he made direct and downright war upon his people, they would use resistance and make reprisals: But discovering, by degrees, that they would bear any thing, and his soldiers would execute every thing, he grew into an open defiance with mankind, and daily and wantonly wallowed in their blood. Having no other rival, he seemed to rival himself, and every day's wickedness was blacker than another.

Yet Nero was not the worst of all men: There have been thousands as bad as he, and only wanted the same opportunity to shew it. And there actually have been many princes in the world who have shed more blood,

¹Finally, when all shame and fear had disappeared, he followed his own nature and descended into crime and dishonour.

and done more mischief to mankind, than Nero did. I could instance in a late one, who destroyed more lives than ever Nero destroyed, perhaps an hundred to one. It makes no difference, that Nero committed butcheries out of cruelty, and the other only for his glory: However the world may be deceived by the change of names into an abhorrence of the one, and an admiration of the other; it is all one to a nation, when they are to be slaughtered, whether they be slaughtered by the hangman or by dragoons, in prison or in the field; nor is ambition better than cruelty, when it begets mischief as great.

It is nothing strange, that men, who think themselves unaccountable, should act unaccountably, and that all men would be unaccountable if they could: Even those who have done nothing to displease, do not know but some time or other they may; and no man cares to be at the entire mercy of another. Hence it is, that if every man had his will, all men would exercise dominion, and no man would suffer it. It is therefore owing more to the necessities of men, than to their inclinations, that they have put themselves under the restraint of laws, and appointed certain persons, called magistrates, to execute them; otherwise they would never be executed, scarce any man having such a degree of virtue as willingly to execute the laws upon himself; but, on the contrary, most men thinking them a grievance, when they come to meddle with themselves and their property. *Suarum legum auctor & everzor*,² was the character of Pompey: He made laws when they suited his occasions, and broke them when they thwarted his will. And it is the character of almost every man possessed of Pompey's power: They intend them for a security to themselves, and for a terror to others. This shews the distrust that men have of men; and this made a great philosopher call the state of nature, a state of war; which definition is true in a restrained sense, since human societies and human laws are the effect of necessity and experience: Whereas were all men left to the boundless liberty which they claim from nature, every man would be interfering and quarrelling with another; every man would be plundering the acquisitions of another; the labour of one man would be the property of another; weakness would be the prey of force; and one man's industry would be the cause of another man's idleness.

²The author and transgressor of his own laws.

Hence grew the necessity of government; which was the mutual contract of a number of men, agreeing upon certain terms of union and society, and putting themselves under penalties, if they violated these terms, which were called laws, and put into the hands of one or more men to execute. And thus men quitted part of their natural liberty to acquire civil security. But frequently the remedy proved worse than the disease; and human society had often no enemies so great as their own magistrates; who, where-ever they were trusted with too much power, always abused it, and grew mischievous to those who made them what they were. Rome, while she was free (that is, while she kept her magistrates within due bounds) could defend herself against all the world, and conquer it: But being enslaved (that is, her magistrates having broke their bounds) she could not defend herself against her own single tyrants, nor could they defend her against her foreign foes and invaders; for by their madness and cruelties they had destroyed her virtue and spirit, and exhausted her strength. This shews that those magistrates that are at absolute defiance with a nation, either cannot subsist long, or will not suffer the nation to subsist long; and that mighty traitors, rather than fall themselves, will pull down their country.

What a dreadful spirit must that man possess, who can put a private appetite in balance against the universal good of his country, and of mankind! Alexander and Caesar were that sort of men; they would set the world on fire, and spill its blood, rather than not govern it. Caligula knew that he was hated, and deserved to be hated; but it did not mend him. *Oderint dum metuant*,³ was his by-word: All that the monster aimed at, was to be great and terrible. Most of these tyrants died as became them; and, as they had reigned, by violence: But that did not mend their successors, who generally earned the fate of those that went before them, before they were warm in their place. *Invenit etiam aemulos infelix nequitia: Quid si floreat vigeatque?*⁴ “If unfortunate villainy thus finds rivals, what shall we say, when it exalts its head and prospers?”

³Let them hate, so long as they fear.

⁴Even unfruitful wickedness finds imitators. What if it were to flourish and prosper?

There is no evil under the sun but what is to be dreaded from men, who may do what they please with impunity: They seldom or never stop at certain degrees of mischief when they have power to go farther; but hurry on from wickedness to wickedness, as far and as fast as human malice can prompt human power. *Ubi semel recto deerratum est, in praeceptis pervenitur; a rectis in vitia, a vitiis in prava, a pravis in praecipitia*,⁵ says a Roman historian; who in this speaks the truth, though in other instances he tells many lies; I mean that base flatterer of power, Velleius Paterculus. So that when we see any great mischief committed with safety, we may justly apprehend mischiefs still greater.

The world is governed by men, and men by their passions; which, being boundless and insatiable, are always terrible when they are not controuled. Who was ever satiated with riches, or surfeited with power, or tired with honours? There is a tradition concerning Alexander, that having penetrated to the Eastern Ocean, and ravaged as much of this world as he knew, he wept that there was never another world for him to conquer. This, whether true or no, shews the spirit of the man, and indeed of human nature, whose appetites are infinite.

People are ruined by their ignorance of human nature; which ignorance leads them to credulity, and too great a confidence in particular men. They fondly imagine that he, who, possessing a great deal by their favour, owes them great gratitude, and all good offices, will therefore return their kindness: But, alas! how often are they mistaken in their favourites and trustees; who, the more they have given them, are often the more incited to take all, and to return destruction for generous usage. The common people generally think that great men have great minds, and scorn base actions; which judgment is so false, that the basest and worst of all actions have been done by great men: Perhaps they have not picked private pockets, but they have done worse; they have often disturbed, deceived, and pillaged the world: And he who is capable of the highest mischief, is capable of the meanest: He who plunders a country of a million of money, would in suitable circumstances steal a silver

⁵Whenever one wanders from the right, one descends headlong—from propriety to depravity, from depravity to crime, from crime to the abyss.

spoon; and a conqueror, who steals and pillages a kingdom, would, in an humbler fortune, rifle a portmanteau, or rob an orchard.

Political jealousy, therefore, in the people, is a necessary and laudable passion. But in a chief magistrate, a jealousy of his people is not so justifiable, their ambition being only to preserve themselves; whereas it is natural for power to be striving to enlarge itself, and to be encroaching upon those that have none. The most laudable jealousy of a magistrate is to be jealous *for* his people; which will shew that he loves them, and has used them well: But to be jealous *of* them, would denote that he has evil designs against them, and has used them ill. The people's jealousy tends to preserve liberty; and the prince's to destroy it. Venice is a glorious instance of the former, and so is England; and all nations who have lost their liberty, are melancholy proofs of the latter.

Power is naturally active, vigilant, and distrustful; which qualities in it push it upon all means and expedients to fortify itself, and upon destroying all opposition, and even all seeds of opposition, and make it restless as long as any thing stands in its way. It would do what it pleases, and have no check. Now, because liberty chastises and shortens power, therefore power would extinguish liberty; and consequently liberty has too much cause to be exceeding jealous, and always upon her defence. Power has many advantages over her; it has generally numerous guards, many creatures, and much treasure; besides, it has more craft and experience, less honesty and innocence: And whereas power can, and for the most part does, subsist where liberty is not, liberty cannot subsist without power; so that she has, as it were, the enemy always at her gates.

Some have said, that magistrates being accountable to none but God, ought to know no other restraint. But this reasoning is as frivolous as it is wicked; for no good man cares how many punishments and penalties lie in his way to an offence which he does not intend to commit: A man who does not mean to commit murder, is not sorry that murder is punished with death. And as to wicked men, their being accountable to God, whom they do not fear, is no security to use against their folly and malice; and to say that we ought to have no security against them, is to insult common sense, and give the lie to the first law of nature, that of self-preservation. Human reason says, that there is no obedience, no regard

due to those rulers, who govern by no rule but their lust. Such men are no rulers; they are outlaws; who, being at defiance with God and man, are protected by no law of God, or of reason. By what precept, moral or divine, are we forbid to kill a wolf, or burn an infected ship? Is it unlawful to prevent wickedness and misery, and to resist the authors of them? Are crimes sanctified by their greatness? And is he who robs a country, and murders ten thousand, less a criminal, than he who steals single guineas, and takes away single lives? Is there any sin in preventing, and restraining, or resisting the greatest sin that can be committed, that of oppressing and destroying mankind by wholesale? Sure there never were such open, such shameless, such selfish impostors, as the advocates for lawless power! It is a damnable sin to oppress them; yet it is a damnable sin to oppose them when they oppress, or gain by oppression of others! When they are hurt themselves ever so little, or but think themselves hurt, they are the loudest of all men in their complaints, and the most outrageous in their behaviour: But when others are plundered, oppressed, and butchered, complaints are sedition; and to seek redress, is damnation. Is not this to be the authors of all wickedness and falsehood?

