



*Liberty without Tumult:
Understanding the Politics of
John Dickinson¹*

OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS, none has confounded scholars more than John Dickinson. Because of his simultaneous call for colonial rights and opposition to the Declaration of Independence, historians have labeled his political stance a “perplexing conservatism,” and him “a conservative sort of rebel” and a “negative-minded agrarian.”² It is likely that this confusion is the reason Dickinson has received relatively little attention when compared to the volumes of work on the other founders. Edwin Wolf 2nd rightly called him the “forgotten patriot,” “doomed to limbo in the popular mind.”³ Most ironically, however, many historians have also labeled him “the Penman of the Revolution”⁴—he who *opposed* the Revolution. Dickinson’s contempo-

¹ A version of this article appeared as “America’s Forgotten Founder: John Dickinson and the American Revolution,” *History Compass* 5 (2007): 1001–11, DOI:10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00424.x.

² H. Trevor Colbourn, “John Dickinson, Historical Revolutionary,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (1959): 271, 272; and Forrest McDonald, “Introduction,” in *Empire and Nation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, 1999), ix.

³ Edwin Wolf 2nd, *John Dickinson: Forgotten Patriot* (n.p., 1967), 6.

⁴ Dickinson is most generally known by this designation. It was probably used for the first time in *The Life and Writings of John Dickinson*, eds. Charles J. Stillé and Paul Leicester Ford, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1891–95), 2:ix; and the label, as well as the misconception behind it, has been perpet-

raries, says Milton E. Flower, “were unable to comprehend the direction and rationale of the straight course Dickinson pursued, as he fearlessly continued to protest against every action of Britain that infringed on the liberties of the colonists and joined with military preparedness in case of armed struggle, yet remained loath to face the question of independence.”⁵ It would seem that this lack of understanding has been as much on our part as on that of Dickinson’s contemporaries.

Considering his achievements, Dickinson’s absence from the historiography is striking. Throughout the creation of the republic, he was among the most active and prolific leaders from the onset of the tensions to the solidification of the union. Before and during the Revolution, he was an important figure in the Stamp Act Congress; member of the First and Second Continental Congresses, as well as many of the committees within those bodies; author of, in addition to many other public and official documents, the Resolutions of the Stamp Act Congress (1765), *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767–68), the First Petition to the King (1774), the Olive Branch Petition (1775), the Declaration for Taking Up Arms (1775), and the first draft of the Articles of Confederation (1776).⁶ He was also a colonel in the Pennsylvania militia and first a private soldier and then a brigadier general in the Delaware militia. In the constitutional period, he was the president of both Delaware and Pennsylvania; unanimously chosen president of the Annapolis Convention; an important contributor to the Constitutional Convention; and author of the *Fabius Letters*. In short, he was the “man of preeminence” who E. Digby Baltzell denies Pennsylvania ever produced.⁷

The confusion over Dickinson’s politics hinges on two seminal and apparently contradictory moments—the publication of the *Farmer’s Letters* and his refusal to support the Declaration of Independence. It is clear that the *Letters* had the result scholars have claimed—they certainly

uated by almost all of the few Dickinson scholars since. The confusion on this point reaches far back. As early as 1787, Thomas Jefferson felt compelled to correct the editor of the *Journal de Paris* who published an article crediting Dickinson with responsibility for American independence. See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), 169.

⁵ Milton E. Flower, *John Dickinson, Conservative Revolutionary* (Charlottesville, VA, 1983), 146.

⁶ Although Benjamin Franklin wrote an earlier version, because Dickinson’s was the one debated in Congress, his is considered the first draft.

⁷ E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class Authority and Leadership* (New York, 1979), 38. It should be noted, of course, that Dickinson was not born in Pennsylvania, but he spent most of his life there, serving in the colonial assembly, as a representative to Congress, and as president.

helped prepare the colonists for revolt. But after painting him as the “Penman of the Revolution,” scholars then find themselves at a loss to explain Dickinson’s stance on the Declaration. If one takes their interpretation of the *Farmer’s Letters* as accurate, Dickinson’s behavior does indeed seem erratic and contradictory. David L. Jacobson, the author of the only scholarly monograph on Dickinson’s politics, writes that in 1776 his opinions were “a hodgepodge of contradictory ideas.”⁸ For centuries historians have been trying to make sense of his seemingly inscrutable opposition to the Declaration, but they have given only vague, speculative, and unsatisfactory explanations for it, most of which paint him in an unfavorable light.

