

*An*  
EMPIRE  
ON THE  
EDGE

*How Britain Came to  
Fight America*

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## Chapter Five

### IGNORANCE AND BAD POLICY

*The British lion has been asleep these four or five years.*

—THOMAS HUTCHINSON, GOVERNOR OF MASSACHUSETTS, SEPTEMBER 1772<sup>1</sup>

Lord Dartmouth took over a small department drooping under the burden of its duties. His office in Whitehall was delightful, recently redecorated by Lord Hillsborough; and in theory, his staff of thirty-five should have been adequate. But ten of them simply drew their salaries and never turned up for work. Another four merely “attended the king,” in the words of a list drawn up for the new minister. The rest were mostly there to carry messages, to welcome visitors, to sweep the floor, or to brew the tea. In practice, the weight of American affairs rested on the bent shoulders of two undersecretaries and seven clerks.

Shortly before he took up his post, Dartmouth received a plaintive note from the head of the department. “I consider my race as run,” wrote John Pownall, the senior undersecretary. “I have neither spirits nor constitution to undergo the fatigue of attending to the business.” Worn out by the age of fifty, the nation’s leading expert on America was yearning for his pension. He longed to spend his retirement with his collection of Roman coins and pots, dug from the soil of his native Lincolnshire.<sup>2</sup>

After a lifetime dealing with the colonies, Pownall had every reason to be exhausted. Since his earliest days as a junior clerk, he had displayed “abilities, attention and

integrity,” in the words of his obituary. A grammar school boy, from a family shabby but genteel, he rose through the ranks by virtue of brains and hard work. Tied to his desk, he never crossed the Atlantic, though his brother Thomas served a term as governor of Massachusetts. Instead, John Pownall tried to run America on paper by reading and writing a mountain of letters.

Every year hundreds of packets arrived from the colonies, each one demanding an urgent reply. All of them were docketed and filed. They survive to this day in the archives in London, bulky and tattered, filled with newspaper cuttings, long lists of numbers, and petitions from people with axes to grind. It would be enough to wear out any official, but John Pownall’s career had been especially wearisome because it was so futile.

During the previous decade, he had advised on every British policy toward the colonies. Almost without exception, each one had fallen by the wayside. The Stamp Act came and went, defeated by American resistance. The Townshend duties also failed to survive, apart from the threepence on a pound of tea. So did the plan to keep the West free from British settlers. Ten years earlier, Pownall drafted the royal proclamation that tried to keep the colonists behind the mountains. Now that doctrine lay in ruins, and no new program had emerged to take its place.

John Pownall expected the consequences to be dire, and word soon arrived of settlers killing Indians on the frontier. “Such savage degeneracy of the human heart,” he wrote in September, “has brought us to the eve of an Indian war: the most ruinous and expensive that can be waged.” This was exactly the outcome that he, like General Gage, had striven to prevent. And when he surveyed the rest of America, Pownall saw signs that the colonies were following the frontier into turmoil.<sup>3</sup>

On the coast, the smugglers had made the collection of taxes all but impossible. Meanwhile, from Lake Champlain to South Carolina the dispatches carried news of other insults to authority. In the valley of Vermont, settlers had built a town

called Pownall, named in honor of John's brother. It fell within a tract of virgin land between the Connecticut River and the Hudson, where rival groups of pioneers were at each other's throats. Settlers from three separate colonies—New Hampshire, New York, and Connecticut—laid claim to the area, and by the summer of 1772 something close to civil war appeared to be breaking out.

For the first time, the Colonial Office heard the name of somebody called Ethan Allen, in reports of a skirmish between a magistrate from New York and Allen's gang of vigilantes. A range war began, violent but very local, of the kind that later generations in America would simply take in their stride as part and parcel of life on the frontier. That year the quarrel in Vermont filled scores of pages in the letters sent to Whitehall. Whatever ministers might say about the rule of law, the Allen affair showed just how little they could do to enforce it.

