The American Conservation: Prelude to the American Revolution

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The American Revolution is often portrayed by historians as the culmination of a movement toward democracy. The Americans battle as enlightened revolutionaries, ahead of their time in their fight to change society from an entrenched oligarchical aristocracy into a more equitable society, where "all men are created equal" and have "certain inalienable rights," to quote the Declaration of Independence.

The intent of this paper is to challenge that view. The years preceding the Revolution, especially the decade after 1763, will be shown to be an era of conservative political activity in Great Britain's American colonies. The leaders of the pre–revolutionary buildup professed and practiced the politics of conservatism; that is, they were attempting to maintain the status quo, not to change it. In the decade preceding the battles at Lexington and Concord, the conservatives in the colonies never changed their mind about what they were trying to accomplish. They only changed the focus of their attempts to preserve their status and station in society.

Conservatism, as defined by Leonard Woods Labaree, is "an attitude of resistance to change, shown in varying degrees by a variety of people with reference to any issue of the day."[1] The elites that ran each colony up through the 1760s opposed any change, political, economic, religious, or social, that would tend to lessen their importance as the ruling class.

The conservatism discussed in this paper only partially resembles American conservatism as it exists in the last decade of the twentieth century. In their

1 Leonard Woods Larabee, Conservatism in Early America (New York: New York University Press, 1948), xii.

resistance to change 20th and 18th-century strains of conservatism resemble each other. But the 18th century was also the age of Edmund Burke. His brand of conservatism called for an ideal hierarchy, not equality, and had little use for the Lockean natural rights theories expressed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.[2]

The form of government and the organization of society in America during the 18th century tended to be conservative. Most of the American colonies were royal colonies. The government consisted of a governor, appointed by the King of England, a council, usually of 12 men, also appointed by the crown, and an assembly, elected by the voters in each colony. Until the 1760s, the council was, if not ahead in the struggle for power, at least on an even par with the governor and the assembly. Just what was this council, what power did it have, and why did the men tend toward conservatism?

The council in each colony consisted of the men of prominence, such as great planters, merchants, and lawyers. Members generally served for life. Although little or no pay was involved, the prominent men of the society viewed service on the council as a civic duty, a position of prestige, and a chance to promote their own economic and social interests. Behavior that today could cause a scandalous conflict of interest, such as the council granting western lands to its own members, was commonplace and accepted at that time. Nominations to open positions on the council were made (not exclusively, but in many cases) by the councillors themselves. This practice tended to promote an ongoing control of the council by a small number of wealthy families in each colony.[3] Participation in government, either by voting or by office–holding, was limited not by property qualifications, although these existed. It was limited to those who had the time, money, ability to travel, and the interest to participate.

The functions of the council, although ill–defined at first, evolved over time to give the councillors influence in executive, legislative and judicial matters. The council could serve as a check on the powers of the governor, or as a support to his activities. The council's executive power rested in its role as an advisory board to the governor, exerting great influence on appointments to lesser administrative positions, for example. As a legislative branch, it acted as

2 Allen Guttmann, The Conservative Tradition in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 8–10.

3 Leonard Woods Larabee, Royal Government in America (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1930; republished 1958; second printing 1964), 154

the upper house of the legislature, effectively giving it two chances to kill any bill emerging from the assembly—once as the upper house, and once as the governor's advisory board. In the judiciary, the council was the highest court of appeals in a colony. By way of example,Benjamin Larabee, in his History of Colonial Massachusetts, summarizes the elite that controlled that colony.

> With a large share of the colony's lawyers and merchants, the leadership of the Court–party [that political faction which supported the governor] towns became increasingly elitist by mid–century... They sought to control the House of Representatives by electing the Speaker and dominating the major committees. But their primary fulcrum of power lay in the governor's council.[4]

By the 1760s, however, the council was past its peak of influence, having been supplanted by the assembly, the lower house of the colonial legislature. Though by no means made up of dirt farmers or laborers, the assemblymen tended to be of a slightly lower socioeconomic class and social standing than members of the council. In his History of the Legislature of the Province of Virginia, Elmer Miller comments on the rise in power of the assembly at the expense of the council:

> Appointment and administration, as exercised by the assembly ... show the general tendency of the assembly to take all authority which was not expressly denied to it, and sometimes even to trench on what was denied. ... In fact, the power to do anything outside the regular routine was sure to be claimed by the assembly.[5]

