

## Chapter 8

### The Stamp Act and Methods of Protest

Despite the many arguments made against it, the Stamp Act was passed and scheduled to be enforced on November 1, 1765. The colonists found ever more vigorous and violent ways to protest the Act. In Virginia, a tall backwoods lawyer, Patrick Henry, made a fiery speech and pushed five resolutions through the Virginia Assembly. In Boston, an angry mob inspired by Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty destroyed property belonging to a man rumored to be a Stamp agent and to Lt. Governor Thomas Hutchinson. In New York, delegates from nine colonies, sitting as the Stamp Act Congress, petitioned the King and Parliament for repeal. In Philadelphia, New York, and other seaport towns, merchants pledged not to buy or sell British goods until the hated stamp tax was repealed.

This storm of resistance and protest eventually had the desired effect. Stamp agents hastily resigned their Commissions and not a single stamp was ever sold in the colonies. Meanwhile, British merchants petitioned Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act. In 1766, the law was repealed but replaced with the Declaratory Act, which stated that Parliament had the right to make laws binding on the colonies "in all cases whatsoever."

The methods used to protest the Stamp Act raised issues concerning the use of illegal and violent protest, which are considered in this chapter.

#### May: Patrick Henry and the Virginia Resolutions

Patrick Henry had been a member of Virginia's House of Burgess (Assembly) for exactly nine days as the May session was drawing to a close. Only 31 of the 116 members remained; many had already gone home to look after their crops. But, on May 29, 1765, George Johnston of Fairfax County rose to suggest that the Burgess consider the Stamp Act. Patrick Henry leaped to his feet and seconded the motion. Older delegates were shocked. Consider the Stamp Act? How dare Virginia consider a law that Parliament had already passed. George Wyeth reminded the Burgess that "it is our duty to humbly and silently accept the decisions of Parliament." Henry, however, thought otherwise:



Patrick Henry

*Gentlemen, the Stamp Act has been forced upon us by a "sick" king.*

*I understand in Williamsburg, it is considered ill-mannered to refer to King George's fits of insanity in plain words – and his weak minister, George Grenville. The act is, in my humble opinion, illegal, unconstitutional and unjust.*

With that, Henry offered the stunned delegates seven resolutions:

1. *Resolved: That the first settlers to this county brought with them all the privileges and rights that have at any time been enjoyed by the people of Great Britain.*
2. *Resolved: That these privileges and rights have been guaranteed by two royal charters.*
3. *Resolved: That the right of self-taxation is a distinguishing characteristic of British freedom.*
4. *Resolved: That the Virginia Assembly has always had the sole power of self-government and self-taxation and that these rights have always been recognized by the kings and people of Great Britain.*
5. *Resolved: That the Assembly of this colony has the sole right and power to tax Virginians, and any attempt to surrender this power will destroy British as well as American freedom.*
6. *Resolved: That the inhabitants of this colony are not bound to obey any law except those passed by their General Assembly,*
7. *Resolved: That any person who speaks otherwise shall be deemed an enemy of the colony.*

Thomas Jefferson, who observed the scene from the entrance hall, described what followed as a "most bloody" debate. The conservative leaders of the Burgess rose one by one to denounce Henry's radical resolutions. How dare he place Virginia's law-making power above that of the British Parliament? In the heat of making his reply, some say Patrick Henry warned, "Caesar has his Brutus; Charles the First, his Cromwell and George the Third..."

As the shouts of "Treason!" "Treason!" all but drowned out his speech, Patrick Henry waited before finishing, "...may profit by their example. If this be treason, make the most of it."<sup>\*12</sup>

Five of Henry's seven resolutions passed the House of Burgess, the last by just one vote. All seven, however, were reprinted by most colonial papers. Thus Virginia's actions were given the appearance of an even more radical challenge to England's authority than they were.

## **August: Riots in Massachusetts**

Inspired by Patrick Henry and the Virginia Resolutions, Boston patriots under the leadership of John Hancock and Sam Adams, organized the Loyal Nine and, later, the Sons of Liberty. This latter group took protest to the streets. Two of the objects of their anger were Andrew Oliver, a British agent appointed to sell the hated stamps, and Lt. Governor Thomas Hutchinson.

The destruction caused by the group led Governor Francis Bernard to rush the following report to London:

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\* Historians today doubt that the last exchange took place but the story has circulated for hundreds of years.

<sup>12</sup>Nardi Reed Campin, *Patrick Henry, the Firebrand of the Revolution*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1961.