To conclude: Power, without control, appertains to God alone; and no man ought to be trusted with what no man is equal to. In truth there are so many passions, and inconsistencies, and so much selfishness, belonging to human nature, that we can scarce be too much upon our guard against each other. The only security which we can have that men will be honest, is to make it their interest to be honest; and the best defence which we can have against their being knaves, is to make it terrible to them to be knaves. As there are many men wicked in some stations, who would be innocent in others; the best way is to make wickedness unsafe in any station.

I am, &c.

P. S. This letter is the sequel of that upon human nature; and both are intended for an introduction to a paper which I intend to write upon the restraints which all wise nations put upon their magistrates.

G.

NO. 62

AN ENQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF
LIBERTY

with its Loveliness and Advantages, and the vile Effects of Slavery

SIR,

I have shewn, in a late paper, wherein consists the difference between free and arbitrary governments, as to their frame and constitution; and in this and the following, I shall shew their different spirit and effects. But first I shall shew wherein liberty itself consists.

By liberty, I understand the power which every man has over his own actions, and his right to enjoy the fruit of his labour, art, and industry, as far as by it he hurts not the society, or any members of it, by taking from any member, or by hindering him from enjoying what he himself enjoys. The fruits of a man's honest industry are the just rewards of it, ascertained to him by natural and eternal equity, as is his title to use them in the manner which he thinks fit: And thus, with the above limitations, every man is sole lord and arbiter of his own private actions and property. A character of which no man living can divest him but by usurpation, or his own consent.

The entering into political society, is so far from a departure from his natural right, that to preserve it was the sole reason why men did so; and mutual protection and assistance is the only reasonable purpose of all reasonable societies. To make such protection practicable, magistracy was formed, with power to defend the innocent from violence, and to punish those that offered it; nor can there be any other pretence for magistracy in the world. In order to this good end, the magistrate is entrusted with conducting and applying the united force of the community; and

with exacting such a share of every man's property, as is necessary to preserve the whole, and to defend every man and his property from foreign and domestick injuries. These are the boundaries of the power of the magistrate, who deserts his function whenever he breaks them. By the laws of society, he is more limited and restrained than any man amongst them; since, while they are absolutely free in all their actions, which purely concern themselves; all his actions, as a publick person, being for the sake of society, must refer to it, and answer the ends of it.

It is a mistaken notion in government, that the interest of the majority is only to be consulted, since in society every man has a right to every man's assistance in the enjoyment and defence of his private property; otherwise the greater number may sell the lesser, and divide their estates amongst themselves; and so, instead of a society, where all peaceable men are protected, become a conspiracy of the many against the minority. With as much equity may one man wantonly dispose of all, and violence may be sanctified by mere power.

And it is as foolish to say, that government is concerned to meddle with the private thoughts and actions of men, while they injure neither the society, nor any of its members. Every man is, in nature and reason, the judge and disposer of his own domestick affairs; and, according to the rules of religion and equity, every man must carry his own conscience. So that neither has the magistrate a right to direct the private behaviour of men; nor has the magistrate, or any body else, any manner of power to model people's speculations, no more than their dreams. Government being intended to protect men from the injuries of one another, and not to direct them in their own affairs, in which no one is interested but themselves; it is plain, that their thoughts and domestick concerns are exempted entirely from its jurisdiction: In truth, men's thoughts are not subject to their own jurisdiction.

Idiots and lunatics indeed, who cannot take care of themselves, must be taken care of by others: But whilst men have their five senses, I cannot see what the magistrate has to do with actions by which the society cannot be affected; and where he meddles with such, he meddles impertinently or tyrannically. Must the magistrate tie up every man's legs, because some men fall into ditches? Or, must he put out their eyes,

because with them they see lying vanities? Or, would it become the wisdom and care of governors to establish a travelling society, to prevent people, by a proper confinement, from throwing themselves into wells, or over precipices; or to endow a fraternity of physicians and surgeons all over the nation, to take care of their subjects' health, without being consulted; and to vomit, bleed, purge, and scarify them at pleasure, whether they would or no, just as these established judges of health should think fit? If this were the case, what a stir and hubbub should we soon see kept about the established potions and lancets? Every man, woman, or child, though ever so healthy, must be a patient, or woe be to them! The best diet and medicines would soon grow pernicious from any other hand; and their pills alone, however ridiculous, insufficient, or distasteful, would be attended with a blessing.

Let people alone, and they will take care of themselves, and do it best; and if they do not, a sufficient punishment will follow their neglect, without the magistrate's interposition and penalties. It is plain, that such busy care and officious intrusion into the personal affairs, or private actions, thoughts, and imaginations of men, has in it more craft than kindness; and is only a device to mislead people, and pick their pockets, under the false pretence of the publick and their private good. To quarrel with any man for his opinions, humours, or the fashion of his clothes, is an offence taken without being given. What is it to a magistrate how I wash my hands, or cut my corns; what fashion or colours I wear, or what notions I entertain, or what gestures I use, or what words I pronounce, when they please me, and do him and my neighbour no hurt? As well may he determine the colour of my hair, and control my shape and features.

True and impartial liberty is therefore the right of every man to pursue the natural, reasonable, and religious dictates of his own mind; to think what he will, and act as he thinks, provided he acts not to the prejudice of another; to spend his own money himself, and lay out the produce of his labour his own way; and to labour for his own pleasure and profit, and not for others who are idle, and would live and riot by pillaging and oppressing him, and those that are like him.

So that civil government is only a partial restraint put by the laws of agreement and society upon natural and absolute liberty, which might otherwise grow licentious: And tyranny is an unlimited restraint put upon natural liberty, by the will of one or a few. Magistracy, amongst a free people, is the exercise of power for the sake of the people; and tyrants abuse the people, for the sake of power. Free government is the protecting the people in their liberties by stated rules: Tyranny is a brutish struggle for unlimited liberty to one or a few, who would rob all others of their liberty, and act by no rule but lawless lust.

So much for an idea of civil liberty. I will now add a word or two, to shew how much it is the delight and passion of mankind; and then shew its advantages.

The love of liberty is an appetite so strongly implanted in the nature of all living creatures, that even the appetite of self-preservation, which is allowed to be the strongest, seems to be contained in it; since by the means of liberty they enjoy the means of preserving themselves, and of satisfying their desires in the manner which they themselves choose and like best. Many animals can never be tamed, but feel the bitterness of restraint in the midst of the kindest usage; and rather than bear it, grieve and starve themselves to death; and some beat out their brains against their prisons.

Where liberty is lost, life grows precarious, always miserable, often intolerable. Liberty is, to live upon one's own terms; slavery is, to live at the mere mercy of another; and a life of slavery is, to those who can bear it, a continual state of uncertainty and wretchedness, often an apprehension of violence, often the lingering dread of a violent death: But by others, when no other remedy is to be had, death is reckoned a good one. And thus, to many men, and to many other creatures, as well as men, the love of liberty is beyond the love of life.

This passion for liberty in men, and their possession of it, is of that efficacy and importance, that it seems the parent of all the virtues: And therefore in free countries there seems to be another species of mankind, than is to be found under tyrants. Small armies of Greeks and Romans despised the greatest hosts of slaves; and a million of slaves have been

sometimes beaten and conquered by a few thousand freemen. Insomuch that the difference seemed greater between them than between men and sheep. It was therefore well said by Lucullus, when, being about to engage the great King Tigranes's army, he was told by some of his officers, how prodigious great the same was, consisting of between three and four hundred thousand men: "No matter," said that brave Roman, drawing up his little army of fourteen thousand, but fourteen thousand Romans: "No matter; the lion never enquires into the number of the sheep." And these royal troops proved no better; for the Romans had little else to do but to kill and pursue; which yet they could scarce do for laughing; so much more were they diverted than animated by the ridiculous dread and sudden flight of these imperial slaves and royal cowards.

Men eternally cowed and oppressed by haughty and insolent governors, made base themselves by the baseness of that sort of government, and become slaves by ruling over slaves, want spirit and souls to meet in the field freemen, who scorn oppressors, and are their own governors, or at least measure and direct the power of their governors.

Education alters nature, and becomes stronger. Slavery, while it continues, being a perpetual awe upon the spirits, depresses them, and sinks natural courage; and want and fear, the concomitants of bondage, always produce despondency and baseness; nor will men in bonds ever fight bravely, but to be free. Indeed, what else should they fight for; since every victory that they gain for a tyrant, makes them poorer and fewer; and, increasing his pride, increases his cruelty, with their own misery and chains?