Also contrbuting to the decline of the council was the aggressive exercise of the power of the royal governors. In the various colonial charters, governors were already equipped with much independent authority, but before the 1760s that power was rarely exercised. As royal power, embodied in the governor, expanded, and the assemblies stepped forward to contest that increased power, "the council ... became in fact less significant as time went on."[6]

This was the situation, then, faced by the traditional economic and social elites, as embodied in the colonial councils. Beginning in the 1760s, the councils and the conservatives fought to maintain the constitutional, social and economic conditions that they considered their birthright. Initially, the conservatives responded by opposing the more radical elements in the colonies that were stirring for more democracy and independence for America. By the 1770s,

4 Benjamin Woods Larabee, Colonial Massachusetts: A History, (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1979), 144.

5 Elmer Miller, The Legislature of the Province of Virginia–Its Internal Development, (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1907), 166.

6 L. Labaree, Royal Government, 170.

however, the conservatives came to see the out–of– control Parliament and the socially out–of–place royal appointees as the greater threat to their way of life.

The remainder of this paper is divided into two sections. The first will attempt to describe the political, social, religious and economic conditions that prevailed in the colonies prior to 1763, as a basis for considering what it was that the conservatives were trying to conserve. The second part will detail the conservative response to the series of crises that occurred in the colonies from 1763–1775, with the goal of demonstrating that the Revolution was the logical consequence of the actions of the conservative elites responding to Parliamentary provocations.

Although America had no formal peerage, a social aristocracy prevailed in the colonies, with definite divisions and responsibilities. Politically, this meant supporting the king and the government as constituted. This was considered a moral absolute by the ruling classes. A college student in 1766, writing to win a prize on the subject of the reciprocal advantages of a perpetual union between Great Britain and her American colonies, wrote, "The cause of liberty, civil and religious, is the cause of Britain herself."[7] By this, the writer implied that there was no need to go outside the union to seek freedom of religion or political liberty. Another writer, in that same essay contest, wrote of the interdependence of Great Britain and the colonies. "Their dependence is mutual, and if either of them be affected, the others sooner or later will feel it in a very sensible manner."[8] A British Member of Parliament wrote in 1774 of the conservatism and economic loyalty of the colonies up to that time. He pointed out that, during the tumultuous politics of England during the previous century, that Americans "have been strangers even to the name Whig and Tory. In all changes, in all revolutions, they have quietly followed the fortunes and submitted to the government of England."[9] William Henry Drayton, a South Carolina planter and self–described conservative, attacked in turn American radicals and then the British government, "when I thought either advanced beyond the line of constitutional propriety."[10] In 1775, William Smith, a Philadelphia minister, published

7 Four Dissertations on the Reciprocal Advantages of a Perpetual Union between Great Britain and her American Colonies, (Philadelphia: W. and T. Bradford, 1766), 10.

8 Four Dissertations, 52

9 Jonathan Shipley, A Speech Intended to Have Been Spoken on the Bill For Altering the Charters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1774), 8.

10 J. Russell Snapp, "William Henry Drayton: The Making of a Conservative Revolutionary," Journal of Southern History 57 (November 1991): 638.

a sermon which justified rebellion against Great Britain on conservative constutional grounds. Citing the example of the Glorious Revolution, Smith stated:

> Did they not magnanimously set their foot upon the line of the constiution, and tell majesty to its face that 'they could not betray the public liberty' and that the Monarch's only safety consisted 'in governing according to the laws?' Did not their example, and consequent sufferings, kindle a flame that illuminated the land, and introduced the noble system of public and personal liberty, secured by the Revolution?[11]

The ruling elites in the colonies wanted democracy only to the extent that they could use it to maintain the existing social and political structure. It was never the intention of the ruling class that broad–based democracy take hold, or when a new government was eventually created for the colonies, that it would be a representative republic. The terms "republican" and "democratical" were used interchangeably by conservatives as terms of reproach, much as "leveling" was used in a social context in England, or as the terms "red" and "communist" were used by Americans during the Cold War.[12] Even while protesting such onerous laws as the Stamp Act and the Townshend duties, conservative American political leaders and the upper crust of society supported the government as constituted. Snapp, writing about William Henry Drayton, states that "during the 1760s he feared challenges from the popular guarantor of individual rights to liberty and property." L.W. Labaree asserts that planters and merchants faced a twofold threat during the pre–revolutionary period. One threat was from British policies that concentrated power in royally controlled bureaucratic hands at the expense of the local colonial governments. The other threat was that the underprivileged classes might use the example of resistence set by conservatives to resist the entrenched privilege of the conservatives.[13]