John Pownall had not the least idea who Ethan Allen was, or why his name would become so famous. Three years had yet to pass before Allen helped to lead the revolution in New England at the head of Vermont's Green Mountain Boys. But for the British, the stories were already deeply worrisome. As the flow of people westward accelerated, so incidents like this were bound to become more common, but nobody could think of a way to prevent them. In theory, royal officials existed to resolve exactly the kind of boundary dispute that caused the trouble in Vermont. But if nobody would listen while men like Allen openly disobeyed authority, what purpose did the empire really serve? And far to the south in the wealthiest corner of British North America, the system appeared to be breaking down entirely.

In Charleston, the planters had an assembly. Keen to run their own affairs, its members saw an ally in John Wilkes. In 1769, believing that Wilkes was friendly to their cause, they sent a donation to help him in his efforts to take his seat in Parliament. From the British point of view, this was illegal, and so Hillsborough issued instructions banning the assembly from making any payments of the sort. The fight that fol-

lowed, between the royal governor and the assembly, paralyzed the government of South Carolina. No taxes were levied, and no laws were passed. Either the assembly would not vote for them, or the governor barred the members from sitting at all. Endless letters passed to and fro between London and the colony, but the dispute was never settled. Only the war put an end to the quarrel.<sup>4</sup>

All around the rim of the empire there were little local crises of this kind under way, just as there were disputes and disorders in Great Britain. Seen from Whitehall, each individual problem might seem trivial, but added together they painted a picture of chaos. The empire had grown too swiftly, in Asia and America alike, partly because of greed and speculation and partly as a side effect of victory against the French. Nobody knew what it meant to be a global power. Nobody put in place the structures such a huge empire required. John Pownall had a deputy named William Knox, the second undersecretary, who never ceased to say exactly this.

Born in Ireland, Knox was another pious man, from a family of Presbyterian Scots. In his youth he went to Georgia to grow rice, hiring missionaries to convert his slaves to faith in Jesus Christ. Returning home, he married an heiress and penned a stream of essays on American affairs that attracted the attention of the government. He joined the Colonial Office, which needed an eloquent writer to put the empire's case. In public he defended the official wisdom that the colonies were merely humble satellites, orbiting around the king and Parliament. Privately, Knox urged his superiors to reform an imperial system that seemed to be disintegrating. In Georgia, Knox had seen just how hard it was to rule a continent three thousand miles away. This became a constant theme of his career. The colonists, he argued, were hell-bent on independence, while the ministers in London would not take the necessary steps to hold them back. "It was with no small degree of astonishment," he once wrote, "that I perceived a total want of plan or system in the British government." In the history of British North America, he saw

nothing but a long, sad chronicle of “neglect, Ignorance, bad Law and worse Policy.” While John Pownall was depressed, William Knox felt driven to distraction by a cabinet he saw as timid and effete.<sup>5</sup>

And so he spent his time writing papers to which his superiors paid no heed. Both he and Pownall were struggling, in their different ways, with a basic flaw of the old colonial system. Far from being unified, the empire was split into fragments, with thirty separate colonies on the mainland or in the West Indies, twenty-five of which had their own parliament or assembly. Each one had developed its own constitution, which it was determined to preserve. At the most extreme, there were Rhode Island and Connecticut—“little republics,” Knox called them—already independent in all but name. But everywhere else, he saw worrying evidence of what he called “the predominancy of the Democratic Power.”<sup>6</sup>

It was all very different from the way the Victorians would supervise their empire. If the British had ruled America in the way they later governed India, they would have installed a viceroy in New York to oversee the whole. He would have been given powers to tax and spend and to borrow money to build roads and drain or irrigate the land. He would have made a code of laws, uniform across the continent. With an army of his own, recruited locally and officered by men like George Washington, he would have defended the frontier. If he were honest and talented and stood up for colonial interests, he might have won the respect of the Americans. Perhaps he might even have kept their loyalty.

