

Letters of Members of the Continental Congress

EDITED BY
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VOLUME II
July 5, 1776, to December 31, 1777



WASHINGTON, D. C.
PUBLISHED BY THE CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON
1923

CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON
PUBLICATION NO. 299

PAPERS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

J. FRANKLIN JAMESON, EDITOR

*Carnegie Inst. of Wash.
7-2-1923*

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The Lord Baltimore Press
BALTIMORE, MD., U. S. A.

day no doubt you have appointed some other Persons to come here, and I shall embrace the first Opportunity, after our Affairs shall get into a more settled Train to return. . . .

Upon the Receipt of yours and Mrs. Temple's Letters I communicated the Contents of them to Congress, who appointed a Committee to consider them, who reported that the Trees should be paid for as Wood. The President I suppose has communicated the Resolution upon it, which agrees with the Report. I should be glad to write Mrs. Temple an Account of this, but have not Time. You will be so good as to let her know it. I answered her Letter before her affair was determined.³

108. JOHN WITHERSPOON, SPEECH ON THE MESSAGE FROM
LORD HOWE.¹

[September 5 (?), 1776.]

Mr. President:

The subject we are now upon is felt and confessed by us all to be of the utmost consequence, and perhaps I may also say, of delicacy and difficulty. I have not been accustomed in such cases to make solemn professions of impartiality, and shall not do it now, because I will not suppose that there are any suspicions to the contrary in the minds of those who hear me. Besides, the variety of opinions that have been formed and delivered upon it, seem to prove that we are giving our own proper judgment without prejudice or influence, which I hope will lead to the discovery of what is most wise and expedient upon the whole.

As the deliberation arises from a message sent to us by Lord Howe, at least by his permission, I think it is of importance to attend with greater exactness to all the circumstances of that message than has been done by any gentleman who has yet spoken on the subject. It comes from the Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the King of Great Britain, and one who is said to carry a commission to give peace to America.

From the conduct of the Ministry at home, from the acts of Parliament, and from Lord Howe's proclamation in conformity to both, it is plain that absolute, unconditional submission is what they require us to agree to, or mean to force us to. And from the most authentick private intelligence, the King has not laid aside his personal rancour; it is rather increasing every day. In these circumstances Lord Howe has evidently a great desire to engage us in a treaty; and yet he has constantly avoided giving up the least punctilio on his side. He could never be induced to give General Washington his title. He plainly tells us he cannot treat with Congress as such; but he has allowed a prisoner of war to come and tell us he would be glad to see us as private gentlemen.

private capacities, after the defeat of the American Army on Long Island on the 26 of August 1776. Mr. Adams under a sudden impression and dread of the consequences of the measure, whispered to me a wish 'that the first ball that had been fired on the day of the defeat of our Army had gone through his head'. When he rose to speak against the proposed interview, he called Gen'l Sullivan a 'decoy duck whom Lord Howe has sent among us to seduce us into a renunciation of our independence.'²

² See no. 89, *ante*.

[108]¹ Force, *Am. Arch.*, fifth ser., II, 178. The speech is also printed in an appendix to the *Journals* (ed. Ford), VI, 1109-1113.

It has been said that this is no insult or disgrace to the Congress; that the point of honour is hard to be got over in making the first advances. This, sir, is mistaking the matter wholly. He has got over this point of honour; he has made the first overtures; he has told General Washington, by Colonel Putnam, that he wished that message to be considered as making the first step. His renewed attempts by Lord Drummond, and now by General Sullivan, point out to all the world that he has made the first step. It will, doubtless, be related at home; and I am of opinion it is already written and boasted of to the Ministry at home that he has taken such a part. Therefore any evil or condescension that can attend seeking peace first, has been submitted to by him. Yet has he uniformly avoided any circumstance that can imply that we are anything else but subjects of the King of Great Britain in rebellion. Such a message as this, if in any degree intended as respectful to us, ought to have been secret; yet has it been open as the day. In short, such a message was unnecessary; for if he meant only to communicate his mind to the Congress by private gentlemen, he might have done that many ways, and it needed not to have been known either to the publick or the Congress till these private gentlemen came here on purpose to reveal it. These, then, are the circumstances which attend this message as it is now before us: and the question is, shall we comply with it in any degree or not? Let us ask what benefit shall be derived from it? There is none yet shown to be possible. It has been admitted by every person without exception who has spoke, that we are not to admit a thought of giving up the independence we have so lately declared; and by the greatest part, if not the whole, that there is not the least reason to expect that any correspondence we can have with him will tend to peace. Yet I think in the beginning of the debate such reasonings were used as seemed to me only to conclude that we should grasp at it as a means of peace. We were told that it was easy for us to boast or be valiant here, but that our armies were running away before their enemies. I never loved boasting, neither here nor anywhere else. I look upon it as almost a certain forerunner of disgrace. I found my hope of success in this cause, not in the valour of Americans or the cowardice of Britons, but upon the justice of the cause, and still more upon the nature of things. Britain has first injured and inflamed America to the highest degree, and now attempts, at the distance of three thousand miles, to carry on war with this whole country, and force it to absolute submission. If we take the whole events of the war since it commenced, we shall rather wonder at the uniformity of our success than be surprised at some cross events. We have seen bravery as well as cowardice in this country, and there are no consequences of either that are probable, that can be worth mentioning as ascertaining the event of the contest.