Colonial society, based as it was on the society of the mother country, contained sharp class distinctions, and people were expected to behave in a deferential manner toward their social superiors. Government was to be left to the "gentlemen," this term having the specific meaning of one well–born to a good family not engaged in manual labor. The lower socioeconomic classes were to pay due respect to their betters, and the ruling class was expected to

11 William Smith, A Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs (Philadelphia: J. Humphreys, Jr., 1775), 21.
12 L. Labaree, Conservatism, 140.
13 Ibid., 56.

provide due allegiance to the mother country and its government. This class system tended to be self–perpetuating. The working classes were too busy making a living to worry to a great extent about government. Anything more than rudimentary education was available only to those who could afford it. Thus the next generation of educated leaders came from the same families as the previous generation. Religion, too, promoted the class system, and urged deference to betters. An excellent example of the mixing of religion and social class is found in William Smith's 1775 sermon:

> Without order and just subordination, there can be no union in public bodies. However much you may be equals on other occasions, yet all this must cease in a united and associated capacity; and every individual is bound to keep the place and duty assigned him, by ties far more powerfulover a man of virtue and honor, than all the other ties that human policy can contrive ... lastly, by every method in your power, and in every possible case, support the laws of your country.[14]

William Tennent, Anglican minister in Charleston, South Carolina, assumed without question the existence of class distinctions. In writing of sins, he states that these sins in former times "were confined chiefly to the middle and lower classes of people" but now "our common and country people seem to vie with the first classes mankind in vices, which were formerly peculiar to them alone."[15]

In the area of education as well, conservatism reigned. Cadwallader Colden attempted to secure a royal charter for King's College (later Columbia University) because it would, in part, "prevent the farther growth of republican principles, which already too much prevail in the colonies."[16] The system of higher education in the colonies was based on the English system, which was not much changed from that five centuries previous. It emphasized the ancient trivium of Latin grammar, rhetoric, and logic and was not open to new ideas of democracy or republicanism.

Religion tended to support the status quo, and that was especially true of the established churches, Anglican in the south and Puritan in the north, that enjoyed special privileges from the colonial governments. The churches and their leaders, not wanting to lose their privileged station, used the pulpit to

14 Smith, Present Situation, 29.
15 William Tennent, An Address, Occasioned by the Late Invasion of the Liberties of the American Colonies by the British Parliament (Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, 1774), 16.
16 L. Labaree, Conservatism, 100.

support the status quo. Writing in 1775, William Smith spoke of

> maintaining ... the most unshaken fidelity to our common Sovereign, as the great center of our union, and guardian of our mutual rights ... we thought it our duty to build up in America, altars, or constitutions, as nearly as we could on the great British system.
>
> We considered ourselves entitled to the priviliges of our Father's house — to enjoy peace, liberty, and safety, to be governed, like our breathcren, by our own laws ... and that no power on earth has a right to come in between us and a gracious Sovereign, to measure our loyalty, or to grant our property, without our consent.
>
> These are the principles we inherited from Britons themselves. Could we depart from them we should be deemed bastards and not sons, aliens and not breathcren.[17]

Beginning with the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British government took a greater interest in the colonies. With the acquisition of French America, Britain not only obtained land but the responsibility of running it, settling it and pacifying the Indians on it. To control this land and raise the revenue necessary to administer it, a series of measures were passed by the British Parliament and Crown, including the Proclamation Line of 1763, the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts. These acts hit directly at the power base of conservatives in the colonies, and the initial resistance to the British government came not from the mobs but from the gentlemen.

The Proclamation Line of 1763 stated that no settlement was to take place west of the Appalachian Mountains. This had the twofold effect of hitting the elite in the pocketbook by directly affecting their opportunities to obtain western land and of reducing further the power and influence of the colonial councils, who had formerly granted land and appointed officials to survey and oversee it; those privileges now lay with the king.

The Stamp Act of 1765 sought to raise revenue from the colonies to pay for the British army that was now being kept in the colonies. The troops, originally sent to fight the French and Indian War, remained after its conclusion, ostensibly to protect the American colonies from the hostile Indians. The cost of maintaining these troops, as well as the bureaucracy that was created to deal with the Indians and to collect the revenue, was to be passed on to the Americans.