Failing that, an English viceroy might have bought off a pampered elite with commissions, salaries, and subsidies, as the British did in Bengal, while leaving the slaves and peasants to toil. But at this stage in the history of the British Empire, a viceroy of such a kind was inconceivable. Each colony jealously guarded its own laws and customs. Each one preferred to pay its own bills and call out its own militia when the need arose. And the very mention of an American viceroy would have caused uproar in London. For Lord North

and the lawyers who advised him, authority must always lie with Parliament and the Crown. But as his name implied, a viceroy would be a petty king, and so potentially a rival to Westminster. As far back as 1754, Benjamin Franklin had come close to proposing a viceregal government for America, with his abortive plan for a union between the colonies, devised as a means to organize defense against the French. We cannot really call Franklin's plan a missed opportunity, because the British cabinet apparently never discussed it at all, and his ideas left his fellow Americans equally unimpressed. But without a viceroy or some system for managing America as a whole, the British were left with an empire too diverse to be held.

It would have been hard enough to cope if Pownall and his staff had merely had the mainland to occupy their time. But they had to deal with the Caribbean as well. Time and again, before and during the war, the West Indies fatally diverted the attention of the government. With as many as 1,800 slave plantations producing sugar cane worth £3 million a year, these treasure islands were the brightest jewel in the crown of empire for crude financial reasons that a single tale will illustrate. It concerns the clerical half brother of Lord North. As a young man, Brownlow North struggled to obtain preferment in the Anglican church, and the family had no money to give him an income. At last the king came to the rescue by making the youth a bishop at the age of only thirty. That was in 1771; the very same year, the newly eligible Brownlow married a slave owner's heiress from Antigua. And so the bishop secured his future, until Mrs. North lost so heavily at cards.<sup>7</sup>

For reasons such as this, the sugar islands were simply too valuable to lose, but they were also very costly to keep. Always at risk of a slave revolt or a surprise attack by the French, the West Indies required a garrison and warships standing by, but this depleted the strength of the army and the navy, whose young men died in their hundreds from fever. Every year produced some fresh emergency, and 1772 was no exception. On St. Vincent, British troops were about

to fight a small war against what remained of the native people, the Caribs who had risen in revolt. In Grenada, meanwhile, where John Wilkes's brother had gone to grow sugar, the British planters were staging their own peaceful insurrection.

Like the Mississippi valley, the Windward Islands harbored a community of French settlers, all of whom were Roman Catholic. Accustomed to coexisting with Catholics in Northern Ireland—he found the Presbyterians far more difficult—Hillsborough wished to give the French inhabitants seats in the Grenada assembly as a way to retain their obedience. The idea horrified the British on the island, who flatly refused to cooperate with London and allow the Pope's children to participate in government. What was worse, the economy had faltered as well. On Grenada, Tobago, and Dominica, the speculators who bought old French estates had mortgaged themselves to the hilt. As the financial crisis began to bite in 1772 in London and Amsterdam, the new plantation owners found it impossible to pay for more slaves or the supplies they needed from the mainland; and some defaulted on money they still owed the government.

In the face of so much trouble in their western dominions, the British needed a farsighted statesman to set priorities and lay down a clear strategy for the future. For all his virtues, Lord Dartmouth could not rise to that particular challenge; but even a politician of genius might have found the task beyond his powers. To heal a failing organization, a manager requires reliable information, and in 1772 the British did not have it. John Pownall and his colleagues could rarely trust the American messages that they received. True, they had General Gage, who always seemed convincing, in letters concise and beautifully written. But if the dispatches came from the royal governors in each mainland colony, sometimes they were worse than useless.

For all the detail they contained, the governors never quite got to the point. In fact, sometimes their communications were deeply misleading, because the men who wrote them had too many private interests and selfish preoccupations.