Lord Howe speaks of a decisive blow not being yet struck, as if this cause depended upon one battle, which could not be avoided. Sir, this is a prodigious mistake. We may fight no battle at all for a long time, or we may lose some battles, as was the case with the British themselves in the Scotch rebellion of 1745, and the cause notwithstanding be the same. I wish it were considered, that neither loss nor disgrace worth mentioning

has befallen us in the late engagement, nor comparable to what the British troops have often suffered. At the battle of Preston, sir, they broke to pieces and ran away like sheep, before a few Highlanders. I myself saw them do the same thing at Falkirk, with very little difference—a small part only of the army making a stand, and in a few hours the whole retreating with precipitation before their enemies. Did that make any difference in the cause? Not in the least—so long as the body of the nation were determined, on principle, against the rebels. Nor would it have made any other difference, but in time, though they had got possession of London, which they might have easily done if they had understood their business; for the Militia in England there gathered together, behaved fifty times worse than that of America has done lately. They generally disbanded and run off as soon as the rebels came within ten or twenty miles of them. In short, sir, from anything that has happened, I see not the least reason for our attending to this delusive message. On the contrary, I think it is the very worst time that could be chosen for us, as it will be looked upon as the effect of fear, and diffuse the same spirit in some degree through different ranks of men.

The improbability of anything arising from this conference, leading to a just and honourable peace, might be shown by arguments too numerous to be even so much as named. But what I shall mention only is, that we are absolutely certain, from every circumstance, from all the proceedings at home, and Lord Howe's own explicit declaration in his letter to Dr. Franklin, that he never will acknowledge the independence of the American States.

I observed that one or two members said, in objection to the report of the Board of War, that it was like a begging of a question, and making a preliminary of the whole subject in debate. Alas, sir, this is a prodigious mistake. It was not only not the whole, but it was properly no subject of debate at all, till within these three months. We were contending for the restoration of certain privileges under the Government of Great Britain, and we were praying for re-union with her. But in the beginning of July, with the universal approbation of all the States now united, we renounced this connection, and declared ourselves free and independent. Shall we bring this into question again? Is it not a preliminary? has it not been declared a preliminary by many gentlemen, who have yet given their opinion for a conference, while they have said they were determined on no account and on no condition to give up our independence? It is then a necessary preliminary, and it is quite a different thing from any punctilios of ceremony. If France and England were at war, and they were both desirous of peace, there might be some little difficulty as to who should make the first proposals; but if one of them should claim the other as they did long ago as a vassal or dependent subject, and should signify a desire to converse with the other, or some deputed by him, and propose him many privileges, so as to make him even better than before, I desire to know how such a proposal would be received? If we had been for ages an independent Republic, we should feel this argument with all its force. That we do not feel it, shows that we have not yet acquired the

whole ideas and habits of independence: from which I only infer, that every step taken in a correspondence as now proposed, will be a virtual or partial renunciation of that dignity so lately acquired.

I beg you would observe, sir, that Lord Howe himself was fully sensible that the Declaration of Independence precluded any treaty, in the character in which he appeared; as he is said to have lamented that he had not arrived ten days sooner, before that declaration was made. Hence it appears, that entering into any correspondence with him in the manner now proposed, is actually giving up, or at least subjecting to a new consideration, the independence which we have declared. If I may be allowed to say it without offence, it seems to me that some members have unawares admitted this, though they are not sensible of it; for when they say that it is refusing to treat, unless the whole be granted us, they must mean that some part of that whole must be left to be discussed and obtained, or yielded, by the treaty.

But, sir, many members of this House have either yielded, or at least supposed, that no desirable peace, or no real good, could be finally expected from this correspondence, which is wished to be set on foot; but they have considered it as necessary in the eye of the publick, to satisfy them that we are always ready to hear anything that will restore peace to the country. In this view it is considered as a sort of trial of skill between Lord Howe and us, in the political art. As I do truly believe, that many members of this House are determined by this circumstance, I shall consider it with some attention. With this view it will be necessary to distinguish the publick in America into three great classes: 1. The Tories, our secret enemies. 2. The Whigs, the friends of independence, our sincere and hearty supporters. 3. The Army, who must fight for us.

