“Between Hawk and Buzzard”: Congress as Perceived by Its Members, 1775-1783

The Second Continental Congress, which met between 1775 and 1781, and its successor, the Confederation Congress, authorized in 1781 by the Articles of Confederation, operated under very difficult circumstances and yet compiled an impressive series of accomplishments in the face of Revolutionary ideology which prevented the formation of a strong national government and the efficient central management of the war. The thirteen fiercely jealous and often uncooperative states continuously disrupted congressional efforts to direct the Revolution. Despite enormous handicaps, however, Congress established an army and a navy, promulgated the Declaration of Independence, founded a diplomatic service, forged an alliance with France, wrote the Articles of Confederation, organized the West and negotiated a peace treaty with England. The distinguished and exceptionally able delegates to Congress, including such men as John Adams, John Hancock, Henry Laurens, John Jay, Samuel Huntington, James Madison, Caesar Rodney, Elbridge Gerry and John Witherspoon, should have been proud of their important achievements.

Their notable accomplishments notwithstanding, congressional delegates became despondent when they remained for extended periods of time far from their homes, families, and friends. They disliked their uncomfortable, expensive quarters in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and York, and upon two occasions, when the British threatened to invade Philadelphia, ingloriously fled for their lives. Although in 1776 Abraham Clark called Congress “an august assembly,” many fellow delegates, irritated by personal inconveniences and the nation’s seemingly insurmountable military and political difficulties, perceived Congress as an unwieldy, inefficient...
body which failed to provide comprehensive direction in the struggle for liberty. These delegates fumed bitterly over their arduous and unremunerative duties and criticized absent colleagues who sought to evade their solemn responsibilities. Inability to gather a quorum forced exasperated representatives to postpone temporarily or indefinitely the consideration of crucial matters, and lengthy, long-winded debates over trifles also impeded legislation. Members castigated colleagues who furthered selfish interests at the public’s expense. As a result of their unfortunate experiences, many of them concluded that Congress’ legislative and executive functions were incompatible.1

After they arrived in Philadelphia, they discovered that congressional duties were financially unprofitable, tedious, and frustrating. When their states failed to provide them with sufficient allowances, many fell into a “distressing and degrading situation.” Caesar Rodney charged that the Delaware General Assembly sought to avoid paying its representatives. In 1777, Charles Carroll worried about his situation: “I have yet received no money, not even my allowance for attending Congress.” Sick and without funds in May 1781, Carroll could not even consult a physician or buy medicine. As for James Lovell, after having bought only one suit of clothes and a hat in the past three years, in 1779 he requested that Massachusetts send him money for desperately needed new garments. By December 1781, Lovell’s fees for board remained unpaid for 247 days, while bills for shoes and stockings were also outstanding.

What were the New Jersey delegates to do without funds, John Fell asked Governor William Livingston, and he added: “my land lady cannot go to market without money, and I do not love to run in debt for bread and water.” Although New York provided some money, Francis Lewis noted that “the delegates of every other state in the union have a more ample allowance than ours.” Thus, after failing to receive enough support from New York, James

1 Robert S. Hohwald of the National Inquiry Into Scholarly Communication, Howard P. Segal of Dalhousie University, and my former colleagues at Middlesex County College, Irwin Kantor, Ian Newman, John Kenny, Vincent Ianuale and Elliot Pasternak, provided valuable suggestions during the revision of this article. Abraham Clark to Elias Dayton, July 4, 1776, New Jersey Letters, Rutgers University Library.
Duane found himself “in danger of being destitute of the means of being decent and comfortable even in the article of dress.” Although the New York delegates submitted to the inconvenience and the financial loss which arose from their attendance at Congress, they could not afford to maintain themselves completely at their own expense.