“You can never manage America well, without having good governors,” wrote a wise friend of Lord Dartmouth’s, warning him about the trials he would face in office. The information the British received was only as good as the men who sent it, and they were very mixed.<sup>8</sup>

Although the file of letters from Governor Hutchinson in Boston was always full to bursting with reports of naughty goings-on, it failed to convey an objective appraisal of public opinion in the Bay Colony. As Pownall already knew, and as Dartmouth would soon learn, although Thomas Hutchinson was highly intelligent, he could also be arrogant, indiscreet, and confrontational. And although he cared deeply about the fate of Massachusetts and the empire, he worried still more about his family, and in particular about his sons, who needed help with their careers. He pursued their material interests with, as we shall see, disastrous consequences. Although Hutchinson was ultra-loyal, the British could not trust him: a lethal paradox.

Much the same was true of his opposite number in New York, Governor William Tryon, an even less disinterested public servant. Firm and effective when it came to hanging farmers who led an uprising in North Carolina, he was nonetheless a dupe of his own vanity. To the outrage of the king, Tryon devoted his time in New York to amassing real estate, awarding great slices of public land to himself and his friends. Strategically, his province was essential—in the Revolutionary War, the Hudson valley held the key to North America—but it was also politically divided, and its internal affairs especially hard to understand. But Tryon’s dispatches amounted to nothing more than long screeds of self-justification, devoid of the cool analysis that Lord Dartmouth required.

As for the other colonies, some rarely sent dispatches at all: freethinking Connecticut and Rhode Island, of course, but also Maryland, where, unknown to the British, the tobacco farmers were some of the first Americans to think of taking up arms against them. The Maryland file was almost empty. But in Virginia the void of information was most damaging

of all. In Lord Dunmore, a Scottish nobleman, the British had chosen a governor keen to see the province expand across the Appalachians. His letters dealt chiefly with Indian affairs. He had no inkling that the tobacco planters of the Old Dominion might, in due course, become perhaps the most fearsome rebels of all. "In the progress of our business, the greatest harmony and most perfect good temper have subsisted, between the different branches of the legislature," Dunmore wrote, just before the *Gaspée* incident, speaking about the colonial assembly in Williamsburg. The governor failed to detect the unrest that already existed in the South as well as in New England. Almost until the last moment before the revolution began, he believed that however outspoken Virginia might be, it would never desert the Crown.<sup>9</sup>

To be fair to John Pownall and his staff in the Colonial Department, they were all too aware of the limits of their knowledge. For all the reams of paper they received, some of the most basic facts eluded them. They did not know how many people lived in America, how swiftly the colonies were growing, or how large a militia each one could put into the field. Without data such as these, it was impossible to tell how serious the threat of independence really was. A year after taking office, Dartmouth sent a long questionnaire to each American governor, itemized under twenty-two headings, asking about his population, revenues, system of government, and much else. The first question, intended to help resolve boundary disputes, was this: where is your colony? Some of the governors never replied at all. By the time the answers came back from those who did, the revolution had already started.<sup>10</sup>

As the crisis approached, the authorities in London fell even further behind the curve. In Boston, Thomas Hutchinson could see that this was so and he felt the same frustration that afflicted William Knox. For Hutchinson, therefore, the news of the *Gaspée's* destruction was scarcely unwelcome. Perhaps the British would at last shake off their lethargy and act decisively in New England. There were men

in Whitehall who agreed, but the official response turned out to be ill-judged and impractical.

#### THE KING'S FIRM RESOLUTION

Something must be done about Rhode Island, said Lord Rochford on August 15, the day after Dartmouth took up his new post. He used the weary, peevish tone that he always employed about America, but in the next sentence he admitted that he had no solution to offer. The hard line recommended by Lord Hillsborough struck him as unrealistic. The civil servants Knox and Pownall also wanted firm reprisals, but Rochford took them with a pinch of salt. Their advice had been poor in the past. Instead, he preferred to act cautiously against the *Gaspée* raiders, even when the lawyers branded them traitors guilty of treason.