The colonial conservatives, again slated to be hit in the pocketbook, called for the repeal of the Stamp Act, but did so in a calm, orderly manner. Massachusetts invited the other colonies to send representatives to a meeting, which

17 Smith, Present Situation, 13–14.

became the Stamp Act Congress, to seek redress from the crown. The elite of Boston began this movement. The Stamp Act Congress adopted a strong set of resolves; even tough talk with no overt action was too much for some of the conservatives at the Congress. Timothy Ruggles, the head of the Congress, refused to sign the resolves, and, like many conservatives, joined the loyalist side when the Revolution finally arrived. When the stamp agents were appointed, mobs of people attacked them, burned their property and, through violence or threat of violence, forced most of them to resign. The stamps in most cases remained unissued. But these mobs of people did not just spontaneously develop. They were supported and encouraged by the local elites and the governor's councilors. In a letter to the government in England, Governor Bernard of Massachusetts detailed the involvement of council members and upper–class citizens in a riot aimed at intimidating the local stamp agent.

> At break of day was discovered hanging upon a tree in a street of the town an effigy ... to represent Mr. Oliver, the ... stamp distributor. Many gentlemen, especially some of the council, treated it as a boyish sport, that did not deserve the notice of the governor and council.[18]

Writing after a second riot, Thomas Hutchinson also credited the better sorts with reponsibility for stirring up the mob. "The encouragers of the first mob never intended matters should go to this length."[19]

Jared Ingersoll, appointed stamp–agent in the colony of Maryland, commented that "only four of the council supported the governor regarding the Stamp Act, and they now face political death."[20] Ingersoll, in letters to a friend back in England, described the reaction of the American ruling class to the Stamp Act.

> We on this side of the water agree we should contribute, we only differ in the means ... our people don't yet believe that the British Parliament really means to impose internal taxes on us without our consent ... any tax not imposed by the legislative bodies here will go down with people like chopt hay.[21]

Much other evidence suggests the involvement of upper–class conserva

18 Governor Bernard, "The Boston Riot of August 14, 1765" in Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764–1766, Edmund S. Morgan, ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 107.

19 Thomas Hutchinson, "The Boston Riot of August 26, 1765" in Ibid., 109.

20 Jared Ingersoll, [Mr. Ingersoll's letters relating to the Stamp Act], title page wanting (New Haven: Samuel Green, 1766, 40.

21 Ibid., 8.

tives behind the scenes in these protests. Henry Laurens, later to become President of the Continental Congress, was suspected by the Sons of Liberty of having custody of some stamped paper. He surprised the common–looking mob that visited him at night in search of the stamped paper, by calling nine of them, acquaintances of his, by name.[22] In several other colonies, the gentlemen participating in intimidating behavior did not even bother to hide their identities, as in the group of 50 gentlemen of Wilmington, North Carolina, who signed their names to an open letter to British customs officials, and when that failed to get any results, they formed an association and led the crowd.[23]

With the almost universal loathing in the colonies for the Stamp Act, the offending legislation was repealed. With this repeal, the conservative forces in the colonies had won a great victory and celebrated while reaffirming their commitment to the government of England. Samuel Stillman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Boston, delivered a sermon in celebration of the repeal of the Stamp Act, in which he conveyed the message that in spite of the protestations of the colonies regarding the Act, they remained loyal subjects of Great Britain and were attempting to preserve, not to destroy, the constitutional system then in place.

> Let us entertain the most dutiful and loyal sentiments with respect to the King ... the prosperity of this kingdom is a great part of our happiness ... may the British Parliament receive that deference from us that they deserve; and be convinced by our future conduct, that we aim not to Independency, nor wish to destroy distinctions, where distinctions are necessary.
>
> May the whole issue of unanimity and peace; the firmest connection and mutual prosperity of Great Britain and her colonies. May we go on to rejoice in the continuence of our privileges, and glorify God in the abundance of His mercy.[24]

In spite of the success of the colonies in persuading Britain to repeal the Stamp Act, there were those who not only saw continued union with the mother country as desirable, but thought of American independence as impossible. An essayist wrote,

> Unconnected and divided as they are at present, both in situation and interest (owing to the difference of settlment, of charters, of religion, and commerce, which are often clashing) how difficult, and next to impossible would it be, to rescue them from a state of anarchy; and form a constitution, for which ... there can no precedent be found.[25]

22 Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 181.