Even when they received regular remittances, members argued that the depreciation of the Continental currency destroyed the value of their allowances. In 1775, Hancock complained that due to increased expenses the Massachusetts delegates spent all of their money rapidly. In 1780 Lovell could not buy two pounds of mutton, which cost thirteen to fifteen dollars per pound, with his daily allowance. In 1782, Duane went to Philadelphia, “one of the most extravagant cities in the world,” with, he sarcastically declared, a “plentiful stock” of money provided by New York. Having received little pay, Samuel Livermore lived on borrowed funds, “or nobody knows how, for I have not forty dollars clear at this time.” In a city where “none but hard coin pass unless it be at the most ruinous terms,” delegates whose states failed to provide sufficient funds suffered from privation.2

Unlike Samuel Osgood, who found himself without money in Philadelphia but who had friends with whom he could stay, several representatives became stranded in the city when their states failed to remit funds. James Madison discovered in May 1782 that he could neither pay his long overdue bills nor the cost of his journey back to Virginia. Roger Sherman was perplexed for the want of fifty pounds from Connecticut, without which he could no longer afford to live in Philadelphia nor journey home. William Ellery, after completing his term in 1780, could not pay his debts in the city or buy a new horse on which to ride home. He asked Governor William Greene of Rhode Island for $20,000. Should Ellery not

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receive the money he might "be obliged to continue here months at the expense of the state, without having it in my power to do it any service."

Discontent over pay and allowances frequently resulted in delegates threatening to return home. As his ragged clothes fell off his back and his "lady of the tub" badgered him over failure to pay for his freshly washed socks, Lovell demanded "ninety days of refreshment" from the Continental Congress. He admitted to Sam Adams that Congress, "this political scene of drudgery," had become too expensive for him to attend. In 1779, Fell similarly observed that New Jersey's parsimony did not tempt him to stay in Congress "longer than I had engaged for," and William Whipple declared that "there is no pecuniary temptation that will be a temptation to tarry through the summer." In 1779, after Nathaniel Scudder had allowed his private fortune to decline, had sacrificed numerous lucrative business opportunities, and had paid his expenses during five years of congressional service, he no longer desired to, nor could he afford to, represent New Jersey. Between 1780 and 1781, Madison, Duane, Thomas McKean, Nicholas Van Dyke, Jonathan Elmer, Richard Bland, John Morin Scott, Meriwether Smith, Thomas Rodney, Robert R. Livingston and Joseph Jones threatened to leave Congress if their states did not promptly provide them with funds.

In similar fashion, John Jay concluded that the honor of being a delegate was not sufficient recompense for the financial loss sustained by accepting the office. Thomas Burke found congressional service financially ruinous; he wished "to make way for some gentleman who valued his honor in this way at a much higher rate than I do." McKean confessed that he originally thought it his duty to be a delegate but had tired of serving in Congress at his own expense, while Cornelius Harnett sarcastically noted that many men

3 Roger Sherman to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., July 3 and Sept. 4, 1781, Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. Papers, Connecticut State Library.
4 John Fell to Robert Morris, Mar. 5, and June 13, 1779, Robert Morris Papers, Rutgers University Library; Thomas McKean to Caesar Rodney, July 4, 1780, Letters To and From Caesar Rodney, 1756-1784, ed. by George Herbert Ryden (Wilmington, 1933), 359-360; John Morin Scott to George Clinton, Sept. 26, 1780, Public Papers of George Clinton, ed. by Hugh Hastings (New York, 1899), VI, 254-255.
would be candidates to supercede him in an honorable and liberally paid position. In disappointment Duane asked, “is the honor of serving as a member of Congress—though so many others have shaken it off—quite a sufficient consideration for me; and abundantly productive of peace and comfort to my family, of improvement and instruction to my children?”

Despite habitual expressions of discontent, many delegates sought to serve their country faithfully, but they soon discovered that Congress’ inefficiency severely hampered completion of important legislation. In 1775, John Adams found that Congress had become lost in a maze of business at a time when it was required to write a constitution for an empire, to fortify a country 1,500 miles long, to create an army and a navy, to raise taxes, and to regulate commerce. “I know not what has confounded us all day,” he told James Warren on July 24, 1775. The Congress, caught “between hawk and buzzard,” failed to function efficiently.