As to the first of them, I readily admit that they are earnest for our treating. They are exulting in the prospect of it; they are spreading innumerable lies to forward it. They are treating the Whigs already with insult and insolence upon it. It has brought them from their lurking holes; they have taken liberty to say things in consequence of it, which they durst not have said before. In one word, if we set this negotiation on foot, it will give new force and vigour to all their seditious machinations. But, sir, shall their devices have any influence upon us at all? If they have at all, it should be to make us suspect that side of the question which they embrace. In cases where the expediency of a measure is doubtful, if I had an opportunity of knowing what my enemies wished me to do, I would not be easily induced to follow their advice.

As to the Whigs and friends of independence, I am well persuaded that multitudes of them are already clear in their minds, that the conference should be utterly rejected; and to those who are in doubt about its nature, nothing more will be requisite than a clear and full information of the state of the case, which I hope will be granted them.

As to the Army, I cannot help being of opinion, that nothing will more effectually deaden the operations of war, than what is proposed. We do not ourselves expect any benefit from it, but they will. And they will possibly impute our conduct to fear and jealousy as to the issue of the

cause; which will add to their present little discouragement, and produce a timorous and despondent spirit.²

109. JOHN ADAMS TO MRS. ADAMS.¹

[PHILADELPHIA], Friday, 6 September, 1776.

This day, I think, has been the most remarkable of all. Sullivan came here from Lord Howe, five days ago, with a message, that his lordship desired a half an hour's conversation with some of the members of Congress in their private capacities. We have spent three or four days in debating, whether we should take any notice of it. I have, to the utmost of my abilities, during the whole time, opposed our taking any notice of it. But, at last, it was determined by a majority, "that the Congress being the representatives of the free and independent States of America, it was improper to appoint any of their members to confer in their private characters with his lordship. But they would appoint a committee of their body,

² Benjamin Rush gives the following account of this debate:

"I took part in several debates. The first or second time I spoke was against a motion for a Committee of Congress, to meet Lord Howe in their private capacity, to confer upon a peace with Great Britain. On the same side of the question John Adams, Dr. Witherspoon and George Ross spoke with uncommon eloquence. The last of those gentlemen began his speech by asking—what the conduct of George the 3rd would be had Congress proposed to negotiate with him as Elector of Hanover instead of King of Great Britain—he would spurn, and very properly spurn the insulting proposal. 'Let the American States', said he, 'act in the same manner. We are bound to cherish the honor of our country which is now committed to our care. Nothing could dishonor the sovereign of Britain, that would not in equal circumstances dishonor us.' In the conclusion of my speech, I said, 'that our country was far from being in a condition to make it necessary for us to humble ourselves at the feet of Great Britain. We had lost a battle, and a small island but the city and State of New York were still in possession of their independence. But suppose that State had been conquered, suppose half the States in the Union had been conquered—nay, suppose all the States in the Union except one had been conquered, still let not that one renounce her independence; but I will go further—should this solitary State, the last repository of our freedom be invaded, let her not survive her precious birthright, but in yielding to superior force, let her last breath be spent in uttering the word *Independence*.' The speakers in favor of the motion were Ed. Rutledge, Thos. Lynch, John [Thomas] Stone, and several others. One of them in answer to the concluding sentence of my speech, said, 'he would much rather live with *dependence*, than die with independence upon his lips.' The motion was carried with some modification. The committee appointed to confer with Lord Howe were Dr. Franklin, John Adams and Edward Rutledge. John Adams objected for a while to going upon this embassy, but was prevailed upon by the minority to consent to it. They met on Staten Island, but the conference ended in a discovery that Lord Howe had no power to grant us peace, upon any other condition than a rescinding the declaration of independence.

"The issue of this negotiation demonstrated that the time in which the States declared themselves to be independent was the proper one. It prevented their dissolution after the defeat and the retreat of the American armies in the subsequent summer and autumn. It moreover produced a secession of Tories, and timid Whigs from the Councils of the United States, and left the government of the country in the hands of men of fixed and determined principles and tempers. Maryland had yielded a little to the gloomy complexion of public affairs. She had instructed her delegates in Congress to vote for an accommodation with Great Britain *any measure* (meaning independence) to the contrary, and one of the delegates said to me in the street soon afterwards, that General Howe's proclamation contained everything we could wish and that we ought now to submit to Great Britain." *Memorial*, p. 90. See no. 102, note 2, *ante*.

[109]¹ *Familiar Letters*, p. 223; Force, *Am. Arch.*, fifth ser., II. 192.