Throughout the American crisis, the British cabinet asked for legal advice about every decision they made. Invited to give his opinion, the attorney general, Edward Thurlow, quickly confirmed that burning the schooner was an act of war against the king. He called that treason plain and simple. Off the record, he added a rider: the culprits, he said, committed a felony five times worse than the riots against the Stamp Act. But while the law was one thing, the realities of power were quite another. If the men who destroyed the *Gaspée* were publicly deemed to be traitors, then Great Britain had to bring them to trial and hang them, and this was what made Lord Rochford so nervous. In the summer of 1772, the British dared not provoke a confrontation in America from which they might emerge as the loser.<sup>11</sup>

Knowingly or not, John Brown had chosen an excellent time for his private rebellion. The politics of Europe were entering a fraught and alarming phase, with Great Britain cast in the role of a spectator. In the first week of August, the Russians and their allies in Berlin had finally sent their soldiers into Poland to divide that unhappy country between themselves and Austria. France, it was thought, would come to the aid of the Poles, sending its navy to threaten the Rus-

sians in the north or in the Mediterranean, where Catherine the Great had placed a squadron of her own. Ominous rumors arrived in London, saying that the French were arming their ships for war; and then, a few weeks later, a still more alarming report of a coup d'état in Sweden. With backing from Paris, or so it was alleged, the young king Gustav had seized control of his country, doing away with his own parliament in Stockholm. This was something Russia would not accept, but if it replied in kind, using force against the Swedes, the British could not stand idly by. In practice it was too expensive to import the bulk of Britain's naval stores from America, and so instead the navy relied on the Baltic for its supplies of masts, rope, and tar. A nation built on its power at sea, Great Britain might not survive the loss of the region, whether to France or St. Petersburg.

And so, fearing that they might be sucked into a war in Europe, the cabinet had no choice but to listen to Rochford and act with restraint in Rhode Island. As a parting shot before he left office, Hillsborough tried to force their hand by writing directly to Montagu, telling him to detain anybody he suspected of taking part in the *Gaspée* raid, but this the admiral simply could not do: the law did not permit the military to arrest civilians on land without a warrant from a judge. When Lord North assembled the cabinet on August 20, they had to begin by recalling Hillsborough's letter. And then they took the first of the long chain of decisions that led to the war; but they did so in the belief that they were being calm and unprovocative.

The legal opinion from Thurlow dealt not only with the nature of the offense, but also with the venue for a trial. No one in Whitehall trusted a jury in America to convict their fellow countrymen of crimes against the king. Witnesses would lie, if they testified at all, and the jurors would be intimidated into making an acquittal. The evidence of that was plain to see in the dispatches that arrived that year. Happily, however, the attorney general confirmed that an English court could try and hang the *Gaspée* raiders, and the cabinet gratefully took a piece of advice supported by what

seemed to be the best authorities. Because it was a rare and special felony, a case of treason in Great Britain usually came for trial to Westminster Hall to be heard by the Court of King's Bench. This was what had happened after the 1745 rebellion, and why should the *Gaspée* raiders be treated any differently? Although King's Bench rarely tried a colonial defendant, it certainly had the power to do so if an impartial jury could not be found near the scene of the crime. A judge in Westminster could send his writ anywhere in the empire if justice and the king required it. If this were not so, how could the Crown and Parliament be sovereign? The empire would not be an empire if the royal judges could not enforce the law throughout the king's dominions.<sup>12</sup>

Far more than merely legal subtleties, these questions went to the very heart of the divisions between the mother country and its colonies. By this time, the political debate in North America had far outgrown the narrow subject of taxation. Could the British be trusted to preserve any of the civil liberties the colonies had come to cherish? Or did they mean to do away with them all, including the right to due process of law? If this were so, Americans would have no alternative but the pursuit of independence; a chain of reasoning which, by the end of 1772, had come to seem compelling, in the light of the British response to the *Gaspée* incident. By choosing to bring the raiders home for trial—always assuming that they could be caught—North and his colleagues took these questions out of the realm of theory and made them topics for urgent, practical discussion in America.