Poor communication between state officials and Congress annoyed the delegates. In 1776, Oliver Wolcott claimed that he received as much information from Asia as he did from Connecticut, and, when new instructions failed to arrive, he learned by reading the Philadelphia newspapers of his re-election to Congress. After William Hooper sent many inquiries but failed to receive a reply from North Carolina’s legislature, he asked on January 1, 1777, “Am or am I not a delegate?” When his state’s delegates journeyed to Philadelphia, Hooper fretted, “our friends seem to consign us to oblivion and give us the important trust of defending their liberties, without affording us such intelligence of their situation as is absolutely necessary to put it in our power to do it effectually.” William Whipple and Josiah Bartlett made similar complaints about New Hampshire’s failure to provide them with vital data, and in 1779 and 1780 the New York delegation noted that their state’s interests could not be protected without proper information from the legislature. Madison and Edmund J. Randolph encountered similar

6 John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 24, 1775, Pemberton Papers, Clifford Correspondence, 1766-1777, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).
problems in 1781 when they could not present an accurate report about military events in Virginia.\footnote{Oliver Wolcott, Sr. to Laura Wolcott, Nov. 24, 1776, Oliver Wolcott, Sr. Papers, Connecticut Historical Society; William Hooper to Joseph Hewes, Jan. 1, 1777, Louis Bamberger Collection, New Jersey Historical Society.}

This lack of information was coupled with Congress’ inability to expedite important legislative matters. Upon arriving at Congress in 1776, Wolcott perceived that “members have a hard service”; more than two years later he thought his duties had grown still more arduous with members continuing their debates until ten or eleven o’clock every night. John Mathews observed that business was conducted slowly, in “the plain John trot mode.” Because affairs did not proceed rapidly, Laurens worried about public accounts remaining unadjusted, and the journals of Congress not being brought up to date. In 1779, Elias Boudinot wrote: “it is an uphill cause to get anything done here”; and John Armstrong claimed that for three months Congress debated the same measures without coming to a decision. If Gouverneur Morris summed up procedures in Philadelphia as slow, Ezekial Cornell provided a more elaborate description of the legislative process: “Congress perhaps three months in passing a recommendation to the states, three months more in adopting it and then the sloth there is in some of the states in executing them.”\footnote{Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, June 3, 1775, Silas Deane Papers, Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society (1890), II, 252-256; Henry Laurens to George Washington, July 31, 1778, Henry Laurens Papers, South Carolina Historical Society.}

Harnett asserted that at times Congress completed more work in three hours than it completed at other times in three days. Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer was sure that if the delegates thought more and talked less congressional business would be conducted more efficiently. Arguments over points of order frequently wasted valuable time. “When we are assembled several gentlemen have such a knack at starting questions of order, raising debates upon critical, cautious, and trifling amendments, protracting them by long speeches, by postponing, calling for the previous question, and other arts, that it is almost impossible to get an important question decided at one sitting; and if it is put over to another day, the field
is open to be gone over again, precious time is lost and the public business left undone."

Chaotic debates prevented swift action. According to Duane, "it takes time to hear the different views and sentiments of the members, and to produce one way of thinking, before essential points can be determined." At one particular session members presented so many opinions that they found themselves unable to agree upon anything specific. A military defeat, according to John Armstrong, "must like every other event of that kind stand subjected to the various strictures of mankind forming opinion on subjects in their local circumstances too remote for accurate and fair discussion even to judges otherwise competent." Upon the subject of taxes, every delegate acted as though he were an expert, and frequently "useless harangues" consumed valuable time. The members appeared to enjoy chatting and idling upon the floor of Congress, and sometimes discussions degenerated into nonsense.