Yet Dickinson was hardly a “timorous rebel,” “irresolute,” a mere pedant, or an idealist with no practical sense of how the colonists should achieve their ends. Indeed, he counseled the colonies in their most effective resistance and negotiations until the day before the vote on independence and then was one of the few congressional delegates to take up arms for the cause. While his continued press for reconciliation even as hostilities with Britain turned violent in 1775 undoubtedly seems a species of naïveté or hypocrisy, as we shall see, he had precedents for success on his side. His position, as will be argued here, was in large part an ideological one, a principled stance for reconciliation. There is, however, certainly more than a grain of truth in the argument that Dickinson had pragmatic concerns about independence as well. As a lawyer, he would have been distinctly aware of the legal and political benefits of pursuing reconciliation as far as possible as a protection against charges of treason from the British government. Dickinson himself claimed that timing was his reason⁹—America had no federal government yet and, he believed, too little foreign support, and Pennsylvania, itself in the middle of a revolution, had no settled government. But this still does not explain completely the tenor of Dickinson’s career or this particular conundrum.

Milton Flower, his only modern biographer, explains Dickinson’s seemingly contradictory political positions in terms of “radical,” “moderate,” and “conservative.” Others have similarly observed that he “was always an intense conservative, and that he had a horror of any changes brought

⁸David L. Jacobson, *John Dickinson and the Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1764–1776* (Berkeley, CA, 1965), 115.

⁹See John Dickinson, *Defense of Actions before the Council of Safety, 1777*, in John Dickinson, 1681–1882, *Political, 1774–1807*, n.d., R. R. Logan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

about by revolutionary means.”¹⁰ But Dickinson’s aversion to riots and tumults that characterizes his writings was more than merely a reactionary conservatism or a “temperamental revulsion to mass violence” as some have claimed.¹¹ Moreover, situating his views along the continuum of conventional political ideology neither does justice to their complexity, nor explains how these apparently disparate views and actions harmonized in one man’s thought. In what is perhaps the most intellectually honest comment on the enigma, J. H. Powell wrote in frustration, “Where the hell did Dickinson learn his complicated political ideas?”¹²

Scholars have been confused about Dickinson’s position because they have not understood the cultural and intellectual tradition in which he was thinking or the theory it produced. They have looked only at the result of his writings and his actions and have ignored the “connotative context” of his work—the “supporting lore” that defined his world, his words, and his intentions.¹³ As the confusion around Dickinson demonstrates, his thought cannot be explained by textual analysis alone or his contemporaries’ reaction to it. A handful of scholars have undertaken brief examinations of Dickinson’s constitutional thought, both pre- and post-Revolution.¹⁴ He has been variously found to be a Lockean Whig, Tory, republican, liberal, royalist, Burkean conservative, moderate, radical, federalist, and nationalist.¹⁵ The expected accolades or epithets have

¹⁰ Stillé and Ford, eds., *Life and Writings*, 1:43.

¹¹ Flower, *Conservative Revolutionary*, ix.

¹² J. H. Powell, notes for Dickinson biography, May 26, 1955, John Dickinson Materials, American Philosophical Society.

¹³ Sheldon S. Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 1070–71.

¹⁴ Among the most useful are M. E. Bradford, “A Better Guide than Reason: The Politics of John Dickinson,” *Modern Age* 21 (1977): 39–49; Forrest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald, “John Dickinson, Founding Father,” *Delaware History* 23 (1988): 24–38; Gregory S. Ahern, “The Spirit of American Constitutionalism: John Dickinson’s *Fabius Letters*,” *Humanitas* 11 (1998): 57–76.

¹⁵ For nearly fifty years since Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955) and then in the work of Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock in the “republican revival” literature and the ensuing debate, scholars disputed the ideological origins of the Revolution and the founding in zero-sum terms. More recently, as this debate has proven unproductive in understanding the nuances of early American political thought, scholars such as Alex Tuckness have sought to reconfigure the discussion in subtler ways (see “Discourses of Resistance in the American Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 [2003]: 547–63). My analysis here follows Tuckness’s lead, if not his particular conclusions. It assumes no hard and fast ideological categories into which individuals or even groups can be fit. Therefore, because Dickinson drew on various sources, there is no argument here that his thought is easily categorized. There was, however, a dominant ideological bent that accounted for the uniqueness of his politics, which it is the purpose of this discussion to isolate and explain.

followed, often betraying the teleological bent of their authors' analyses. Some scholars show quite rightly in many cases how his thought corresponded with important aspects of the liberalism and republicanism of the day. But no single rubric they propose binds his ideas together or accounts completely for the persistence with which he advocated peaceful reconciliation; neither his language, his predilections, nor his concern for virtue and liberty can be explained in terms of the usual ideologies.