In the colonies, it was universally agreed that justice required a trial by a jury made up of one's peers, which could only mean men from the same town or county. It would be a flagrant breach of civil liberties to ship a suspect away to face a hostile English court, packed with loyal supporters of King George. And so, when the newspapers in America revealed that the British intended to do precisely that, the story caused outrage, especially in Virginia, where the news put an end to the peace and quiet that Lord Dunmore had described with such complacency. Two years later,

when Thomas Jefferson wrote his first verbal assault against the British, he listed this aspect of their reaction to the *Gaspée* affair among the worst examples of imperial oppression.<sup>11</sup>

Did the cabinet know how much trouble they might cause? Almost certainly not. At the meeting on August 20, the use of force was mentioned only in passing, and no one suggested revoking Rhode Island's charter. Instead they tried to make the Americans take responsibility for pursuing the traitors. Acting cautiously, or so they thought, the cabinet chose to appoint a commission of inquiry, led by Governor Wanton and composed of the senior judges from Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. Nobody would be arrested until the commission in Newport heard all the evidence the navy had gathered about the *Gaspée's* destruction.

Off went John Pownall to draw up a dispatch to Rhode Island for Dartmouth to sign; but here again the British miscalculated. By the time the letter was ready, two weeks later, another report had arrived from Admiral Montagu, pointing the finger at the Browns of Providence. And so, when the dispatch left England in the middle of September 1772, it was couched in a tone of uncompromising harshness. It was, wrote Dartmouth, "his Majesty's firm resolution" to punish the guilty men with the utmost severity. Worse still, the dispatch contained a threat to send the redcoats into Rhode Island to suppress any riots that might follow an attempt to arrest the raiders.<sup>13</sup>

Knowing little about the internal workings of Rhode Island, the inexperienced Lord Dartmouth meant the letter to be private, as though Joseph Wanton were a royal appointee. Once again, a gulf of ignorance divided the two nations. A man elected to his post, a close friend of Stephen Hopkins's and a partner of the Browns, Wanton could not possibly keep the letter confidential. It appeared in print for every American to read and inflamed the situation still further. By the end of the year Britain's clumsy response to the *Gaspée* affair had backfired and helped to create the atmosphere of deep distrust that produced the Boston Tea Party.

This blunder about the dispatch was one of many errors that Lord Dartmouth would commit. But Americans, including Benjamin Franklin, made their own mistakes that were equally damaging. They began by misreading Dartmouth's character. Franklin once called him "a truly good man," and so he was. William Legge had some detractors, but he made no lasting enemies. When the king asked a Scottish visitor his opinion, he called Lord Dartmouth agreeable, enchanting, and a perfect Christian. On both sides of the Atlantic, it was widely expected that he would take the path of reconciliation with the colonies. His appointment, it was thought, might signify a change of tack and lead to policies intended to bring about a lasting settlement of American grievances. This proved to be a sad illusion.<sup>14</sup>

Lord Dartmouth's benevolence is not in doubt. When a clergyman friend lay dying, he nursed the invalid with ass's milk, and he always gave money freely to support those in distress. The outbreak of the war left him heartbroken. When Dartmouth learned of Britain's Pyrrhic victory at the battle of Bunker Hill, all he could do was mourn what he called "the melancholy loss" of so many officers and men. But for all his piety and kindness, he too retained a core of damaging conservatism.

In order to prevent the final rift with America, Dartmouth would have had to break with his colleagues, with North and with the king, and take an independent path of his own. This was something he could never do because, for all his virtues, Dartmouth remained a captive of the system that had made him what he was. Tragically, this fine and gentle Christian who hated the thought of fighting came to be one of those most responsible for the war. In 1775, Lord Dartmouth wrote the dispatch from Whitehall that sent the redcoats up the road to Lexington and Concord.<sup>15</sup>

## THE TEA PARTY'S ORIGINS

However theatrical it might appear, and however accidental or contingent the events that led to it may seem, the Tea Party came about neither by chance nor simply as a plot by smugglers to protect their trade. Its roots can be found in deep flaws within the system that the British had brought into being. From the time of the *Gaspée* raid, the empire had begun to crack apart, along hidden lines of weakness that North and his colleagues only dimly recognized.