Trivial matters shunted aside important and critical issues. Harnett chafed about Congress disputing trifles. Delegates bickered over small points, observed John Adams, and became lost amid the extensive and detailed affairs under consideration. Edward Rutledge remarked that the members possessed their share of human weaknesses: "It is not impossible for the members of that house to have their attention engrossed by subjects which might as well be postponed for the present, while such as require despatch have been— I had almost said, neglected." A squabble which consumed three days might easily have been resolved in three minutes, and "a thousand and one little matters too often throw out greater ones." Despite good intentions, Congress became so involved in an infinite number of matters that "many affairs of great importance are crowded out and postponed by an inevitable attention to events

9 Titus Hosmer to W. Hosmer, Aug. 16, 1778, Gratz Collection, HSP; Cornelius Harnett to Thomas Burke, Sept. 19, 1778, Thomas Burke Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

and business constantly arising.” Because of the great press of affairs, if the delegates failed to show intense interest important matters did not receive consideration.\textsuperscript{11}

Members accused each other of lapsing into indifference at critical moments. Thomas Burke noted in 1777 that delegates listened carelessly to debates and remained inattentive during votes upon resolutions. In May 1777, William Duer condemned his colleagues for their indifference over monetary problems, and a few months later at York, Lovell discovered that some delegates appeared unwilling to consider crucial issues despite the grave crisis which gripped the nation. If an angel, an exasperated John Mathews declared in 1780, perched upon the presiding officer’s chair “and proclaimed the immediate annihilation of the southern states unless something vigorous and effectual was done, even point out the mode, I sincerely believe, as soon as he had taken his flight, and the confusion had subsided, they would just sink again into the same torpid state in which it had found them.”\textsuperscript{12}

Between 1775 and 1783, delegates continually complained that absent colleagues, seeking to evade the discomforts associated with attendance at Congress, frequently prevented individual states from voting and the entire body from conducting business. In order to pass legislation nine states were required to attend the Congress, and each state had to be represented by at least two delegates in order to cast its vote. But frequently the requisite number of delegates failed to attend, and little could be accomplished. When spring arrived, Lovell remarked, “certain birds of passage return who seldom appear in our flock during the winter,” and Laurens claimed in March 1778 that the union suffered “from a want of full and competent representatives.”\textsuperscript{13}

When members failed to arrive in Philadelphia, delegates noted that Congress could not efficiently expedite its business. In November 1775, Francis Lewis reported that “business goes on heavily for

\textsuperscript{11} John Adams to Mr. Warren, July 24, 1775, John Jay Papers, Columbia University Library; William Whipple to John Langdon, Dec. 21, 1778, John Langdon Papers, HSP.


\textsuperscript{13} Gouverneur Morris to Robert Morris, Apr. 16, 1778, Robert Morris Papers, Rutgers University Library; Henry Laurens to Isaac Motte, Jan. 30, 1781, Henry Laurens Papers.
Josiah Bartlett contended that he alone could not represent New Hampshire on a multitude of committees which met simultaneously. For five months, during 1775 and 1776, he singlehandedly oversaw the state’s interests and felt confined and greatly in need of exercise and relaxation at home with his family. Thomas Stone warned the Maryland Council of Safety that one individual could not cast the state’s vote on the floor of Congress and prayed that “one of the delegates may be desired to attend.” Hooper, who thought himself neglected by North Carolina, wondered why his associate John Penn did not appear in Philadelphia. “I give this notice that I may not be culpable in case the State of North Carolina should not find me relief.” Three delegates from Massachusetts could not adequately attend to a multitude of committee assignments, argued Lovell; the presence of two additional representatives was required. Wolcott accused his two colleagues, William Williams and Eliphalet Dyer, of preferring to remain at home; because of such absenteeism diligent and faithful delegates suffered from overwork.¹⁴