What most analyses fail to take seriously is Dickinson's religious belief.¹⁶ It was, of course, Christian; but it was not the hostile deism of men such as Paine, the blandly benevolent Unitarianism of Jefferson, or the stiff Puritanism of John Adams;¹⁷ it was strongly Quaker. Dickinson lived, worked, and thought in a Quaker culture. His immediate and extended family and heritage were all Quaker, and he gained professional experience as a lawyer and politician in the atmosphere of "civil Quakerism" in Pennsylvania.¹⁸ And though never a "convinced" member of the Society of Friends, he was a devout "fellow traveler" and, especially in his later years, a greater advocate for Quaker concerns than many Quakers.¹⁹ Indeed, there was a marked change in him after the Revolution and before the Federal Convention. The period was no doubt a difficult time for him personally and professionally. He saw combat with his Delaware regiment, which would have been trying both physically and psychologically for a man of ill health (as Dickinson often was) and inclined towards peace. Moreover, Dickinson was attacked by those on

¹⁶ One exception is M. Susan Power, "John Dickinson After 1776: The Fabius Letters," *Modern Age* 16 (1972): 391.

¹⁷ While it is anachronistic to consider anyone during this period a Puritan, I agree with scholars who find puritanical elements in Adams's religious and political views. See, for example, John Witte Jr., "A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion: John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment," in *Religion and the New Republic: Faith in the Founding of America*, ed. James H. Hutson (Lanham, MD, 2000), 15.

¹⁸ On the definition and pervasiveness of "civil Quakerism" in Pennsylvania, see Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideals, Interests, and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1994), 258, *passim*.

¹⁹ Because Dickinson was born into a Quaker family, he had what is called "birthright" status in the Society. But when he failed to maintain connections by attending meeting and adhering to the Discipline, he effectively renounced it. Those who let their birthright status lapse or those who had no formal affiliation with Friends might later be "convinced," or converted, and thus return to formal membership, but Dickinson never did. Many people, such as Dickinson, with close ties to Quakerism but who chose never to become members are today called "fellow travelers." This category is a confusing concept for those not familiar with Quakerism. It does not imply lack of conviction or commitment to Quaker principles. On the contrary, it is an indicator of someone who is closely allied with Quakers on many, though not necessarily all, fundamental points of the faith and practice. Quakers themselves made little distinction between convinced members and fellow travelers.

both sides of the conflict.²⁰ The British, considering him one of the fomenters of the Revolution, burned his house; his countrymen, on the other hand, viewing him as a traitor for his lack of support for the Declaration, brought him before the Pennsylvania Council of Safety to justify his actions.²¹ When Dickinson took refuge with his family and began spending more time with his devoutly Quaker wife, she may well have had an influence on him.

Like many people who find religion late in life, Dickinson became more Quakerly than many convinced members. Where his thought ended up in later years gives us a clear indication of the nascent Quakerism in his early ideas. He adopted the "outward Testimonies for God" that distinguished Friends from other people, such as the antislavery testimony, the use of plain speech (thee and thou and numbers for days and months), simplicity and frugality in worldly possessions, and the refusal to take an oath upon assuming political office. Quakers praised him for these things, and they looked to him as a champion of their causes, which had become his as well. After he retired from public service, he became a philanthropist and public intellectual, writing about his concerns for the nation and funding projects to improve it, such as prison reform, the education of poor children, and combating threats to society such as the theater and slavery. Though he was indeed "too large a man to be bound in his opinions by [Quaker] practices,"²² Dickinson's inclinations were chiefly those of Friends. What ultimately kept him from uniting fully with Quakers—and a seminal point for our purposes here—was his belief in, as he put it, "the lawfulness of defensive war."²³ The fact that he was nevertheless buried in the Friends cemetery in Wilmington is evidence that Quakers claimed him as one of their own.

²⁰ As will be discussed below, one of the reasons Dickinson was attacked was because of the clear affinity of his views with Quakerism. Dickinson's awareness of his Quaker ties as a political liability during the Revolution undoubtedly kept him from making the connection explicit. In my research I have found only one letter, cited below, in which Dickinson alluded to the fact that his political stance was linked to the Quakers. But more than this, he always had a principled concern to remain non-partisan in his stance. All of these things make a close examination of the context and expression of his thought essential to understanding his politics.

²¹ See *Defense of Actions before the Council of Safety*. The attacks continued into the 1780s. See especially a series of letters by "Valerius" in the *Freeman's Journal* beginning on November 6, 1782.

²² Stillé and Ford, eds., *Life and Writings*, 1:304.

²³ John Dickinson to Tench Coxe, Jan. 24, 1807, cited in Flower, *Conservative Revolutionary*, 301.