23 Ibid., 182.

24 Samuel Stillman, Good News From a Far Country A Sermon Preached at Boston, May 17, 1766. Upon the Arrival of the Important News of the Repeal of the Stamp–Act (Boston: Kneeland and Adams, for Philip Freeman, 1766), 33–34.

Another essayist on the same subject wrote:

> The preservation of our laws, commerce, and every other blessing of domestic peace, by the wise policy of the mother country, can only be made the basis of a close and firm connection betweeen her and them.[26]

Relief at the repeal of the Stamp Act was felt in many quarters in America. Not only was the onerous tax lifted, but the constitution and form of government was preserved. The spirit of kinship with the mother country is noted is the following excerpt, which again reflects the deference common is colonial society.

> The rights we claim are the full and free enjoyment of constitutional liberty, protection from foreign invasion, and encouragement in every commercial interest, which does not directly interfere with that of the mother country.
>
> The duties we owe are obedience under constitutional and legal restrictions, and an exclusive preference to the mother country in every article of commerce and trade.[27]

In 1767, the British government, still looking for a way to raise revenue from the colonies, passed the Townshend Acts, which placed duties in the colonies on many commonly used items imported from England, such as lead, glass and tea. The colonies again acted in a predictable manner, protesting the taxation. Non–importation agreements were put into place in the various colonies, in an effort to force British merchants, hurt by the embargoes, to pressure Parliament for repeal of the duties. The reaction was again, for the most part, through channels, although there was some intimidation of merchants who did not cooperate with the embargoes. James Otis, future revolutionary, is quoted as saying "The Tax! The Tax! is the matter of grievance; redress is to fought for in a legal and constitutional way."[28]

The people of Boston, in their town meeting in December 1767, gave instructions to their representatives in the Massachusetts assembly. Several of these instructions demonstrate the conservative influence still prevalent at that time, as opposed to six years later, when radicals would be dumping tea into the

25 Four Dissertations, 100.

26 Ibid., 101.

27 Ibid., 85.

28 David Hawke, The Colonial Experience (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1966), 545.

harbor. The representatives of Boston were instructed:

> 1. As we have nothing more at heart, than to maintain a lasting a perpetual union with the people of Great Britain, who are our fellow subjects ... readily join in any measures tending to cultivate and establish it ... and frustrate the designs of those who would create jealousies and forment divisions between us.
>
> 2. Inspect such acts of Parliament as are or shall be passed to be binding on these colonies.
>
> 3. [since] we are not and cannot be represented in the Parliament that passeth such laws ... we enjoin upon you, to use your influence, that the nature and tendency of the late act of Parliament ... may be the subject of enquiry in the House of Representatives.[29]

The Bostonians then listed their objections to the specific acts. They objected to the revenue aspect, pointing out that, while regulating trade had always been the power and duty of the British government, the raising of revenue had traditionally been the province of the colonial legislatures. They also objected to the purpose the money was being raised for, specifically, the payment of royal officials in the colonies. Up to this time the colonies had raised the money and paid the royal officials, such as governors and judges, and by practicing the "power of the purse" had effectively controlled these appointments, even though the Crown technically still appointed them. The instructions continued:

> the appropriation of the monies raised ... is justly a matter of grievance to us; inasmuch as we are deprived of that honor ... of testifying our alacrity in supporting his majesty's officers .. as well as taking into consideration our own ability, and the merit of their services.[30]

The colonists also pointed out that they were already indirectly providing revenue to the coffers of Great Britain, in the form of higher prices they paid due to the exclusive nature of their trade with the mother country. The higher profits thus provided to British companies were then taxed.