New York failed to send a full complement of delegates to Congress in 1776 and 1777, and Gouverneur Morris warned in 1778 that New York’s interests might suffer irreparable damage if a sufficient number of able and industrious men did not arrive to represent the state. McKean told his wife that he expected to remain Delaware’s sole delegate for a considerable length of time, while the New Jersey delegates treated Fell with the “greatest unpoliteness” and disgraced the state. “They take upon them, to leave Congress when they please without leave, by which the state in course is not represented.” John Witherspoon and Frederick Frelinghuysen departed from Philadelphia for their homes without informing Fell. Attempting to excuse his own temporary absence, Burke claimed that delegates withdrew “at pleasure from attendance on Congress,” and Francis Lightfoot Lee observed that delegates who grew tired of conducting business simply went home.¹⁵

¹⁴ Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, June 25, 1776; Governor Joseph Trumbull Collection, Connecticut State Library; Roger Sherman to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., Mar. 4, 1777, Jonathan Trumbull, Sr. Papers.

¹⁵ John Jay to John Dickinson, Mar. 22, 1779, Maria Dickinson Logan Papers, HSP; John Fell to William Livingston, Mar. 25, 1779, Manuscript Collection, New Jersey State Library.
When too many members remained absent, business completely ground to a halt. In October 1776, Edward Rutledge reported to Robert R. Livingston that poor attendance forced suspension of the debate over confederation, and at York during the winter of 1778, Laurens found twenty-one delegates regularly in attendance, but frequently only fifteen of them on the floor. Sometimes, he noted, as few as nine members appeared for sessions, and as a result “those things were done which ought not to have been done and those left undone which ought to have been done.” Poor attendance resulted in the waste of money and the passage of disadvantageous legislation.

Congressional committees failed to function when members remained absent. In 1776, Hancock found that insufficient attendance prevented the Marine Committee from conducting meetings. For sixteen weeks Lovell conducted by himself the business of the Committee for Foreign Affairs and felt harassed by his strenuous and extensive duties. Because Lovell was the only committee member who stayed in Philadelphia, the Committee for Foreign Affairs failed in 1778 to answer important correspondence promptly. When colleagues remained absent, delegates became overburdened with committee assignments and failed to complete important tasks.16

A rapid turnover in membership contributed to the inefficiency of committees. In 1777, John Adams complained “of a Congress continually changing, until very few faces remain, that I saw in the first Congress.” At York in 1778, able members went home during the winter and were replaced by less capable delegates. James Mercer condemned delegate rotation because “a member must be here near a month before he can be acquainted with the business on hand and rules of Congress,” and Samuel Johnson noted that rapid turnover of delegates rendered Congress inefficient and deranged its plans and policies. New members, Madison observed, displayed little respect for their predecessors’ acts. A change of membership and circumstances, he continued, “often proves fatal to consistency and stability of public measures.” Treasury, marine, and commercial affairs fell into disorder in 1778, according to

Bartlett, because the composition of committees constantly changed. Before men even became acquainted with the complex problems under consideration, they departed from Congress and were replaced by newly selected delegates who were equally ignorant of matters before the committees. Jay claimed that Marine Committee members served short terms in Congress and showed little interest in or knowledge about naval affairs.

Delegates realized that Congress did not function properly as both a deliberative body and an executive agency. Debates upon the floor consumed every morning and committee meetings occupied every evening. As correspondence accumulated, despatches remained unwritten and unanswered. Overwhelmed in 1778 by business at York, according to Laurens, Congress lacked the necessary power and authority to expedite required legislation. The committee system, in which members also acted as executive officials in addition to their role as legislators, exhausted the delegates and inhibited the completion of urgent matters. In 1778, delegates deliberated upon financial matters three days a week, and spent another three days a week considering foreign affairs; they also attended lengthy meetings of the treasury, finance, medical, commissary, quartermaster, clothier and military prisoners committees.

Committee members became exasperated by their inability or lack of time to oversee executive functions. Bartlett, a member of the Marine Committee, admitted that, like many other committee members, he knew nothing about ships, and yet committee members, instead of the entire Congress, were supposed to manage naval affairs. Jay observed that while the navy remained under a committee's supervision it would be "exposed to all the consequences of want of system, attention and knowledge." The Foreign Affairs Committee found itself deluged by business but did not possess enough time to answer correspondence and to determine policy. In like manner financial affairs failed to receive timely attention.