It now grew dark when the Mob which had been gathering all the afternoon, came down to Council Chamber and passed on. From thence they went to a new Building lately erected by Mr. Oliver to let out for shops and not quite finished. This they called the Stamp Office and pulled it down to the ground in two minutes. Then they attacked Mr. Oliver's house. The mob broke down the whole fence of the garden and beat in all the doors and windows. As soon as they got possession of the house they searched for Mr. Oliver, declaring they would kill him. After the destruction of Mr. Oliver's house, the principle people of the Town publicly avowed and justified the act. The mob was highly elated and private resentments against persons in high office were executed under the mask of public cause. On August 26, the mob attacked Governor Hutchinson's house with inestimable fury.

They went to work on the House with a rage scarce to be found by the most savage people. Everything moveable was destroyed in the most minute manner except for such things of value carried off. The House they resolved to level to the ground. Though due to the thickness of the walls they were prevented from completing their purpose. The next day the streets were found scattered with money, rings, etc., which had been dropped in carrying off. The whole loss in this house is reckoned at 3,000 pounds sterling.<sup>13</sup>

## October: The Stamp Act Congress

Even before word of Henry's resolutions reached Boston, the Massachusetts House of Representatives voted to ask the assemblies of the various colonies to send delegates to attend a general congress in New York City. The purpose of this Congress would be to protest the Stamp Act. Nine colonies eventually sent delegates (one colony refused and three could not be represented because governors would not convene the Assemblies to elect delegates). The Stamp Act Congress met in October, 1765, and after much scribbling and debate agreed upon 14 resolutions, including the following:

*That his Majesty's subjects in these colonies owe the same Allegiance to the Crown of Great Britain, that is owing from his English subjects, and all due Subordination to Parliament.*

*That it is the Right of Englishmen that no taxes be imposed upon them but with their own consent, given personally, or by their representatives.*

*That the People of these Colonies cannot be represented in the House of Commons in Great Britain.*

*That it is the duty of these Colonies to try to obtain the Repeal of the Stamp Act.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>John Braeman, *The Road to Independence*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1973, pp. 94-95. (edited)

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.

## November: Boycott of British Goods

In New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other seaport towns, merchants made agreements to stop doing business with or pay debts to English businessmen until the Stamp Act was repealed. In New York an agreement was made the day before the Stamp Act was to go into effect. Signed by some 200 merchants, it stated:

*We, the underwritten, retailers of goods, do hereby promise and oblige ourselves not to buy any goods, wares, or merchandises of any person or persons whatsoever that shall be shipped from Great Britain after the first day of January next unless the Stamp Act shall be repealed as witness our hands.*<sup>15</sup>

## March: Repeal of the Stamp Act

Violence, petitions, resolutions, and boycotts finally caused Parliament to reconsider the Stamp Act. After a long and heated debate, the Act was repealed. But repeal was accompanied by a law known as the Declaratory Act, which stated:

*The colonies and plantations in America are and of right ought to be, subordinate to, and dependent upon the imperial crown and Parliament of Great Britain; and the King and Parliament had, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make laws of sufficient force to bind the colonies and people of America in all cases.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 102.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 121-22.

## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

- |                        |                                          |                     |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| a. 4 forms of protest  | e. Andrew Oliver and Governor Hutchinson | h. boycott          |
| b. 3 Virginia Resolves | f. Stamp Act Congress                    | i. London merchants |
| c. King threatened     | g. 2 resolves of above                   | j. Declaratory Act  |
| d. Sons of Liberty     |                                          |                     |

## Deciding Whether an Action is Justified

When deciding whether an act of political protest is justified one should consider several of the following:

- The purpose or ends of the action: are the ends just?
- The alternatives to the action: could the same ends be reached with less provocative means?
- The method or means of protest: do the ends justify the means?
- The effect of the action: was the end obtained? Is the situation better as a result?

It is a matter of personal judgment how important each of these considerations should be. It is important, however, that one develop a consistent philosophy incorporating ends, means, alternatives, and effects.

2. Arrange the following actions in order from least to most justified. State reason for each selection:

- Patrick Henry calling George III a sick king and denouncing all who disagree with his solutions as enemies of Virginia.
- Representatives from nine colonies petitioning the King and Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act.
- A mob in Boston destroying property and threatening the lives of Andrew Oliver and Thomas Hutchinson.
- Merchants in New York refusing to buy British goods or paying debts to English merchants until the Stamp Act was repealed.
- Tar and feathering merchants who sold British goods despite the boycott.

3. Using the criteria given above—ends, alternatives, means, and effects decide whether use of violence in Boston was justified.