Interestingly, many scholars have noted the Quaker influence in his life. Indeed, they have often mistaken him for a member of the Society.²⁴ Bernhard Knollenberg posits that Dickinson “may have been influenced by his family and other Quaker connections.”²⁵ Forrest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald note that his “orientation was toward Quakerism.”²⁶ Despite this, Frederick Tolles explains that “no one has ever tried to say with exactness just what that Quaker influence was or just how it expressed itself in his thought and action.”²⁷ In political history, a field that has not been especially receptive to religious interpretations, some would likely agree with the McDonalds that his reliance on Christian language was little more than a “rhetorical strategy.”²⁸ While strategy may have played a role, it does not preclude sincere belief on Dickinson’s part, nor does it take seriously the power and uniqueness of his tradition. It is no coincidence that his political expressions had, as J. H. Powell writes, “the reinforcing agreement of the Society of Friends.”²⁹

*Quaker Constitutionalism*³⁰

Dickinson’s opinions and conduct in the Revolution were based on Quaker political theory as it originated in the seventeenth century.³¹ Quakers functioned within a unique constitutional tradition. They were neither Puritans, pietists, nor deists. Neither were they Whigs or Tories, Lockean liberals or classical republicans.³² Theirs was a tradition based on

²⁴ One of the earliest incidents of this mistake appearing in the historiography is in William Wade Hinshaw, *The Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1938), 505. Bernhard Knollenberg corrects this misperception in “John Dickinson vs. John Adams: 1774–1776,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107 (1963): 142.

²⁵ Knollenberg, “John Dickinson vs. John Adams,” 142.

²⁶ McDonald and McDonald, “John Dickinson, Founding Father,” 28.

²⁷ Frederick Tolles, “John Dickinson and the Quakers,” *“John and Mary’s College”: The Boyd Lee Spahr Lectures in Americana* ([Westwood, NJ, 1956]), 67.

²⁸ McDonald and McDonald, “John Dickinson, Founding Father,” 38.

²⁹ J. H. Powell, “John Dickinson and the Constitution,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 60 (1936): 11.

³⁰ The following is a much-abbreviated discussion of the subject. For a thorough treatment of Quaker constitutionalism, see Jane E. Calvert, “The Quaker Theory of a Civil Constitution,” *History of Political Thought* 27 (2006): 586–619.

³¹ While neither religious nor political Quakerism was monolithic or unchanging over the centuries, the following are some of the basic tenets of their thought that did remain consistent.

³² It is worth noting that, while some tenets of Quaker thought appear “Lockean,” Quakers were writing about and practicing their theory since the 1650s, well before Locke wrote or published the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) or the *Letter on Toleration* (1689).

their “peculiar” theology and ecclesiology, and it functioned in the following way:

Quakers believed that a constitution—which included the founding principles of government, the laws, and the government itself—was ordained by God and therefore sacred. The sanctity of the constitution was key because, according to Quaker theology, creations of God should not be destroyed by man. They applied this principle, known as the Peace Testimony, to all people and every polity. But in spite of the sanctity of the constitution, it was not static; rather, it was constantly evolving *because* it was sacred. The reason for this sacred flexibility was that the constitution was created and continually discerned by the people—all the people—through the direction of God. Because man was fallible and God did not reveal his will all at once, change was a fundamental aspect of Quaker constitutionalism. Thus, although it was sacred and therefore perpetual, the constitution was also amendable as God gave man greater insight into his will and man fixed his earlier mistakes. By contrast, while most Englishmen acknowledged that constitutional change took place, they all agreed that it was dangerous and generally undesirable.³³

For the most part, the failings that Quakers saw in the British government were the same as those perceived by their contemporaries, the Whigs, who believed that rulers had a habit of overstepping the bounds of the law to infringe upon the rights of the people. Moreover, many central aspects of their political thought overlapped. But, most significantly, they had other solutions to the problem of tyranny and oppression than did Whigs. While the Whigs could and did sanction the destruction of the government through revolution, the Quakers’ Peace Testimony compelled Friends to take another tack. Because the constitution must be preserved, while at the same time securing fundamental rights and liberties, the most important aspect of Quaker constitutional theory was the process by which laws were made and changed. In formulating their theory, Quakers drew on their ecclesiastical polity—a sort of religious representative democracy—as a model. Indeed, they considered the civil polity to be the ecclesiastical polity writ large. Constitutional change was a popular process. It was the people who, through a revelatory process rather than ratiocination, discerned the laws and the first principles

³³ The literature on early modern Anglo-American constitutionalism—works by Charles McIlwain, J. G. A. Pocock, Glenn Burgess, Gordon Wood, and Michael Zuckert, among others—finds that legal thinkers agreed that there was neither desire nor formal and effective mechanism for constitutional change until the American founding.

whence they came, transcribed them, and monitored them to make sure the rulers did not transgress them. If they did, there would be peaceful protest and change, not revolution.