18 Henry Laurens to John L. Gervais, Mar. 11, 1778, Henry Laurens Papers.
Congressional proposals, John Penn concluded, became worthless if they were not implemented, although in 1776 Robert Morris believed that Congress retained too many executive powers. The members, however, did “not like to part with power, or to pay others for doing what they cannot do themselves.” In order to win the war, Samuel Chase remarked, Congress had to establish executive departments, and James Wilson thought that delegates, “however enlarged their geniuses, and however extensive their knowledge may be,” could not, amid the rush of business, devote themselves to every matter requiring their attention. In 1777, Harnett, who hardly found time to write to his friends, felt harassed by having to attend debates as well as meetings of the commercial committee and the treasury board. The proliferation of committees, William Fleming argued in 1779, would eventually subvert the entire government and make Congress unmanageable. An exhausted Bartlett complained that “the almost innumerable letters and business, that daily crowd upon Congress for want of regular boards,” perpetually prevented the delegates from completing matters under consideration. Gerry and Jesse Root agreed that Congress had to transform itself into an exclusively deliberative body and appoint executive officials.20

Although many distinguished patriots sat in Congress, delegates frequently expressed serious doubts about their colleagues’ honesty and virtue. McKean voiced concern in 1778 that British bribes would corrupt delegates, and Laurens claimed that certain members, who held a great deal of influence, acted “an excellent part for the benefit of our enemies.” In 1782, Arthur Lee went so far as to accuse Samuel Wharton of being an enemy agent.

Members of Congress charged that private interests rather than public business engaged the attention of fellow delegates. In 1778 Laurens accused unnamed members of illegally manipulating loan office certificates for their personal profit, and Richard Henry Lee argued that “to get into office is another thing for getting into wealth or public funds and to the public injury.” Every great

congressional “plumb pudding” created quarreling and squabbling among delegates who sought to further their private interests, but meanwhile the members showed little regard for public affairs. They availed themselves of congressional secrets and sought to engross certain goods and to accumulate certificates of public debt which could be sold later for their private enrichment. A torrent of money inundated virtue. Laurens told William C. Houston that astonishing “scenes of venality, peculation and fraud” occurred in Congress. Weak and wicked men, as Richard Henry Lee called the delegates in 1779, misconducted the public councils, and Whipple sadly concluded that Congress suffered from “a want of resolution to oppose vice and stem the torrent of corruption” which threatened America.

Frequently, the delegates found themselves yielding to the solicitations of individuals who sought rank and riches at the public’s expense. Military rank and extraordinary amounts of money were, seemingly, given to everyone upon every occasion. The longer Congress remained in Philadelphia, William Williams observed, the more offices and officers it established in the city. Carroll claimed in 1777 that 1,000 military officers lived in Philadelphia. Even on the floor of Congress, delegates found themselves besieged by individuals who sought favors. Lovell complained that “there is either a perpetual knocking at the door or a crowded parlor, except foreigners who give nobody the trouble of asking ‘who is there,’ but bolt into your bedroom.” Only at midnight could a delegate escape solicitous individuals and remain undisturbed.21

Delegates protested that their associates, who were distinguished and widely respected men in their own states, often lacked wisdom. A delegate, argued Bartlett, required probity, integrity, and the ability to devote close attention to business, but such men always found private employment more advantageous. Laurens warned that able men instead of “frolickers” or “jolly fellows” had to be sent to Congress. Members needed to be men “of competent abili-

ties, unshaken integrity, and unremitting diligence.” John Adams blamed the failure of the Canadian expedition, which sought to capture Quebec in 1775, in part on a lack of wisdom in Congress. Incompetence of that sort was believed in by Thomas Rodney, who felt that the delegates were not of the first rank, and Lovell in 1780 grieved that “I do not find men of such mind round me as I have been accustomed to transact business with in the first part of my delegation.” Madison described Congress as suffering “from a defect of inadequate statesmen more likely to fall into wrong measures and of less weight to enforce right ones.”