Every argument offered by the colonists, however, seemed to return to the theme that revenue taxation was wrong and not to be tolerated. The conservatives in the colonial legislatures did not want any power to be ceded to the Crown or Parliament. They fought against these taxes because of the loss of

29 Boston Chronicle, 21–28 December 1767, 15.
30 Ibid.

power and influence that would ensue should the royal bureaucracy succeed in its takeover of local colonial administration. It was not just money; it was a way of life that was at stake. John Dickinson, writing anonymously as "A Farmer in Pennslyvania," deftly made that argument:

> 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 fear of calamities, each of which was unworthy of free men to bear ... it is calculated for the same purpose that the other was, that is, to raise money upon us without our consent.[31]

To enforce the Townshend Acts, new methods were tried, along with the expanded use of existing enforcement mechanisms. New customs officers were dispatched, to replace the lax, absentee customs officers previously in place. Vice–Admiralty courts were given expanded jurisdiction, and new Vice–Admiralty courts were created to assist with increased enforcement. Writs of assistance, a form of generalized search warrant, were provided for. These duties and their enforcement had the greatest effect on shipowners, traders merchants and the moneyed class — in other words, the conservative elements of society. In 1768, at the height of the protest of the Townshend duties, the Boston town meeting again sent instructions to their representatives. A list of 12 grievances was prepared, of which several showed the influence of the conservative element.

> 3. A number of new officers, unknown in the Charter of this Province, have been appointed to superintend this revenue, whereas by our Charter, the great and general Court [council] or assembly of this province has the sole right of appointing all civil officers.
>
> 4. Each of these petty officers so made in entrusted with power more absolute and arbitrary than ought to be lodged in the hands of any man or body of men. Thus our houses ... are exposed to be ransacked ... by Wretches, whom no prudent man would venture to employ even as menial servants.
>
> 7. We find ourselves greatly oppressed by Instructions sent to our Governor from the Court of Great Britain ... In consequence of instructions, the Governor has called and adjourned our General Assemblies to a place highly inconvenient to the

31 John Dickinson, Letters From a Farmer in Pennsylvania To the Inhabitants of the British Colonies (originally published in Philadelphia in the Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser; beginning the week of 30 November – 3 December, 1767 and for 11 weeks thereafter; immediately after its newspaper appearance it was published in book form in nine editions in six different cities.) Reprinted and with an introduction by R.T.H. Halsey (New York: The Outlook Company, 1903), 21–22.

> Members and greatly disadvantageous to the interests of the province ... in consequence of instructions, the Assembly has been prorogued from time to time, when the important concerns of the Province required their meeting ... [here the suspension of the New York Assembly in 1768 is described also] ... By an instruction, the honorable his Majesty's Council are forbid to meet and transact matters of public concern as a council of advice to the Governor, unless called by the Governor.
>
> 11. We cannot see without concern the various attempts which have been made, and are now making, to establish an American Episcopate ... no power on Earth can justly give either temporal or spiritual jurisdiction within this province, except the Great and General Court.[32]

The appointment power for officers, once a chief source of power for conservative members of the councils, was being usurped by Parliament and the Crown. The fourth grievance was especially galling to conservatives, because these officers not only were granted inordinate power, but they achieved it outside the normal channels of the hierarchical, class–conscious society. The conservative element honestly believed that they were best serving society by restoring society to its traditional state, by trying to get these interloping royal officials out of the way of the normal societal order. The seventh grievance directly affected the council in the performance of its duties, and in the exercise of its influence. And the opposition to an American Episcopate, expressed in the 11th grievance, was based on a fear of the loss of even more power and influence. The bishops in England were politically powerful, and the conservatives had more opposition to their rule already than they could handle.

Parliament, realizing its goals were not being achieved by the Townshend duties, repealed all except the tax on tea in 1770. This was good enough for the conservatives. The radicals continued the protests of the tea tax, resulting in the Boston Tea Party, and the British responded with the Intolerable Acts. The tea party marked the point where the radical revolutionary movement broke off from the conservative protest movement. Many of the merchants of Boston had opposed the tea party and offered to help pay for the tea. The offer was refused by the Governor, who insisted that the restitution had to be made by the colonial government. The governor, Thomas Gage, also reported on a Boston Town

32 The Votes and Proceedings of the People of Boston, in Town Meeting Assembled (Boston: Edes and Gill and T. and J. Fleet, 1772), 15–27

meeting in June 1774, where he noted that the upper–class people attended and proposed that the tea be paid for and the Committee of Correspondence, backbone of the radical element, be abolished. But they were outvoted by the lower classes.[33] Thomas Chandler, in a tract titled A Friendly Address to All Reasonable Americans made the case for cooler heads to prevail. Written in 1774, it drew the distinction between allowable protest and illegal revolt.