Because the process for change grew out of their theology, there were specific guidelines for how the people must protest that were in keeping with God's law. When an individual observed injustice, he must dissent; he was obliged by God to testify for the truth, but to do so in a way that would not upset the ever-precarious unity of the polity. Quakers believed that the surest way to preserve individual liberties was to ensure the safety of the civil union. Thus, if protest could become too disruptive, it should be curtailed to protect the constitution, even if that might mean the progress towards justice was slower. It cannot be overemphasized, especially when considering Dickinson's "subtle" religion, that Quaker theory was embodied in action—their revelatory process for legal discernment and peaceful redress of grievances.³⁴

The problem with the English system was that there was no formal process either for discerning the will of the people—that is to say, *all* the people, not the people "virtually" represented by Parliament—or for making changes should the laws depart from the first principles. Quakers felt this problem acutely as religious dissenters during the Restoration. Because they could not resort to violence, they established and implemented the first program of civil disobedience, along with other peaceful means of agitation, to challenge and amend the laws.³⁵ And their efforts were remarkably successful. One of the most significant pieces of legislation in the early modern period—the 1689 Act of Toleration—can be attributed largely to the Quaker process that highlighted the injustice and compelled reform.

In this political tradition as in the Quaker religion, Dickinson partook devotedly, but not completely. Despite the fact he did not become a fellow traveler with Quakers until after the Revolution, his politics in Pennsylvania and in the conflict with Britain exemplify the Quaker theory, albeit imperfectly and in a less overtly religious tone than he would later express it. In two significant instances prior to the *Farmer's Letters* we see the theory expressed in the course of action Dickinson

³⁴ McDonald and McDonald, "John Dickinson, Founding Father," 28.

³⁵ Because it is vulnerable to misinterpretation, we must be clear what this term means before we proceed. Civil disobedience means breaking the law in a public and nonviolent way with the intent to educate about injustice and achieve change. It is a method of resistance that honors the fundamental principles of the constitution and denies the legitimacy of laws passed that contradict them.

prescribed—in the Pennsylvania controversy over royal government and in the Stamp Act resistance. In the first, he lobbied for the preservation of the Quakers' distinctive 1701 Charter of Privileges in the face of Benjamin Franklin's and Joseph Galloway's 1764 campaign to have it abolished and Pennsylvania placed under a royal government.³⁶ He counseled moderation and continuity, and praised the Charter as the repository of all the peculiarly Quaker liberties that the colony enjoyed.³⁷ In the second, as a key figure in the Stamp Act resistance, he contributed to the movement by outlining a program of peaceful resistance through civil disobedience that, in conjunction with other forms of resistance across the colonies (many of which, it must be noted, were violent), in short order caused the repeal of the act.³⁸ These two episodes set the stage for the greater role Dickinson would play as the conflict with Britain intensified.

Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania

Dickinson's *Farmer's Letters* have been heralded by his contemporaries and by historians as one of the greatest pieces of writing in the revolutionary era and the one that served to unite the colonists against Britain as never before. With its publication, he became America's first political hero. Here he articulated the fullest expression of his constitutionalism to date and with that became the most eloquent spokesman for the traditional Quaker theologico-political process—one's opinion voiced

³⁶ For sources on the "Campaign for Royal Government," see David L. Jacobson, "John Dickinson's Fight Against Royal Government, 1764," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 19 (1962): 64–85. William S. Hanna, *Benjamin Franklin and Pennsylvania Politics* (Stanford, CA, 1964); James H. Hutson, "The Campaign to Make Pennsylvania a Royal Province, 1764–1770, Part I," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94 (1970): 427–63; James H. Hutson, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1740–1770: The Movement for Royal Government and Its Consequences* (Princeton, NJ, 1972); Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783* (Philadelphia, 1984). My interpretation of Dickinson's role in the controversy differs in one significant point from most of the accounts cited here. With the exception of Marietta, these scholars situate Dickinson on the side of the Proprietary Party. In *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Origins of American Civil Disobedience* (under contract with Cambridge University Press), I argue that while the Proprietary Party adopted Dickinson as its champion, he assured the assembly in his May 24, 1764, speech (cited in fn. 37) that his sympathies lay with the traditional Quaker faction. Later he would make explicit his animosity for the Proprietary Party (see below, fn. 118).