Alexander Hamilton also characterized his colleagues as weak and as too easily influenced by their apprehensions, and John Adams noted the fidgets, whims, caprices, superstitions, and irritability of some of his associates. Upon the floor of Congress Benjamin Rush in 1776 beheld “the strength and weakness of the human understanding and the extent of human virtue and folly.” Whipple observed that Congress consisted of mere mortals subject to all the frailties of mankind. Laurens claimed that the members possessed “that kind of timidity which makes men too often neglect their most important duties through fear of offending popular men.” Mathews believed that the delegates possessed souls “confined within the compass of a nutshell.” Such small-minded men trembled “at the very idea of doing anything that is not strictly enjoined by their father’s will though the salvation of the country depend upon it.” Richard Henry Lee observed that delegates became petulant with military and naval commanders who were forced, by unforeseen circumstances, to deviate, no matter how slightly, from congressional directives. Nothing vigorous or decisive could be accomplished, many believed, while weak men sat in Congress.22

Despite Congress’ gigantic achievements during the war, delegates concluded as a result of their experiences that they had failed to provide strong leadership. Joseph Hewes lamented in 1776 that “we appear to have everything we want. We resolve to raise regiments, resolve to make cannon, resolve to make and import muskets, powder, and clothing, but it is a melancholy fact that near half of

our men, cannon, muskets, powder, clothes, etc., is to be found nowhere but on paper.” Madison observed that if the states did not provide the necessary resources, Congress could not enlist, pay, or feed a single soldier. And in 1781, as fighting raged in South Carolina, Mathews remarked that the delegates did not have power to supply anything for the troops.

Earlier, William C. Houston acknowledged that Congress, an object of public criticism, lacked the means and the power to direct public affairs. This state of things became worse in 1780, according to Lovell, when the delegates gave up their power to print money and became almost completely dependent upon the states for financial support. Root found the entire system of national government defective because Congress, “the sovereign power of war and peace,” did not possess permanent funds or the means of establishing them. In a circular letter dated May 19, 1780, Samuel Huntington informed the state governors that “Congress have no resources but in your spirit and virtue,” and in another letter Joseph Jones concluded that Congress had given up its few powers to the states and retained scarcely any functions other than the oversight of foreign affairs. Congress became little more, he continued, than a medium through which the army transmitted its desires to the states. “This body never had or at least in few instances have exercised powers adequate to the purposes of war and such as they had, have been from embarrassment and difficulties frittered away to the states.” Although Huntington claimed that Congress did everything possible to win the war, many delegates realized that their assembly possessed relatively few powers.23

As for improving that body, few were optimistic. As early as 1777, Laurens feared that Congress was in its dotage; he felt thankful that the British army was just as ineffective. Fell in 1780 believed that there was little hope for meaningful reform, while Clark expressed even greater pessimism: “Congress appears to be tumbling down fast and will, I believe, soon reform no more than a mouse and that I fear not a good one.” John Sullivan sourly commented

23 Thomas McKean to Samuel Adams, July 8, 1781, Thomas McKean Papers, HSP; Phillips White to Josiah Bartlett, Jan. 9, 1781, Emmett Collection, New York Public Library.
that it was as easy to make a stream flow backwards to its source as
to make Congress change its habits. 24

Thus, between 1775 and 1783 many congressional delegates found
their duties arduous and unremunerative. They complained that
absent colleagues did not wish to share the heavy burden of con-
gressional responsibility, that tortuous and time-consuming debates
impeded the passage of vitally important legislation, and that
frequently the personal interests of the members took precedence
over public affairs. These angry, frustrated delegates concluded that
the Congress did not provide the effective legislative or executive
leadership required to defeat the British but was instead an un-
wieldy body that could accomplish nothing of substance.

Metuchen, N. J.                       Arnold M. Pavlovsky

Public Library; Henry Laurens to John Rutledge, Aug. 12, 1777, Henry Laurens Papers.