> If the supreme power of any kingdom or state ... should adopt measures that are wrong or oppresssive, the subjects may complain or remonstrate against them in a respectful manner, but they are bound, by the laws of heaven and earth, not to behave insolently or rebelliously. The ill consequences of open disrespect to the government are so great, that no misconduct of the administration can justify or excuse it ... Christians are required ... to be subject to the higher power, of whatever character, for consciences' sake.[34]

The writer went on to demonstrate that specific non–importation agreements, such as those employed during the Stamp Act and Townshend Act crises, were moderate and measured responses and achieved the desired effect. But a general non–importation act aimed at Britain, now that those particular acts were repealed, would do more harm to the colonies than to Great Britain and so should not be employed.[35]

Even some in England sided with the American conservatives. Also writing in 1774, Jonathan Shipley commented on Parliamentary relations with the American colonies.

> Let me add further, that to make any changes in their government, without their consent, would be to transgress the wisest rules of policy, and to wound our most important interests.[36]
>
> We never gained so much by North America as when we let them govern themselves and were content to trade with them and protect them.[37]

After the repeal of the Townshend duties, the radicals such as Sam Adams of Boston came to the forefront of the revolutionary movement, and there was

33 Peter D.G. Thomas, Tea Party to Independence: The Third Phase of the American Revolution, 1773–1776 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 120–121.
34 Thomas Bradbury Chandler, A Friendly Address to All Reasonable Americans (New York: J. Rivington, 1774), 5.
35 Ibid., 44.
36 Shipley, Speech Intended, 28.
37 Ibid., 30.

no unanimity among conservatives as to the course to be taken. Most continued, by long tradition and custom, to support the government as constituted. Some, however, using the same reasoning of allegiance to the constitution, justified a further break with Great Britain.

Samuel Seabury, in his tract An Alarm to the Legislature of New York, published early in 1775, attacked the nature, election and authority of the First Continental Congress. He expounded,

> the people have a right to share in the legislature. This right they exercise by choosing representatives; and thereby constituting one branch of the legislative authority. But when they have chosen their representatives, that right, which was before diffused through the whole people, centers in their representatives alone; and can legally be exercised by none but them ... But in the present dispute with Great Britain, the representatives of the people have not only been utterly disregarded, but their dignity has been trampled upon, and their authority contravened.

> A committee, chosen in a tumultuous, illegal manner, usurped the most despotic authority over the province. They entered into contracts, without any power from the legislature of the province .... They had the insolence to direct the manner in which the delegates should be chosen in counties; and the greater insolence, to count all the friends to order and good government, — those namely, who did not choose to obey their seditious mandate, — as being of their party, and as acquiescing in the New York choice.[38]

In the Sermon on the Present Situation, published in 1775, before the battles at Lexington and Concord, the author made the case that resistance to Parliament is justified, because it is Parliament itself that is acting in an unconstitutional manner.

> But it is said that we have of late departed from your former line of duty, and refused our homage at the great altar of British Empire and to this it has been replied, that the very refusal is the strongest evidence of our veneration for the altar itself.[39]

The Revolutionary War did not suddenly spring out of peaceful, happy colonies; it was the culmination of a series of events following the end of the French and Indian War. From the British point of view, it seemed that the colonies needed to be reminded of their proper place, and Parliament took what it considered to be measured, reasonable steps to accomplish its goal of raising

38 Samuel Seabury, An Alarm to the Legislature of the Province of New York, Occasioned by the Present Political Disturbances in North America: Addressed to the Honorable Representatives in General Assembly Convened (New York: James Rivington, 1775), 4–5.
39 Smith, Present Situation, 16.

revenue, while re–establishing royal authority in the colonies, which it had neglected due to other concerns of the empire. But from the American perspective, and particularly from the conservative perspective of the ruling elites in the colonies, the series of Parliamentary acts in 1763 and following were an unwarranted intrusion and interruption of the status quo. The colonial elite started the political and economic battles of the 1760s and the early 1770s, not to change anything, not to advance the ideals of democracy or republicanism, but simply to restore things to the way they ought to be. William Henry Drayton, a typical member of the landed, moneyed, ruling upper class, wrote in 1775 of his reasons for becoming a revolutionary:

> I endeavored at one time to oppose the exuberances of popular liberty, and at another, the stretches of the government party, when I thought either advances beyond the line of constitutional propriety. Tenacious and jealous in my liberty, I do not change ground, because I in turn face opposite quarters making the attack. ... I opposed succeeding violations of my rights, then, by a temporary democracy, now by an established monarchy.[40]

Drayton, though a typical member of the ruling elite, was far from a typical conservative. Although he expressed the conservative sentiments of preserving the status quo, he did it in the opposite manner from most conservatives. The typical conservative of the time was in the forefront of protestations and petitions, advocated embargoes, and, with a wink and a nod, acquiesced to the ruder forms of mob violence, such as the tarring and feathering of stamp agents. But when actual fighting began, many conservatives shrank from that final, irretrievable step, and backed the Loyalist cause.