Those, who, from terror and delusion, the frequent causes and certain effects of servitude, come to think their governors greater than men, as they find them worse, will be as apt to think themselves less: And when the head and the heart are thus both gone, the hands will signify little. They who are used like beasts, will be apt to degenerate into beasts. But those, on the contrary, who, by the freedom of their government and education, are taught and accustomed to think freely of men and things, find, by comparing one man with another, that all men are naturally alike; and that their governors, as they have the same face, constitution, and shape with themselves, and are subject to the same sickness, acci-

dents, and death, with the meanest of their people; so they possess the same passions and faculties of the mind which their subjects possess, and not better. They therefore scorn to degrade and prostrate themselves, to adore those of their own species, however covered with titles, and disguised by power: They consider them as their own creatures; and, as far as they surmount themselves, the work of their own hands, and only the chief servants of the state, who have no more power to do evil than one of themselves, and are void of every privilege and superiority, but to serve them and the state. They know it to be a contradiction in religion and reason, for any man to have a right to do evil; that not to resist any man's wickedness, is to encourage it; and that they have the least reason to bear evil and oppression from their governors, who of all men are the most obliged to do them good. They therefore detest slavery, and despise or pity slaves; and, adoring liberty alone, as they who see its beauty and feel its advantages always will, it is no wonder that they are brave for it.

Indeed liberty is the divine source of all human happiness. To possess, in security, the effects of our industry, is the most powerful and reasonable incitement to be industrious: And to be able to provide for our children, and to leave them all that we have, is the best motive to beget them. But where property is precarious, labour will languish. The privileges of thinking, saying, and doing what we please, and of growing as rich as we can, without any other restriction, than that by all this we hurt not the publick, nor one another, are the glorious privileges of liberty; and its effects, to live in freedom, plenty, and safety.

These are privileges that increase mankind, and the happiness of mankind. And therefore countries are generally peopled in proportion as they are free, and are certainly happy in that proportion: And upon the same tract of land that would maintain a hundred thousand freemen in plenty, five thousand slaves would starve. In Italy, fertile Italy, men die sometimes of hunger amongst the sheaves, and in a plentiful harvest; for what they sow and reap is none of their own; and their cruel and greedy governors, who live by the labour of their wretched vassals, do not suffer them to eat the bread of their own earning, nor to sustain their lives with their own hands.

Liberty naturally draws new people to it, as well as increases the old stock; and men as naturally run when they dare from slavery and wretchedness, whithersoever they can help themselves. Hence great cities losing their liberty become deserts, and little towns by liberty grow great cities; as will be fully proved before I have gone through this argument. I will not deny, but that there are some great cities of slaves: But such are only imperial cities, and the seats of great princes, who draw the wealth of a continent to their capital, the center of their treasure and luxury. Babylon, Antioch, Seleucia, and Alexandria, were great cities peopled by tyrants; but peopled partly by force, partly by the above reason, and partly by grants and indulgencies. Their power, great and boundless as it was, could not alone people their cities; but they were forced to soften authority by kindness; and having brought the inhabitants together by force, and by driving them captive like cattle, could not keep them together, without bestowing on them many privileges, to encourage the first inhabitants to stay, and to invite more to come.

This was a confession in those tyrants, that their power was mischievous and unjust; since they could not erect one great city, and make it flourish, without renouncing in a great measure their power over it; which, by granting it these privileges, in effect they did. These privileges were fixed laws, by which the trade and industry of the citizens were encouraged, and their lives and properties ascertained and protected, and no longer subjected to the laws of mere will and pleasure: And therefore, while these free cities, enjoying their own liberties and laws, flourished under them, the provinces were miserably harrassed, pillaged, dispeopled, and impoverished, and the inhabitants exhausted, starved, butchered, and carried away captive.

This shews that all civil happiness and prosperity is inseparable from liberty; and that tyranny cannot make men, or societies of men, happy, without departing from its nature, and giving them privileges inconsistent with tyranny. And here is an unanswerable argument, amongst a thousand others, against absolute power in a single man. Nor is there one way in the world to give happiness to communities, but by sheltering them under certain and express laws, irrevocable at any man's pleasure.

There is not, nor can be, any security for a people to trust to the mere will of one, who, while his will is his law, cannot protect them if he would. The number of sycophants and wicked counsellors, that he will always and necessarily have about him, will defeat all his good intentions, by representing things falsely, and persons maliciously; by suggesting danger where it is not, and urging necessity where there is none; by filling their own coffers, under colour of filling his, and by raising money for themselves, pretending the publick exigencies of the state; by sacrificing particular men to their own revenge, under pretence of publick security; and by engaging him and his people in dangerous and destructive wars, for their own profit or fame; by throwing publick affairs into perpetual confusion, to prevent an enquiry into their own behaviour; and by making him jealous of his people, and his people of him, on purpose to manage and mislead both sides.

By all these, and many more wicked arts, they will be constantly leading him into cruel and oppressive measures, destructive to his people, scandalous and dangerous to himself; but entirely agreeable to their own spirit and designs. Thus will they commit all wickedness by their master's authority, against his inclinations, and grow rich by the people's poverty, without his knowledge; and the royal authority will be first a warrant for oppression, afterwards a protection from the punishment due to it. For, in short, the power of princes is often little else but a stalking-horse to the intrigues and ambition of their minister.

But if the disposition of such a prince be evil, what must be the forlorn condition of his people, and what door of hope can remain for common protection! The best princes have often evil counsellors, the bad will have no other: And in such a case, what bounds can be set to their fury, and to the havock they will make? The instruments and advisers of tyranny and depredation always thrive best and are nearest their ends, when depredation and tyranny run highest: When most is plundered from the people, their share is greatest; we may therefore suppose every evil will befall such a people, without supposing extravagantly. No happiness, no security, but certain misery, and a vile and precarious life, are the blessed terms of such a government—a government which

necessarily introduces all evils, and from the same necessity neither must nor can redress any.

The nature of his education, bred up as he ever is in perpetual flattery, makes him haughty and ignorant; and the nature of his government, which subsists by brutish severity and oppression, makes him cruel. He is inaccessible, but by his ministers, whose study and interest will be to keep him from knowing or helping the state of his miserable people. Their master's knowledge in his own affairs, would break in upon their scheme and power; they are not likely to lay before him representations of grievances caused by themselves; nor, if they be the effects of his own barbarity and command, will he hear them.

Even where absolute princes are not tyrants, there ministers will be tyrants. But it is indeed impossible for an arbitrary prince to be otherwise, since oppression is absolutely necessary to his being so. Without giving his people liberty, he cannot make them happy; and by giving them liberty, he gives up his own power. So that to be and continue arbitrary, he is doomed to be a tyrant in his own defence. The oppression of the people, corruption, wicked counsellors, and pernicious maxims in the court, and every where baseness, ignorance, and chains, must support tyranny, or it cannot be supported. So that in such governments there are inevitable grievances, without possible redress; misery, without mitigation or remedy; whatever is good for the people, is bad for their governors; and what is good for the governors, is pernicious to the people.

I am, &c.

G.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These comprehension questions are optional. I would encourage you instead to discuss the text with your preferred AI assistant—the interactive, immediate feedback will likely serve your understanding better than a fixed list of questions. Matthew Calvin has generously provided a Socratic prompt he uses for exactly this, which I have hosted at masonmelead.com/socratic. The flow is simple: paste the prompt into your preferred LLM workspace, or set it up as a project, then paste in the passage you have just read and let it quiz you for comprehension.

1. In No. 33, Gordon argues that even well-meaning men cannot safely be trusted with unchecked power. What reasons does he give, and how does the example of the Roman emperors serve his case?
2. Explain the distinction Gordon draws between a people's jealousy of its rulers and a ruler's jealousy of its people. Why does he call the first wholesome and the second dangerous?
3. In No. 62, how does Gordon define liberty, and what limit does he place upon it? What does he say is the sole legitimate purpose of government?
4. Gordon maintains that liberty and prosperity rise and fall together. How does he connect the security of a man's property to a nation's industry and population?
5. Where do these essays finally locate the safeguard of liberty—in the virtue of rulers, or somewhere else? What does that answer imply for how a government should be designed?

LETTERS FROM A FARMER IN PENNSYLVANIA

John Dickinson

SELECTED LETTERS II, VII, AND XII · 1767–1768

In 1767 Parliament returned to the problem of colonial revenue. Chastened by the resistance that had forced repeal of the Stamp Act, it now imposed duties on glass, paint, paper, and tea—the Townshend Acts—defended as ordinary regulations of imperial trade. John Dickinson, a Philadelphia lawyer of wide learning and cautious temper, answered in a series of twelve essays that appeared over the winter of 1767–68 as *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. Reprinted in nearly every colonial newspaper, they made him the most celebrated American writer of the day and did much to knit the colonies into a common cause.

Dickinson's achievement was to hold two commitments together—loyalty to the empire and a refusal of Parliament's claim to tax—by drawing a careful line between the regulation of commerce and the raising of a revenue without consent. He wrote as a subject who revered the imperial connection and feared its rupture; his aim was to arrest a “most dangerous innovation” before it hardened into precedent. The method—patient, legal, addressed to the understanding rather than the passions—defined one pole of the American argument in the years before it gave way to another.