The British Empire in America had no plan, and it had no center of command. It had no guiding vision, and it had no high ideals. From a British point of view, the American colonies existed to serve one purpose alone, which was crudely economic. For that very reason the old regime could not endure. More than eighty years ago, this point was forcefully made by the British historian Sir Lewis Namier, whose analysis of the American Revolution's origins still remains one of the most useful.<sup>43</sup>

By birth a member of the Polish landed gentry, Namier belonged to that brilliant generation of central European Jews who settled in England in the first half of the twentieth century and immensely enriched Great Britain's cultural life. In the light of his background—he spent his boyhood in Austrian Galicia, where he acquired a deep dislike of the Habsburg monarchy—Namier achieved some especially penetrating insights into the fall of empires. Although in detail his arguments were subtle and complex, he clearly identified the defects in the British system in North America that led to its collapse.

By the 1770s, Great Britain had long since come to view itself as a thoroughly commercial country. Even people who owed their rank to the ownership of land agreed that business was the lifeblood of the nation. "Every country and every age has dominant terms, which seem to obsess men's thoughts," Namier wrote. "Those of eighteenth century England were property, contract, trade and profits." Indeed the British took this as a badge of pride. Their achievements in

commerce marked them out as a free and liberal race very different from the French, whom they regarded as merely lackeys of Versailles.<sup>16</sup>

Genius though he was, Namier never developed his ideas into a full-length account of the crisis in America and the Revolutionary War; but the logic of his argument ran as follows. While the British ideology of commerce had its merits—it helped to produce a relatively open, flexible society—it also had its grave defects. Their devotion to trade often descended into a narrow materialism that impaired the vision of the nation’s leaders. As a result, the British came to see their overseas dominions as no more than a means for making profits for the mother country. On those rare occasions when Parliament discussed colonial affairs, the speakers would say just that, rarely feeling the need to embellish their case for empire with moral rhetoric of any kind.

This was true even of a man as friendly to America as Edmund Burke, whose finest speeches on the subject dwelled chiefly on the benefits of peaceful commerce beneath the British flag, which he saw as the imperial system’s *raison d’être*. Of course Burke had grave doubts about the East India Company, that entity so vile, which cruelly exploited the people of the Ganges: but the king and his ministers agreed with him. All of them shared his deep misgivings about the company’s regime in India. Even so, they dared not think of abandoning it to the French. Like the West Indies and Virginia, the nation’s possessions in Bengal were simply far too profitable to surrender. Together they formed a system of global trade that could not be allowed to slip away from Britain’s grasp.

It would be facile to suggest that the British were wrong to wish to make money. But some kinds of profits are better than others, less destructive, less venal, and more permanent. The problem was simply this: while the British were determined, for commercial reasons, to keep their empire, they did not really understand the way it had come to work. By the early 1770s, the system as a whole had become too large, too diverse, and too volatile for the British to administer. This was obviously true in India, but the point applies to

America as well. Ironically enough, most sections of its economy were actually thriving, like that of the West Indies, as the trade in sugar, molasses, tobacco, rice, indigo, fish, and grain continued to expand. But too much of this arose from a boom in credit that could not be sustained: the same boom that caused the East India Company's brush with disaster.

Starting with the banking crash, one crisis erupted after another with no logic that Lord North and the cabinet could discern. How could they end the epidemic of smuggling in the colonies or in the British Isles? In fact the prevalence of smuggling was simply another side effect of a speculative empire, and of a fiscal system that relied too heavily on the taxation of commodities that lent themselves to illegal traffic. But the only solution they offered was the Royal Navy and officers like Lieutenant Dudingston. And what could the British do when the tea trade collapsed and the company came so close to ruin? Ship the stuff to America, of course, and hope that it would sell. The Treasury did not anticipate the effects the tea might have upon arrival.