³⁷ See John Dickinson, *A Speech, Delivered in the House of Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania, May 24th, 1764* (Philadelphia, 1764).

³⁸ See John Dickinson, *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered* (Philadelphia, 1765); and *An Address to the Committee of Correspondence in Barbados* (Philadelphia, 1766).

in a calm demeanor, advocacy of the people's rights, peaceful resistance to oppression, and reform to preserve the sanctity and unity of the constituted polity. The *Letters* proceeded from a sense of duty to testify. As Dickinson proclaimed, "the Dictates of my Conscience command Me boldly to speak on the naked Sentiments of my Soul."³⁹ This refrain of not remaining silent when obliged to speak—a Quaker injunction that applied to all people in the religious polity—recurs throughout Dickinson's writings, speeches, and personal correspondence and in the face of much hostility. Despite the way these *Letters* have been interpreted by contemporaries and historians, they were not a call for revolution; they were written to *prevent* revolution by giving Americans a peaceful and productive outlet for their frustrations with British policy.

Thinking within the framework of Quaker constitutionalism, Dickinson treated the civil polity like the religious polity writ large. In the first place, he cast America in the same role in relation to the rest of the world as Quakers did their meeting. He wrote, "Let us consider ourselves as MEN—FREEMEN—CHRISTIAN FREEMEN—*separated from the rest of the world, and firmly bound together by the same rights, interests and dangers.*"⁴⁰ This is similar to how Friends referred to themselves—as a "peculiar people," a group "hedged off" from the rest of the world, distinguished and united by their unique behaviors, customs, and understanding of God and the world. They were further bound together by their insistence on their rights and their martyrdom for their cause of liberty. In the Quaker understanding of their religious polity, however, the uniqueness and separateness of their body were conditional. These qualities were dependent upon the protection the body received from the British constitution. Therefore, although Quakers and British North Americans may each have been a "separate people" in some ways, Dickinson did not consider the colonies disconnected and autonomous entities from Britain with a special charge to pursue their own interests contrary to the will of the government. Rather, he spoke of the colonies as "parts of a *Whole*," as limbs that must "bleed at every vein" if separated from the body.⁴¹ The colonies and Britain, he repeated, "form *one* political body, of which *each colony is a member*. Their *happiness* is founded on

³⁹ John Dickinson, "Notes for a Speech in Congress," May 23, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith, 25 vols. (Summerfield, FL, 1995), 1:378, CD-ROM.

⁴⁰ John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, To the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* [1767], in *Empire and Nation*, ed. McDonald, 80. (Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7, 19.

their constitution; and is to be promoted by preserving that constitution in unabated vigor, *throughout every part*.”⁴² Happiness lay in the security the constitution provided for their rights. “The legal authority of Great Britain may indeed lay hard restrictions upon us; but, like the spear of Telephus, it will cure as well as wound.”⁴³ In other words, the remedy for their ills was to be found in the same place as the cause—the British government. This understanding of a unique people protected as part of a perpetual constitutional polity is reminiscent of William Penn’s vision of religious diversity within the polity. The religious liberty of all should be safeguarded by the “true Principles” of civil government. The preeminent principle was that of liberty of conscience, which protected the religious rights of all. But this liberty was dependent upon a unified and therefore stable polity. “Our *Civil Union*,” Penn therefore said, “is our *Civil Safety*.”⁴⁴

Like Quaker theorists before him such as William Penn, Robert Barclay, and Isaac Penington, Dickinson clearly argued that although the constitution was perpetual, the power of the government was not unlimited. Similarly, he made a distinction between laws that were constitutional and those that were not. The imperative Dickinson expressed in the *Letters* was adherence to the first principles of the constitution regardless of subsequent statutes or acts that had misrepresented it in the past, or might do so in the present, and a return to them when necessary.⁴⁵ In keeping with the Quaker tradition of following the living spirit of the law as opposed to the dead letter, Dickinson persisted in cautioning against Parliament’s legal innovations. He echoed the distinction made by Penn between fundamental immutable laws and superficial, alterable ones.⁴⁶ Also like other Quakers thinkers, he differed from most Americans in his attitude towards the law. He was not an unmitigated supporter of the common law tradition. “Custom,” he said, “undoubtedly has a mighty force in producing opinion, and reigns in nothing more arbitrarily than in public affairs. It gradually reconciles us to objects even of dread and

⁴² Ibid., 80–81.

⁴³ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁴ William Penn, *One Project for the Good of England: That Is, Our Civil Union is Our Civil Safety* (London, 1679).

⁴⁵ *Letters*, 69.