Three of the twelve letters are printed here. The second states the constitutional heart of the case, conceding Parliament's authority over trade while denying its authority to tax. The seventh turns to political economy, warning that liberty may be lost not by great blows but by small duties accepted without notice, “praising the neatness of the workmanship.” The twelfth and last of the series is valedictory, turning from law to character, and pressing upon his countrymen the union and vigilance on which, Dickinson believed, the fate of their liberties would finally depend. Readers should notice throughout the restraint of a man who hoped that petitions and united opinion might yet make resistance unnecessary—a hope that within a decade would fail, and that Dickinson would honor by declining to sign the Declaration of Independence. On the timeline at the front of this reader, the Farmer's Letters fall within the Pamphlet War (1763–1776), the decade of argument these pages document.

LETTER II

BELOVED COUNTRYMEN,

There is another late act of parliament, which seems to me to be as destructive to the liberty of these colonies, as that inserted in my last letter; that is, the act for granting the duties on paper, glass, &c. It appears to me to be unconstitutional.

The parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to regulate the trade of Great-Britain, and all its colonies. Such an authority is essential to the relation between a mother country and its colonies; and necessary for the common good of all. He, who considers these provinces as states distinct from the British Empire, has very slender notions of justice or of their interests. We are but parts of a whole; and therefore there must exist a power somewhere, to preside, and preserve the connection in due order. This power is lodged in the parliament; and we are as much dependant on Great-Britain, as a perfectly free people can be on another.

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 preserve or promote a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire; and though many of them imposed duties on trade, yet those duties were always imposed with design to restrain the commerce of one part, that was injurious to another, and thus to promote the general welfare. The raising a revenue thereby was never intended. Thus, the king by his judges in his courts of justice, imposes fines, which all together amount to a considerable sum, and contribute to the support of government: but this is merely a consequence arising from restrictions, which only meant to keep peace, and prevent confusion; and surely a man would argue very loosely, who should conclude from hence, that the King has a right to levy money in general upon his subjects; Never did the British parliament, till the period abovementioned,

tioned, think of imposing duties in America FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING A REVENUE. Mr. Greenville's sagacity first introduced this language, in the preamble to the 4th of Geo. III. Ch. 15, which has these words—"And whereas it is just and necessary that a revenue be raised in your Majesty's said dominions in America, for defraying the expences of defending, protecting and securing the same: We your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the commons of Great Britain, in parliament assembled, being desirous to make some provision in the present session of parliament, towards raising the said revenue in America, have resolved to give and grant unto your Majesty the several rates and duties herein after mentioned," &c.

A few months after came the Stamp-act, which reciting this, proceeds in the same strange mode of expression, thus—"And whereas it is just and necessary, that provision be made for raising a further revenue within your majesty's dominions in America, towards defraying the said expences, we your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of Great-Britain, &c. GIVE and GRANT," &c. as before.

The last act, granting duties upon paper, &c. carefully pursues these modern precedents. The preamble is, "Whereas it is expedient that a revenue should be raised in your Majesty's dominions in America, for making a more certain and adequate provision for the defraying the charge of the administration of justice, and the support of civil government in such provinces, where it shall be found necessary; and towards the further defraying the expences of defending, protecting and securing the said dominions, we your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of Great-Britain, &c. give and grant," &c. as before.

Here we may observe an authority expressly claimed to impose duties on these colonies; not for the regulation of trade; not for the preservation or promotion of a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire, heretofore the sole objects of parliamentary institutions; but for the single purpose of levying money upon us.

This I call an innovation; and a most dangerous innovation. It may perhaps be objected, that Great-Britain has a right to lay what duties she

pleases upon her exports, and it makes no difference to us, whether they are paid here or there.

To this I answer. These colonies require many things for their use, which the laws of Great-Britain prohibit them from getting any where but from her. Such are paper and glass.

That we may be legally bound to pay any general duties on these commodities, relative to the regulation of trade, is granted; but we being obliged by her laws to take them from Great Britain, any special duties imposed on their exportation to us only, with intention to raise a revenue from us only, are as much taxes upon us, as those imposed by the Stamp-act.

What is the difference in substance and right, whether the same sum is raised upon us by the rates mentioned in the Stamp-act, on the use of the paper, or by these duties, on the importation of it. It is nothing but the edition of a former book, with a new title page.

Suppose the duties were made payable in Great-Britain?

It signifies nothing to us, whether they are to be paid here or there. Had the Stamp-act directed, that all the paper should be landed in Florida, and the duties paid there, before it was brought to the British Colonies, would the act have raised less money upon us, or have been less destructive of our rights? By no means: For as we were under a necessity of using the paper, we should have been under the necessity of paying the duties. Thus, in the present case, a like necessity will subject us, if this act continues in force, to the payment of the duties now imposed.

Why was the Stamp-act then so pernicious to freedom? It did not enact, that every man in the colonies should buy a certain quantity of paper—No: It only directed, that no instrument of writing should be valid in law, if not made on stamp paper, &c.

The makers of that act knew full well, that the confusions that would arise upon the disuse of writings would COMPEL the colonies to use the stamp paper, and therefore to pay the taxes imposed. For this reason the Stamp-act was said to be a law THAT WOULD EXECUTE ITSELF. For the very same reason, the last act of parliament, if it is granted to have any

force here, will execute itself, and will be attended with the very same consequences to American Liberty.

Some persons perhaps may say, that this act lays us under no necessity to pay the duties imposed, because we may ourselves manufacture the articles on which they are laid: whereas by the Stamp-act no instrument of writing could be good, unless made on British paper, and that too stampt.

Such an objection amounts to no more than this, that the injury resulting to these colonies, from the total disuse of British paper and glass, will not be so afflicting as that which would have resulted from the total disuse of writing among them; for by that means even the stamp-act might have been eluded. Why then was it universally detested by them as slavery itself? Because it presented to these devoted provinces nothing but a choice of calamities, imbibtered by indignities, each of which it was unworthy of freemen to bear. But is no injury a violation of right but the greatest injury? If the eluding the payment of the duties imposed by the stamp-act, would have subjected us to a more dreadful inconvenience, than the eluding the payment of those imposed by the late act; does it therefore follow, that the last is no violation of our rights, though it is calculated for the same purpose that the other was, that is, to raise money upon us, WITHOUT OUR CONSENT?

This would be making right to consist, not in an exemption from injury, but from a certain degree of injury.

But the objectors may further say, that we shall sustain no injury at all by the disuse of British paper and glass. We might not, if we could make as much as we want. But can any man, acquainted with America, believe this possible? I am told there are but two or three glass-houses on this continent, and but very few paper-mills; and suppose more should be erected, a long course of years must elapse, before they can be brought to perfection. This continent is a country of planters, farmers, and fishermen; not of manufacturers. The difficulty of establishing particular manufactures in such a country, is almost insuperable, for one manufacture is connected with others in such a manner, that it may be said to be

impossible to establish one or two, without establishing several others. The experience of many nations may convince us of this truth.

Inexpressible therefore must be our distresses in evading the late acts, by the disuse of British paper and glass. Nor will this be the extent of our misfortunes, if we admit the legality of that act.

Great-Britain has prohibited the manufacturing iron and steel in these colonies, without any objection being made to her right of doing it. The like right she must have to prohibit any other manufacture among us. Thus she is possessed of an undisputed precedent on that point. This authority, she will say, is founded on the original intention of settling these colonies; that is, that she should manufacture for them, and that they should supply her with materials. The equity of this policy, she will also say, has been universally acknowledged by the colonies, who never have made the least objection to statutes for that purpose; and will further appear by the mutual benefits flowing from this usage, ever since the settlement of these colonies.

Our great advocate, Mr. Pitt, in his speeches on the debate concerning the repeal of the Stamp-act, acknowledged, that Great-Britain could restrain our manufactures. His words are these—"This kingdom, as the supreme governing and legislative power, has always bound the colonies by her regulations and restrictions in trade, in navigation, in manufactures—in every thing, except that of taking their money out of their pockets, WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT." Again he says, "We may bind their trade, CONFINE THEIR MANUFACTURES, and exercise every power whatever, except that of taking money out of their pockets, WITHOUT THEIR CONSENT."

Here then, let my countrymen, ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over their heads. If they ONCE admit, that Great-Britain may lay duties upon her exportations to us, for the purpose of levying money on us only, she then will have nothing to do, but to lay those duties on the articles which she prohibits us to manufacture—and the tragedy of American liberty is finished. We have been prohibited from procuring manufactures, in all cases, any where but from Great-Britain, (excepting linens, which we are permitted to import directly from

Ireland). We have been prohibited, in some cases, from manufacturing for ourselves; We are therefore exactly in the situation of a city besieged, which is surrounded by the works of the besiegers in every part but one. If that is closed up, no step can be taken, but to surrender at discretion. If Great-Britain can order us to come to her for necessaries we want, and can order us to pay what taxes she pleases before we take them away, or when we have them here, we are as abject slaves, as France and Poland can shew in wooden shoes, and with uncombed hair.

Perhaps the nature of the necessities of the dependant states, caused by the policy of a governing one, for her own benefit, may be elucidated by a fact mentioned in history. When the Carthaginians were possessed of the island of Sardinia, they made a decree, that the Sardinians should not get corn, any other way than from the Carthaginians. Then, by imposing any duties they would, they drained from the miserable Sardinians any sums they pleased; and whenever that oppressed people made the least movement to assert their liberty, their tyrants starved them to death or submission. This may be called the most perfect kind of political necessity.