That was how the tea came to be sent. It was a short-term expedient, intended to prop up the company, undercut the smugglers, and reassert the doctrine that Britain had the right to levy taxes in America. It did not occur to North and his colleagues that while for them tea was just an object of trade, in the colonies it would acquire a new meaning. In Boston, tea became a symbol against which men and women would mobilize on that chilly evening in December; and this Lord North could never understand.

In fact the British scarcely saw the colonies at all as anything more than a bundle of economic resources or a destination for convicts. Often the American people themselves remained almost invisible, mere accessories dotted about in a landscape where, in British eyes, the objects in the foreground were fields of tobacco, sacks of rice, and barrels of molasses. Even writers of genius like Edward Gibbon never thought of crossing the Atlantic. Neither did Burke or David Hume, James Boswell or Adam Smith, despite the relative ease of the voyage—a ticket to New York and back cost only £20—and their own wide interests.

“In America there is little to be observed except natural curiosities,” wrote Samuel Johnson in 1762. In his opinion, the western continent had nobody worth talking to. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin was an exception, but he had removed the necessity of going there by coming to England himself. And if the colonies appeared to be bereft of civilization, their politics struck the British as provincial, misguided, and dishonest. To North and his colleagues, American demands for liberty seemed to be nothing more than a fraud, a masquerade behind which the colonists were intent on tax evasion.

In many different places—in Charleston, in Virginia, and most of all in Boston—the British encountered new societies with their own agenda. An empire built on maritime trade required customers and clients, but as the century went on, the Americans who played those roles developed their own distinctive ambitions, as they were bound to do; and they also developed their own reinterpretation of political principles and ideas first acquired from Great Britain and then modified to suit colonial circumstances. If British statesmen had visited the colonies, they *might* gradually have come to accept that these Americans’ aspirations were valid. But they might also have come away even more appalled by what they found: a political culture that, by the 1770s, had evolved until it was radically different from their own.

Besides their obsession with trade, another fetish enjoyed the devotion of Britain’s elite. They were utterly loyal to a political system built on the ownership of property. A gentleman’s rank and status depended on his assets, and in England the best, most prestigious asset of all was real estate. When merchants strove to succeed, they did so in the hope of acquiring land and becoming the equals of men above them who already owned many acres. The national obsessions with commerce and with landed property were merely two sides of the same coin, but they threw up another barrier between Britain and America.

It was very rare for Lord North to set out his own political philosophy. He had no need, since everybody knew precisely what it was. But when occasionally he did so, he staunchly upheld a system in which English landowners occupied the

commanding heights of power, not only in the British Isles, but also, by virtue of Parliament's sovereignty, in the dominions overseas. In 1785, when the House of Commons debated some modest proposals by William Pitt the Younger for parliamentary reform, North stood up to defend the old arrangements. According to him, the country gentlemen should *always* form the majority in the nation's legislature. The British constitution, he believed, was "the work of infinite wisdom—the most beautiful fabric that, perhaps, had existed from the beginning of time." It rested, he proclaimed, on the landed gentry, whom he called "the best and most respectable objects of the confidence of the people."<sup>17</sup>

Holding views such as these, Lord North could hardly fail to antagonize Americans for whom this kind of thinking was already antiquated and absurd. From North's perspective, a planter from Virginia might just qualify as the equal of an English landlord. But even there he had his doubts, and the artisans and laborers of Massachusetts did not count at all. In November and December 1773, when the people of Boston threw open their meetings to everyone, including the landless and the unemployed, they not only broke the law. They violated every principle of government to which North and his colleagues adhered.

When the news of the Tea Party reached Whitehall, it came as an appalling surprise to the governing elite. Unable to see New England as it was, instead the British cabinet beheld a mirage, in which the mobs of Boston or Rhode Island stood for forces of sin and disorder. They were nothing but criminals led by fanatics, or so they seemed to be from London. The cabinet reacted in two equally misguided ways. First it opted for punishment. Then it tried to put in place in Massachusetts a new regime based on empty and abstract ideas having to do with sovereignty and the will of Parliament. The British government's obsession with the rule of law would lead it into a war it had never expected to fight.

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