⁴⁶ William Penn, *England’s Present Interest Discover’d* (London, [1676]), 6. Gordon S. Wood notes that Americans did not see this distinction until they began writing their state and federal constitutions. See *Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969; repr. New York, 1993), 261–65.

detestation.”⁴⁷ It was like ritual in religious practice—a path that *appeared* to lead to salvation, but really took the traveler in the opposite direction. He suspected that many innovations were inspired by false guides and thus departed from the divine spirit. “Nothing is more certain,” he explained, “than that the *forms* of liberty may yet be retained, when the *substance* is gone.” Repeating the Quaker attitude towards dogma of any kind, he wrote, “In government, as well as in religion, ‘The *letter* killeth, but the *spirit* giveth life.’” When the spirit is ignored, there is a great potential for “manifest violation of the constitution, *under the appearance of using legal prerogative*.”⁴⁸ His sentiments concur with Penn’s, who wrote “That Country which is False to its first Principles of Government . . . must Unavoidably Decay.”⁴⁹

Dickinson reiterated throughout the *Letters* that the Townshend Act was a dangerous legal precedent. But he was not advocating a return to first principles through violence, which many came to believe was the only way to resist British tyranny.⁵⁰ “To talk of ‘defending’ [the principles], as if they could be no otherwise ‘defended’ than by arms” was nonsensical to him.⁵¹ Yet some historians have interpreted the ominous statement at the end of his fourth letter, “We have a statute, laid up for future use, like a sword in the scabbard,”⁵² as a threat of violence against Britain and indicative of Dickinson’s “revolutionary” message.⁵³ But although it is true that this statement is a threat, it is a threat with a nonviolent weapon, a legal threat. Here Dickinson has secularized the Quaker call for “spiritual” rather than “carnal” weapons⁵⁴ and said that the weapon should be on paper and in principle—such as the “American ‘bill of rights’” that New York produced to delineate the extent of Britain’s right to tax the

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 71. On other Americans’ acceptance of custom, see John Phillip Reid, *Constitutional History of the American Revolution: The Authority to Tax* (Madison, WI, 1987), 181–93.

⁴⁸ *Letters*, 36.

⁴⁹ Mary Maples Dunn, *William Penn: Politics and Conscience* (Princeton, NJ, 1967), 49.

⁵⁰ Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, vol. 2, *New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994), 36, 195, 201, 248, 298–305.

⁵¹ *Letters*, 16–17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³ Richard M. Gummere calls it a threat against the British government “that rings like the clashing of steel.” “John Dickinson, the Classical Penman of the Revolution,” *Classical Journal* 52 (1956): 84.

⁵⁴ William Penn, *England’s Great Interest in the Choice of This New Parliament* ([London, 1678/79]), 4. See also Penn’s “Fundamentall Constitutions,” *The Papers of William Penn*, eds. Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1981–86), 2:143. For the earliest and most thorough analysis to date of the role of pacifism in Quaker political thought, see Herman Wellenreuther, *Glaube und Politik in Pennsylvania, 1681–1776: Die Wandlungen der Obrigkeitsdoktrin und des Peace Testimony der Quäker* (Köln, Ger., 1972).

colonists.⁵⁵ To back up these words and principles, Dickinson advocated a plan of nonviolent measures that ranged in severity from humble pleas in petitions, to nonimportation, to open disobedience of the offending laws. But the latter was the furthest extreme Quaker constitutionalism would allow.

In keeping with proper behavior within the Quaker meeting—that is, with the aim to preserve liberty, peace, and constitutional perpetuity—Dickinson very carefully outlined the colonists' rights and obligations in the face of royal oppression. In conducting protest, there was a duty to be upheld and a particular process to be followed. He encouraged his countrymen to action based on the Quaker process of dissent. He suggested that not revolution, but reformed relations with the crown could solve their problems. It seemed to Dickinson, however, that even at this early phase of the controversy, the colonists were vulnerable to either total submission to the injustice on the one hand, or war on the other. A middle ground seemed lacking. He was equally concerned about both extremes of behavior, either of which could destroy the constitutional relationship. Importantly, because the polity belonged to the people, it was their responsibility to behave in a way that would maintain it.

The first danger was that the colonists' passive acceptance of the unjust laws would cause "a dissolution of our constitution."⁵⁶ Accordingly, the first ill to be combated was their submissiveness to the new act. Dickinson was surprised that "little notice has been taken of [the Townshend Act]," although it was "as injurious in principle to the liberties of these colonies, as the Stamp Act."⁵⁷ He concluded that it was, first, a misunderstanding of the legitimate reach of government. "Millions entertain no other idea of the *legality* of power, than it is founded upon the exercise of power." He continued, "They voluntarily fasten their chains, by adopting the pusillanimous *opinion* 'that there will be too much *danger* in attempting a remedy'—or another *opinion* no less fatal—that the government has a right to treat them as it does."⁵⁸ This opinion was based on the understanding of government within the ancient constitution as something that cannot be resisted. Dickinson's stance was that resistance on an individual basis was not only acceptable, it was a constitutional duty. It was the

⁵⁵ *Letters*, 23.