From what has been said, I think this uncontrovertible conclusion may be deduced, that when a ruling state obliges a dependant state to take certain commodities from her alone, it is implied in the nature of that obligation; and is essentially requisite to give it the least degree of justice; and is inseparably united with it, in order to preserve any share of freedom to the dependant state; that those commodities should never be loaded with duties for the sole purpose of levying money on the dependant state.

The place of paying the duties imposed by the late act, appears to me therefore to be totally immaterial. The single question is, whether the parliament can legally impose duties to be paid by the people of these colonies only for the sole purpose of raising a revenue, on commodities which she obliges us to take from her alone; or, in other words, whether the parliament can legally take money out of our pockets, without our consent. If they can, our boasted liberty is but

Vox et præterea nihil.

A sound, and nothing else.

A FARMER.

LETTER VII

This letter is intended more particularly for such of you, whose employment in life may have prevented your attending to the consideration of some points that are of great and public importance. For many such persons there must be even in these colonies, where the inhabitants in general are more intelligent than any other people, as has been remarked by strangers, and it seems with reason.

Some of you perhaps, filled as I know your breasts are with loyalty to our most excellent prince, and with love to our dear mother country, may feel yourselves inclined by the affections of your hearts, to approve every action of those whom you so much venerate and esteem.

A prejudice thus flowing from goodness of disposition is amiable indeed. I wish it could be indulged without danger. Did I think this possible, the error should have been adopted, not opposed by me. But in truth, all men are subject to the passions and frailties of nature; and therefore whatever regard we entertain for the persons of those who govern us, we should always remember that their conduct as rulers may be influenced by human infirmities.

When any laws injurious to these colonies are passed, we cannot, with the least propriety, suppose that any injury was intended us by his Majesty or the Lords. For the assent of the crown and peers to law seems, as far as I am able to judge, to have been vested in them, more for their own security than for any other purpose. On the other hand, it is the particular business of the people to enquire and discover what regulations are useful for themselves, and to digest and present them in the form of bills to the other orders, to have them enacted into laws—Where these laws are to bind themselves, it may be expected that the house of Commons will very carefully consider them: But when they are making laws, that are not designed to bind themselves, we cannot imagine that their deliberations will be as cautious and scrupulous as in their own case.

I find that this clause “privately got into an act,” for the benefit of Capt. Cole, “to the vast loss of the nation,” is foisted into the 3d Anne, chap. 5, intituled, “An act for granting to her Majesty a further subsidy on wines and merchandizes imported,” with which it has no more connexion, than with 34th Edw. I. 34th and 35th of Henry VIII. or the 25th of Car. II. which provide that no person shall be taxed but by himself or his representative.

I am told that there is a wonderful address frequently used in carrying points in the house of commons, by persons experienced in these affairs—that opportunities are watched—and sometimes votes are past, that if all the members had been present, would have been rejected by a great majority. Certain it is, that when a powerful and artful man has determined on any measure against these colonies, he has always succeeded in his attempt. Perhaps therefore it will be proper for us, whenever any oppressive act affecting us is past, to attribute it to the inattention of the members of the house of commons, and to the malevolence or ambition of some factious great man, rather than to any other cause.

Now I do verily believe, that the late act of parliament imposing duties on paper, &c. was formed by Mr. Grenville and his party, because it is evidently a part of that plan, by which he endeavoured to render himself popular at home; and I do also believe that not one half of the members of the house of commons, even of those who heard it read, did perceive how destructive it was to American freedom.

For this reason, as it is usual in Great-Britain, to consider the King’s speech, as the speech of the ministry, it may be right here to consider this act as the act of a party.—Perhaps I should speak more properly if I was to use another term.—

There are two ways of laying taxes.—One is by imposing a certain sum on particular kinds of property, to be paid by the user or consumer, or by taxing the person at a certain sum; the other is, by imposing a certain sum on particular kinds of property to be paid by the seller.

When a man pays the first sort of tax, he knows with certainty that he pays so much money for a tax. The consideration for which he pays it is remote, and it may be does not occur to him. He is sensible too that

he is commanded and obliged to pay it as a tax; and therefore people are apt to be displeased with this sort of tax.

The other sort of tax is submitted to in a very different manner. The purchaser of any article very seldom reflects that the seller raises his price so as to indemnify him for the tax he has paid. He knows the prices of things are continually fluctuating, and if he thinks about the tax, he thinks at the same time in all probability, that he might have paid as much, if the article he buys had not been taxed. He gets something visible and agreeable for his money, and tax and price are so confounded together, that he cannot separate, or does not chuse to take the trouble of separating them.

This mode of taxation therefore is the mode suited to arbitrary and oppressive governments. The love of liberty is so natural to the human heart, that unfeeling tyrants think themselves obliged to accommodate their schemes as much as they can to the appearance of justice and reason, and to deceive those whom they resolve to destroy or oppress, by presenting to them a miserable picture of freedom, when the inestimable original is lost.

This policy did not escape the cruel and rapacious Nero. That monster, apprehensive that his crimes might endanger his authority and life, thought proper to do some popular acts to secure the obedience of his subjects. Among other things, says Tacitus, "he remitted the twenty-fifth part of the price on the sale of slaves, but rather in shew than reality; for the seller being ordered to pay it, it became a part of the price to the buyer."

This is the reflection of the judicious historian: but the deluded people gave their infamous emperor full credit for his false generosity. Other nations have been treated in the same manner the Romans were. The honest industrious Germans who are settled in different parts of this continent can inform us, that it was this sort of tax that drove them from their native land to our woods, at that time the seats of perfect and undisturbed freedom.

Their princes inflamed by the lust of power and the lust of avarice, two furies, that the more hungry they grow, transgressed the bounds,

they ought in regard to themselves, to have observed. To keep up the deception in the minds of subjects “there must be,” says a very learned author “some proportion between the impost and the value of the commodity; wherefore there ought not to be an excessive duty upon merchandizes of little value. There are countries in which the duty exceeds seventeen or eighteen times the value of the commodity. In this case the prince removes the illusion. His subjects plainly see they are dealt with in an unreasonable manner, which renders them most exquisitely sensible of their slavish situation.”

From hence it appears that subjects may be ground down into misery by this sort of taxation as well as the other. They may be as much impoverished if their money is taken from them in this way, as in the other; and that it will be taken, may be more evident, by attending to a few more considerations.

The merchant, or importer who pays the duty at first, will not consent to be so much money out of pocket. He, therefore, proportionably raises the price of his goods. It may then be said to be a contest between him and the person offering to buy, who shall lose the duty. This must be decided by the nature of the commodities and the purchasers demand for them. If they are mere luxuries, he is at liberty to do as he pleases, and if he buys, he does it voluntarily: But if they are absolute necessities, or conveniences which use and custom have made requisite for the comfort of life, and which he is not permitted, by the power imposing the duty, to get elsewhere, there the seller has a plain advantage, and the buyer must pay the duty. In fact, the seller is nothing less than the collector of the tax for the power that imposed it. If these duties then are extended to necessities and conveniences of life in general, and enormously increased, the people must at length become indeed “most exquisitely sensible of their slavish situation.”

Their happiness, therefore, entirely depends on the moderation of those who have authority to impose the duties.

I shall now apply these observations to the late act of parliament. Certain duties are thereby imposed on paper and glass, &c. imported into these colonies. By the laws of Great-Britain we are prohibited to get

these articles from any other part of the world. We cannot at present, nor for many years to come, though we should apply ourselves to these manufactures with the utmost industry, make enough ourselves for our own use. That paper and glass are not only convenient, but absolutely necessary for us, I imagine very few will contend. Some, perhaps, who think mankind grew wicked and luxurious as soon as they found out another way of communicating their sentiments than by speech, and another way of dwelling than in caves, may advance so whimsical an opinion. But I presume nobody will take the unnecessary trouble of refuting them.

From these remarks I think it evident, that we must use paper and glass, that what we use must be British, and that we must pay the duties imposed unless those who sell these articles are so generous as to make us presents of the duties they pay, which is not to be expected.

Some persons may think this act of no consequence, because the duties are so small. A fatal error. That is the very circumstance most alarming to me. For I am convinced that the authors of this law, would never have obtained an act to raise so trifling a sum, as it must do, had they not intended by it to establish a precedent for future use. To console ourselves with the smallness of the duties, is to walk deliberately into the snare that is set for us, praising the neatness of the workmanship. Suppose the duties, imposed by the late act, could be paid by these distressed colonies, with the utmost ease, and that the purposes, to which they are to be applied, were the most reasonable and equitable that could be conceived, the contrary of which I hope to demonstrate before these letters are concluded, yet even in such a supposed case, these colonies ought to regard the act with abhorrence. For who are a free people? not those over whom government is reasonably and equitably exercised but those who live under a government, so constitutionally checked and controuled, that proper provision is made against its being otherwise exercised. The late act is founded on the destruction of this constitutional security.