The division of opinion within the conservative movement is exemplified by the following quotations from sermons. Keep in mind that churches tended to promote conservative values, and the contrast between the two positions is striking. In 1774 William Tennent, Anglican minister in Charleston, South Carolina, proclaimed:

> The question is of no less magnitude than whether we shall continue to enjoy the privileges of men and Britons, or whether we shall be reduced to a state of the most abject slavery.[41]

In 1775, William Smith, although he provided a moral justification for revolu

40 Snapp, Drayton, 638.
41 Tennent, Invasion, 6.

tion should the majority deem it unavoidable, asserted that no revolt was necessary, as independence was inevitable, with or without a war.

> Heaven has great and gracious purposes towards this continent illiberal or mistaken plans of policy may distress us for a while ... [but] the genius of America will rise triumphant ... this country will be free.[42]

Historian L.W. Labaree has identified eight characteristics of Loyalists during the American Revolution. They were essentially conservative and resisted innovation; they believed resistance to constituted authority was morally wrong; they made their decision to be Loyalists slowly and with much difficulty; they were usually forced into a decision by Patriots who did not allow them to sit on the fence; they had a sentimental attachment to Great Britain and her constitution; they generally believed that independence was inevitable but need not occur at that time or with that amount of violence; they were uncertain of the future, and felt that if they sided with the Patriots, there was no guarantee that things would not get worse; and they were pessimistic about the government should the Americans win. They belived this would lead to the ignorant and disorderly coming to power in the government.[43] Labaree's analysis of Loyalism coincides almost exactly with the characteristics of the ruling class described earlier in this paper.

Historian John Franklin Jameson provides an excellent analysis of how the change from the conservatism of 1763–1775 to the Lockean liberalism of the Declaration could happen. Revolutions, asserts Jameson, "as they... tend to fall into the hands of men holding more and more advanced and extreme views, less and less restrained by traditional attachment to the old order of things." The English Civil War, the American Revolution and the French Revolution, fit this description, according to Jameson.[44] The same qualities that made conservatives object to the Stamp Act, the dissolution of assemblies and councils, and the Townshend duties, also made them think long and hard before supporting armed rebellion. Historian Clinton Rossiter, in the conclusion to his comprehensive work on American Revolution–era political thought, Seedtime of the Republic,

42 Smith, Present Situation, 28.
43 L. Labaree, Royal Government, 274.
44 John Franklin Jameson, The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement (Boston: Beacon Press, 1926), 12.

characterizes that thought as "deep–seated conservatism." "The Americans of 1776," states Rossiter, "were among the first men in modern history to defend rather than seek an open society and constitutional liberty."[45] What Rossiter labels "ethical, ordered liberty[46] is an accurate statement of the goals of pre–revolutionary and Revolution–era conservatives. In a more recent work, Theodore Draper argues in A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution that the Americans struck for independence only after the British government rejected their claim to entitlement to power as they believed the British constitution defined and limited it. The struggle for power described by Draper is essentially the struggle of conservatives in America to hold on to the power they had accumulated, constitutionally and traditionally, for over a century.[47]

Although many American conservatives stopped short of armed revolt or open disloyalty to Great Britain, they can be credited with ingiting the fires that flared into the American Revolution. The republican society that conservatives feared in fact was begun by them in their vehement protestations of imperial policy in the 1760s. The more radical elements, used at first by conservatives for limited ends, adopted the rhetoric and tactics of the elite, and carried these ideas to their logical conclusion. The decade preceding Lexington and Concord and the beginning of the "American Revolution" might accurately be called the "American Conservation," as the colonies, with their own society and constitutional ideas, formed over a century of virtually autonomous development, fought to maintain the status quo as they perceived it.

45 Clinton Rossiter, Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 440.
46 Rossiter, Seedtime, 449.
47 Edmund S. Morgan, review of A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution by Theodore Draper, in New York Review of Books 43 (March 21, 1996): 17–20.