If the parliament have a right to lay a duty of four shillings and eight pence on a hundred weight of glass, or a ream of paper, they have a right to lay a duty of any other sum on either. They may raise the duty as the author before quoted says, has been done in some countries, till

it “exceeds seventeen or eighteen times the value of the commodity.” In short, if they have a right to levy a tax of one penny upon us, they have a right to levy a million upon us. For where does their right stop? At any given number of pence, shillings, or pounds? To attempt to limit their right, after granting it to exist at all, is as contrary to reason, as granting it to exist at all is contrary to justice. If they have any right to tax us, then, whether our own money shall continue in our own pockets, or not, depends no longer on us, but on them. “There is nothing which we can call our own”, or to use the words of Mr. Locke, “What property have” we “in that, which another may, by right, take, when he pleases, to himself.”

These duties, which will inevitably be levied upon us, and which are now levying upon us, are expressly laid for the sole purpose of taking money. This is the true definition of taxes. They are therefore taxes. This money is to be taken from us. We are therefore taxed. Those who are taxed without their own consent, given by themselves, or their representatives, are slaves. We are taxed without our own consent given by ourselves, or our representatives. We are therefore——I speak it with grief——I speak it with indignation——we are slaves.

Miserabile vulgus.

A miserable tribe.

A FARMER.

LETTER XII

Some states have lost their liberty by particular accidents; but this calamity is generally owing to the decay of virtue. A people is travelling fast to destruction, when individuals consider their interests as distinct from those of the public. Such notions are fatal to their country, and to themselves. Yet how many are there so weak and sordid as to think they perform all the offices of life, if they earnestly endeavour to increase their own wealth, power, and credit, without the least regard for the society, under the protection of which they live; who, if they can make an immediate profit to themselves, by lending their assistance to those, whose projects plainly tend to the injury of their country, rejoice in their dexterity, and believe themselves intitled to the character of able politicians. Miserable men! of whom it is hard to say, whether they ought to be most the objects of pity or contempt, but whose opinions are certainly as detestable as their practices are destructive.

Though I always reflect with a high pleasure on the integrity and understanding of my countrymen, which, joined with a pure and humble devotion to the great and gracious author of every blessing they enjoy, will, I hope, ensure to them, and their posterity, all temporal and eternal happiness; yet when I consider, that in every age and country there have been bad men, my heart, at this threatening period, is so full of apprehension, as not to permit me to believe, but that there may be some on this continent, against whom you ought to be upon your guard. Men, who either hold or expect to hold certain advantages by setting examples of servility to their countrymen—Men who trained to the employment, or self-taught by a natural versatility of genius, serve as decoys for drawing the innocent and unwary into snares. It is not to be doubted but that such men will diligently bestir themselves, on this and every like occasion, to spread the infection of their meanness as far as they can. On the plans they have adopted, this is their course. This is the method to recommend themselves to their patrons.

They act consistently, in a bad cause.

They run well in a mean race.

From them we shall learn, how pleasant and profitable a thing it is, to be, for our submissive behaviour, well spoken of in St. James's, or St. Stephen's; at Guildhall, or the Royal Exchange. Specious fallacies will be dressed up with all the arts of delusion, to persuade one colony to distinguish herself from another, by unbecoming condescensions, which will serve the ambitious purpose of great men at home, and therefore will be thought by them, to entitle their assistants in obtaining them, to considerable rewards.

Our fears will be excited; our hopes will be awakened. It will be insinuated to us with a plausible affectation of wisdom and concern, how prudent it is to please the powerful—how dangerous to provoke them—and then comes in the perpetual incantation, that freezes up every generous purpose of the soul, in cold—inactive—expectation “that if there is any request to be made, compliance will obtain a favourable attention.”

Our vigilance and our union are success and safety. Our negligence and our division are distress and death. They are worse—they are shame and slavery.

Let us equally shun the benumbing stillness of overweening sloth, and the feverish activity of that ill-informed zeal, which buries itself in maintaining little, mean, and narrow opinions. Let us, with a truly wise generosity and charity, banish and discourage all illiberal distinctions, which may arise from differences in situation, forms of government, or modes of religion. Let us consider ourselves as men—Freemen—Christian men—separated from the rest of the world, and firmly bound together by the same rights, interests, and dangers. Let these keep our attention inflexibly fixed on the great objects, which we must continually regard, in order to preserve those rights, to promote those interests, and to avert those dangers.

Let these truths be indelibly impressed on our minds—that we cannot be happy without being free—that we cannot be free without

being secure in our property—that we cannot be secure in our property, if, without our consent, others may, as by right, take it away—that taxes imposed on us by parliament, do thus take it away—that duties laid for the sole purposes of raising money, are taxes—that attempts to lay such duties should be instantly and firmly opposed—that this opposition can never be effectual, unless it is the united effort of these provinces—that, therefore, benevolence of temper toward each other, and unanimity of counsels are essential to the welfare of the whole—and lastly, that, for this reason, every man amongst us, who, in any manner, would encourage either dissention, diffidence, or indifference between these colonies, is an enemy to himself and to his country.

The belief of these truths, I verily think, my countrymen, is indispensably necessary to your happiness. I beseech you, therefore, “Teach them diligently unto your children, and talk of them when you sit in your houses, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

What have these colonies to ask, while they continue free? Or what have they to dread, but insidious attempts to subvert their freedom? Their prosperity does not depend on ministerial favours doled out to particular provinces. They form one political body, of which each colony is a member. Their happiness is founded on their constitution; and is to be promoted by preserving that constitution in unabated vigour throughout every part. A spot, a speck of decay, however small the limb on which it appears, and however remote it may seem from the vitals, should be alarming. We have all the rights requisite for our prosperity. The legal authority of Great-Britain may indeed lay hard restrictions upon us; but, like the spear of Telephus, it will cure as well as wound. Her unkindness will instruct and compel us, after some time, to discover, in our industry and frugality, surprising remedies—if our rights continue inviolated. For as long as the products of our labours and the rewards of our care, can properly be called our own, so long will it be worth our while to be industrious and frugal. But if when we plow—sow—reap—gather—and thresh, we find, that we plow—sow—reap—gather—and thresh for others, whose pleasure is to be the sole limitation, how much they shall take, and how much they shall leave, why should we repeat

the unprofitable toil? Horses and oxen are content with that portion of the fruits of their work, which their owners assign to them, in order to keep them strong enough to raise successive crops; but even these beasts will not submit to draw for their masters, until they are subdued with whips and goads. Let us take care of our rights, and we therein take care of our property. "Slavery is ever preceded by sleep." Individuals may be dependant on ministers, if they please. States should scorn it—And, if you are not wanting to yourselves, you will have a proper regard paid you by those, to whom if you are not respectable, you will infallibly be contemptible. But if we have already forgot the reasons that urged us, with unexampled unanimity, to exert ourselves two years ago; if our zeal for the public good is worn out before the homespun cloaths which it caused us to have made—if our resolutions are so faint, as by our present conduct to condemn our own late successful example—if we are not affected by any reverence for the memory of our ancestors, who transmitted to us that freedom in which they had been blest—if we are not animated by any regard for posterity, to whom, by the most sacred obligations, we are bound to deliver down the invaluable inheritance—Then, indeed, any minister—or any tool of a minister—or any creature of a tool of a minister—or any lower instrument of administration, if lower there may be, is a personage, whom it may be dangerous to offend.

I shall be extremely sorry if any man mistakes my meaning in any thing I have said. Officers employed by the crown, are, while according to the laws they conduct themselves, entitled to legal obedience and sincere respect. These it is a duty to render them, and these no good or prudent person will withhold. But when these officers, thro' rashness or design, endeavour to enlarge their authority beyond its due limits, and expect improper concessions to be made to them, from regard for the employments they bear, their attempts should be considered as equal injuries to the crown and people, and should be courageously and constantly opposed. To suffer our ideas to be confounded by names, on such occasions, would certainly be an inexcusable weakness, and probably, an irremediable error.

We have reason to believe, that several of his Majesty's present ministers are good men, and friends to our country; and it seems not unlikely,

that by a particular concurrence of events, we have been treated a little more severely than they wished we should be. They might not think it prudent to stem a torrent. But what is the difference to us, whether arbitrary acts take their rise from ministers, or are permitted by them? Ought any point to be allowed to a good minister, that should be denied to a bad one? The mortality of ministers is a very frail mortality. A * * * may succeed a Shelburne—a * * * may succeed a Conway.

We find a new kind of minister lately spoken of at home——“The minister of the house of Commons.” The term seems to have particular propriety when referred to these colonies, with a different meaning annexed to it, from that in which it is taken there. By the word “minister” we may understand not only a servant of the crown, but a man of influence among the Commons, who regard themselves as having a share of the sovereignty over us. The minister of the house may, in a point respecting the colonies, be so strong, that the minister of the crown in the house, if he is a distinct person, may not chuse, even where his sentiments are favourable to us, to come to a pitched battle upon our account. For tho’ I have the highest opinion of the deference of the house for the King’s minister; yet he may be so good natured as not to put it to the test, except it be for the mere and immediate profit of his master or himself.

But whatever kind of minister he is, that attempts to innovate a single iota in the privileges of these colonies, him I hope you will undauntedly oppose, and that you will never suffer yourselves to be either cheated or frightened into any unworthy obsequiousness. On such emergencies you may surely without presumption believe that ALMIGHTY GOD himself will look down upon your righteous contest with gracious approbation. You will be a “Band of brother’s” cemented by the dearest ties—and strengthened with inconceivable supplies of force and constancy, by that sympathetic ardour which animates good men, confederated in a good cause. Your honour and welfare will be, as they now are, most intimately concerned; and besides——you are assigned by Divine Providence, in the appointed order of things, the protectors of unborn ages, whose fate depends upon your virtue. Whether they shall arise the noble and indisputable heirs of the richest patrimonies, or the dastardly and hereditary drudges of imperious task-masters, you must determine.

To discharge this double duty to yourselves and to your posterity; you have nothing to do, but to call forth into use the good sense and spirit, of which you are possessed. You have nothing to do, but to conduct your affairs peaceably—prudently—firmly—jointly. By these means you will support the character of freemen, without losing that of faithful subjects—a good character in any government—one of the best under a British government. You will prove that Americans have that true magnanimity of soul, that can resent injuries without falling into rage; and that tho’ your devotion to Great-Britain is the most affectionate, yet you can make proper distinctions, and know what you owe to yourselves as well as to her—you will, at the same time that you advance your interests, advance your reputation—you will convince the world of the justice of your demands, and the purity of your intentions—while all mankind must with unceasing applauses confess, that you indeed 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.

“Certe ego libertatem quæ mihi a parente meo tradita est, experiar, verum id frustra, an ob rem faciam, in vestra manu situm est, quirites.”

“For my part, I am resolved strenuously to contend for the liberty delivered down to me from my ancestors; but whether I shall do this effectually or not, depends on you, my countrymen.”

How little soever one is able to write, yet, when the liberties of one’s country are threatened, it is still more difficult to be silent.

A FARMER.

Is there not the greatest reason to hope, if the universal sense of the colonies is immediately express by resolves of the assemblies, in support of their rights; by instructions to their agents on the subject; and by petitions to the crown and parliament for redress; that those measures will have the same success now that they had in the time of the Stamp-act.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These comprehension questions are optional. I would encourage you instead to discuss the text with your preferred AI assistant—the interactive, immediate feedback will likely serve your understanding better than a fixed list of questions. Matthew Calvin has generously provided a Socratic prompt he uses for exactly this, which I have hosted at masonmelead.com/socratic. The flow is simple: paste the prompt into your preferred LLM workspace, or set it up as a project, then paste in the passage you have just read and let it quiz you for comprehension.

1. In Letter II, what distinction does Dickinson draw between Parliament's authority to regulate trade and its authority to tax? Why does he regard the Townshend duties as taxes despite the form they take?
2. In Letter VII, why does Dickinson think a duty hidden in the price of goods is more dangerous to liberty than a tax openly demanded? What does he mean by walking "into the snare that is set for us, praising the neatness of the workmanship"?
3. Dickinson defines a free people not as those who happen to be governed mildly. What is his definition, and why does he insist on the difference?
4. In Letter XII, Dickinson turns from constitutional argument to the character of his countrymen. What does he name as the safeguards of their liberties, and what men and habits does he warn them against?
5. Throughout the letters Dickinson resists Parliament's measures yet stops short of rebellion. How does he distinguish lawful resistance from a renunciation of allegiance?

GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH

Speech to the Second Virginia Convention

Patrick Henry

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, RICHMOND · MARCH 23, 1775

On the twenty-third of March, 1775, the Second Virginia Convention met in St. John's Church in Richmond, beyond the reach of the royal governor. Patrick Henry, already famous for his part in the Stamp Act protests, rose to move that the colony put itself in a posture of defense. The speech that followed has become the most quoted of the Revolution, remembered for its final antithesis.

A caution is owed the reader about the text. No transcript was made, and Henry left no manuscript. The words printed here were reconstructed more than forty years later by his biographer, William Wirt, who assembled them from the recollections of men who had been present and were by then elderly. What survives is therefore best understood as a considered reconstruction—faithful, its defenders held, to the substance and force of what Henry said, but not a verbatim record. It should be read as the memory of an oration rather than the oration itself.

With that qualification, the speech repays attention as a specimen of revolutionary rhetoric at its height. Henry dismisses the hope of reconciliation as a delusion that would betray those who indulge it, reads the ministry's conduct as evidence of a settled design, and presses his hearers toward the conclusion that the war has in fact already begun. Where Dickinson had reasoned, Henry exhorts; the appeal is to resolve, not to precedent. Readers may weigh the two modes against each other, and consider what the movement from one to the other required. On the timeline at the front of this reader, the speech stands at the very close of the Pamphlet War, in the last weeks before the War of Independence began.

No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen who have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights; and, therefore, I hope it will not be thought disrespectful to those gentlemen if, entertaining as I do opinions of a character very opposite to theirs, I shall speak forth my sentiments freely and without reserve. This is no time for ceremony. The question before the House is one of awful moment to this country. For my own part, I consider it as nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery; and in proportion to the magnitude of the subject ought to be the freedom of the debate. It is only in this way that we can hope to arrive at truth, and fulfill the great responsibility which we hold to God and our country. Should I keep back my opinions at such a time, through fear of giving offense, I should consider myself as guilty of treason towards my country, and of an act of disloyalty toward the Majesty of Heaven, which I revere above all earthly kings.

Mr. President, it is natural to man to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past. And judging by the past, I wish to know what there has been in the conduct of the British ministry for the last ten years to justify those hopes with which gentlemen have been pleased to solace themselves and the House. Is it that insidious smile with which our petition has been lately received? Trust it not, sir; it will prove a snare to your feet. Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss. Ask yourselves how this gracious reception of our petition comports with those warlike preparations which cover our waters and darken our land. Are fleets and armies necessary to a work of love and reconciliation? Have we shown ourselves so unwilling

to be reconciled that force must be called in to win back our love? Let us not deceive ourselves, sir. These are the implements of war and subjugation; the last arguments to which kings resort. I ask gentlemen, sir, what means this martial array, if its purpose be not to force us to submission? Can gentlemen assign any other possible motive for it? Has Great Britain any enemy, in this quarter of the world, to call for all this accumulation of navies and armies? No, sir, she has none. They are meant for us: they can be meant for no other. They are sent over to bind and rivet upon us those chains which the British ministry have been so long forging. And what have we to oppose to them? Shall we try argument? Sir, we have been trying that for the last ten years. Have we anything new to offer upon the subject? Nothing. We have held the subject up in every light of which it is capable; but it has been all in vain. Shall we resort to entreaty and humble supplication? What terms shall we find which have not been already exhausted? Let us not, I beseech you, sir, deceive ourselves. Sir, we have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne! In vain, after these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. There is no longer any room for hope. If we wish to be free—if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending—if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained—we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of hosts is all that is left us!

They tell us, sir, that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? Shall we gather strength by

irresolution and inaction? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance by lying supinely on our backs and hugging the delusive phantom of hope, until our enemies shall have bound us hand and foot? Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. The millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. Besides, sir, we have no election. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable—and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come.

It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These comprehension questions are optional. I would encourage you instead to discuss the text with your preferred AI assistant—the interactive, immediate feedback will likely serve your understanding better than a fixed list of questions. Matthew Calvin has generously provided a Socratic prompt he uses for exactly this, which I have hosted at masonmelead.com/socratic. The flow is simple: paste the prompt into your preferred LLM workspace, or set it up as a project, then paste in the passage you have just read and let it quiz you for comprehension.

1. Henry dismisses the hope of reconciliation with Britain. What evidence does he point to that the ministry intends force rather than accommodation?
2. To the objection that the colonies are too weak to oppose so formidable an adversary, how does Henry reply? On what does he rest his confidence of success?
3. What does Henry mean by insisting that “the war is actually begun”? How does that claim change the choice he lays before his hearers?
4. Henry’s speech survives only as a reconstruction assembled decades later. What should a reader keep in mind about the text, and does it affect how the speech should be used as evidence?
5. Compare Henry’s manner of persuasion with Dickinson’s. To what does each appeal—reason, precedent, resolve, passion—and what has changed between 1768 and 1775?

THE VIRGINIA DECLARATION OF RIGHTS

Drafted by George Mason

ADOPTED BY THE VIRGINIA CONVENTION · JUNE 12, 1776

Weeks before the Continental Congress declared independence, Virginia set about replacing the authority it had cast off. In May 1776 its convention resolved to frame a new government, and appointed a committee to prepare a declaration of rights to stand before it. The principal author was George Mason, a planter of Fairfax County and a reluctant public man, whose draft the convention adopted, with amendments, on the twelfth of June.

The document is the first bill of rights framed by an American state as the foundation of its government, and its influence was immediate and lasting. Its opening article—“that all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights”—supplied the model and much of the language for the more famous sentences Jefferson would compose a few weeks later. Its provisions on trial by jury, on the freedom of the press, on the subordination of the military to the civil power, and against general warrants would reappear in the bills of rights of other states and, in 1791, in the amendments to the federal Constitution.

Readers should notice two things in particular. The first is the sixteenth and final section, on the free exercise of religion, in which a young James Madison had a hand; its language of conscience marks a step beyond mere toleration. The second is the tension, visible to the framers’ contemporaries as it is to us, between the universal claim of the first article and the institution of slavery that Virginia maintained. The Declaration announces principles whose reach exceeded the society that proclaimed them—a disproportion that would trouble American politics long after 1776. On the timeline at the front of this reader, it stands at the opening of the War of Independence (1776), which it helped to justify.

A Declaration of Rights made by the Representatives of the good people of Virginia, assembled in full and free Convention; which rights do pertain to them and their posterity, as the basis and foundation of Government.

1. That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

2. That all power is vested in, and consequently derived from, the people; that magistrates are their trustees and servants, and at all times amenable to them.

3. That government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community; of all the various modes and forms of government that is best, which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety and is most effectually secured against the danger of maladministration; and that, whenever any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, unalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.

4. That no man, or set of men, are entitled to exclusive or separate emoluments or privileges from the community, but in consideration of public services; which, not being descendible, neither ought the offices of magistrate, legislator, or judge be hereditary.

5. That the legislative and executive powers of the state should be separate and distinct from the judicative; and, that the members of the two first may be restrained from oppression by feeling and participating the burthens of the people, they should, at fixed periods, be reduced to a private station, return into that body from which they were originally taken, and the vacancies be supplied by frequent, certain, and regular elections in which all, or any part of the former members, to be again eligible, or ineligible, as the laws shall direct.

6. That elections of members to serve as representatives of the people in assembly ought to be free; and that all men, having sufficient

evidence of permanent common interest with, and attachment to, the community have the right of suffrage and cannot be taxed or deprived of their property for public uses without their own consent or that of their representatives so elected, nor bound by any law to which they have not, in like manner, assented, for the public good.

7. That all power of suspending laws, or the execution of laws, by any authority without consent of the representatives of the people is injurious to their rights and ought not to be exercised.

8. That in all capital or criminal prosecutions a man hath a right to demand the cause and nature of his accusation to be confronted with the accusers and witnesses, to call for evidence in his favor, and to a speedy trial by an impartial jury of his vicinage, without whose unanimous consent he cannot be found guilty, nor can he be compelled to give evidence against himself; that no man be deprived of his liberty except by the law of the land or the judgement of his peers.

9. That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed; nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

10. That general warrants, whereby any officer or messenger may be commanded to search suspected places without evidence of a fact committed, or to seize any person or persons not named, or whose offense is not particularly described and supported by evidence, are grievous and oppressive and ought not to be granted.

11. That in controversies respecting property and in suits between man and man, the ancient trial by jury is preferable to any other and ought to be held sacred.

12. That the freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.

13. That a well regulated militia, composed of the body of the people, trained to arms, is the proper, natural, and safe defense of a free state; that standing armies, in time of peace, should be avoided as dangerous to liberty; and that, in all cases, the military should be under strict subordination to, and be governed by, the civil power.

14. That the people have a right to uniform government; and therefore, that no government separate from, or independent of, the

government of Virginia, ought to be erected or established within the limits thereof.

15. That no free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.

16. That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These comprehension questions are optional. I would encourage you instead to discuss the text with your preferred AI assistant—the interactive, immediate feedback will likely serve your understanding better than a fixed list of questions. Matthew Calvin has generously provided a Socratic prompt he uses for exactly this, which I have hosted at masonmelead.com/socratic. The flow is simple: paste the prompt into your preferred LLM workspace, or set it up as a project, then paste in the passage you have just read and let it quiz you for comprehension.

1. According to Section 1, which rights are inherent, and what does the Declaration say men cannot surrender even by their own compact?
2. Sections 2 and 3 describe the source and the purpose of all political power. What are they, and what right do the people retain when a government fails that purpose?
3. Choose three of the particular protections—for example, trial by jury, the freedom of the press, the subordination of the military, or the ban on general warrants—and explain what abuse each is meant to prevent.
4. How does the language of Section 1 anticipate the Declaration of Independence, adopted a few weeks later? What tension is there between that language and the society that proclaimed it?

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Drafted by Thomas Jefferson

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776 · THE DUNLAP BROADSIDE

The document that closes this volume needs little introduction, but the form in which it is printed here deserves a word. On the second of July, 1776, the Continental Congress voted for independence; on the fourth it approved the text of a declaration justifying that vote, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and revised by the Congress. That night the printer John Dunlap struck off the first copies as a broadside for distribution to the states and the army. It is this Dunlap broadside, rather than the engrossed parchment signed later that summer, that is reproduced here; the differences are small, but the broadside is the text as it first met the public.

The Declaration is easily remembered for its second paragraph and as easily forgotten for the rest. Readers are encouraged to weigh the proportions. The philosophical preamble, with its self-evident truths and its account of government as resting on consent and answerable to the governed, occupies only a few sentences; the great bulk of the document is a list of particular grievances against the King, a bill of indictment meant to prove to “a candid World” that the colonies acted from necessity and not caprice.

In this the Declaration gathers up the arguments of the preceding decade. The colonists’ complaint had always been that power was exercised over them without their consent; the grievances translate that complaint into a catalogue of concrete acts. Read after Cato, Dickinson, and Mason, the Declaration appears less as a sudden invention than as a conclusion—the point at which the rights of Englishmen, denied within the empire, were reasserted as the rights of men outside it. On the timeline at the front of this reader, it marks the hinge of 1776, where the Pamphlet War gives way to the War of Independence.

When in the course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the Separation.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The History of the Present King of Great-Britain is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid World.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public Good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing Importance, unless suspended in their Operation till his Assent

should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the Accommodation of large Districts of People, unless those People would relinquish the Right of Representation in the Legislature, a Right inestimable to them, and formidable to Tyrants only.

He has called together Legislative Bodies at Places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the Depository of their public Records, for the sole Purpose of fatiguing them into Compliance with his Measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly Firmness his Invasions on the Rights of the People.

He has refused for a long Time, after such Dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the Dangers of Invasion from without, and Convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the Population of these States; for that Purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their Migrations hither, and raising the Conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary Powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the Tenure of their Offices, and the Amount and Payment of their Salaries.

He has erected a Multitude of new Offices, and sent hither Swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance.

He has kept among us, in Times of Peace, Standing Armies, without the consent of our Legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a Jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution, and unacknowledged by our Laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For quartering large Bodies of Armed Troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all Parts of the World:

For imposing taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us, in many Cases, of the Benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended Offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary Government, and enlarging its Boundaries, so as to render it at once an Example and fit Instrument for introducing the same absolute Rule in these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with Power to legislate for us in all Cases whatsoever:

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our Seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our Towns, and destroyed the Lives of our People.

He is, at this Time, transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the Works of Death, Desolation, and Tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and Perfidy, scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous Ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized Nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the Executioners of their Friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic Insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction, of all Ages, Sexes and Conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated Injury. A Prince, whose Character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the Ruler of a free People.

Nor have we been wanting in Attentions to our British Brethren. We have warned them from Time to Time of Attempts by their Legislature to extend an unwarrantable Jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the Circumstances of our Emigration and Settlement here. We have appealed to their native Justice and Magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the Ties of common Kindred to disavow these Usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our Connections and Correspondence. They too have been deaf to the Voice of Justice and of Consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of Mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace, Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political Connection between them and the State of Great-Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of the divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

THE RIGHTS OF ENGLISHMEN

SIGNED BY ORDER AND IN BEHALF OF THE CONGRESS,

JOHN HANCOCK, PRESIDENT.

ATTEST. CHARLES THOMSON, SECRETARY.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These comprehension questions are optional. I would encourage you instead to discuss the text with your preferred AI assistant—the interactive, immediate feedback will likely serve your understanding better than a fixed list of questions. Matthew Calvin has generously provided a Socratic prompt he uses for exactly this, which I have hosted at masonmelead.com/socratic. The flow is simple: paste the prompt into your preferred LLM workspace, or set it up as a project, then paste in the passage you have just read and let it quiz you for comprehension.

1. Restate the argument of the second paragraph in your own words. On what does legitimate government rest, and under what conditions may a people alter or abolish it?
2. The greater part of the document is a catalogue of grievances against the King. What is the purpose of this list, and to whom is it addressed?
3. Choose two of the grievances and explain what principle of self-government each one alleges the King had violated.
4. How does the Declaration turn the colonists' long-standing complaint—that they were governed without their consent—into a justification for independence rather than for reform within the empire?