⁵⁶ Dickinson, *An Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great-Britain over the Colonies in America* (Philadelphia, [1774]), 53.

⁵⁷ *Letters*, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

people's responsibility to keep the government within its proper bounds and preserve the constitution, and if they did not resist unconstitutional laws, the polity would be destroyed by their own negligence.

There was also a second explanation for Americans' submissiveness: a "deplorable poverty of spirit, that prostrates the dignity bestowed by divine providence on our nature."⁵⁹ While certainly Dickinson was using the word *spirit* here as we understand it to mean courage or will, in the context of his time and culture the meaning was deeper. It was, as he suggests, something related to divinity, a God-given motivating force—in Quaker parlance, the Inner Light. Conformity or submission to ungodly laws was a denial of the spirit of God itself. Immediate resistance against injustice, in other words, was a divine injunction that supersedes human law. It was a spiritual as much as a political act—the two were, in fact, the same. And it was for the good of the country. Dickinson said, "In such cases, it is a submission to *divine authority*, which forbids us to injure our country; not to the *assumed authority*, on which the unjust sentences were founded. But *when* submission becomes inconsistent with and destructive of the public good, the same veneration for and duty to the *divine authority*, commands us to oppose."⁶⁰ He reiterated, "God has given us the right and means of asserting [our freedom]. We may reasonably ask and expect his gracious assistance in the reasonable employment of those means. To look for miracles, while we abusively neglect the powers afforded us by divine goodness, is not only stupid, but criminal."⁶¹ When ignoring the call to defend liberty and protect the country, Americans were "*pusillanimously* deserting the post assigned to us by Divine Providence."⁶² Resistance against injustice was thus an act in keeping with a sacred constitution.

Because the Townshend Act was as unconstitutional as the Stamp Act, he argued in Quakerly language that "we should have born our testimony against it."⁶³ Because Quakers believed in "publishing" injustices and oppression in order to heighten awareness and encourage reform, Dickinson did not believe that evading the oppression, as Bostonians had

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Dickinson, *Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great-Britain*, 105.

⁶¹ John Dickinson, "Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America" (1774), in *Life and Writings*, ed. Stillé and Ford, 2:499.

⁶² John Dickinson, "Instructions of the Pennsylvania Convention" (1774), in *American Archives*, ed. Peter Force, 9 vols. (Washington, DC, 1837–53), 1:595.

⁶³ *Letters*, 7.

done in the Stamp Act crisis, was sufficient for Americans.⁶⁴ Certainly it would be possible for a time, he acknowledged, to “elude this act” by inventing other materials to serve in place of the ones taxed by Britain. But, he warned, “[America’s] ingenuity would stand her in little stead; for then the parliament would have nothing to do but to prohibit such manufactures.”⁶⁵ Dickinson’s solution was more direct and definitive. The law must be challenged and changed; the demonstration must be public and visible. This approach was rooted in the ancient Quaker practice of bearing public witness to their persecution, testifying openly as martyrs for God’s law against corrupted human law.

Dickinson’s success in rousing Americans to resistance is well known; but he also anticipated the dangerous enthusiasm of their response. Although there was no serious thought of revolution at this early date, Dickinson was keenly aware of the rapidity with which passion could overwhelm prudence. The other threat to the country, therefore, was that the people would destroy the constitutional relationship through their aggression: When “oppressions and dissatisfactions [are] permitted to accumulate,” he explained, “if ever the governed throw off the load, they will do more. A people,” he warned, “does not reform with moderation.”⁶⁶ The danger was not simply that Britain would violate American rights, but that Americans would turn violent because of it. Dickinson’s other point, then, articulated with like force, was to convince his countrymen to restrain themselves in their protests. It was a delicate balance to achieve, and a solution that most of Dickinson’s readers then and now have overlooked. His remedy to the injustice was pacifism without passivity. “The constitutional modes of obtaining relief,” he explained, “are those which I wish to see pursued on the present occasion.” Just as there were laws that were constitutional and unconstitutional, so were there actions that are in keeping with the spirit of the constitution and those that departed from it. Working through the established machinery was constitutional. Likewise, peaceful civil disobedience and other nonviolent resistance, though illegal, were constitutional; violent protest and revolution were not. In the spirit of harmony within the polity, therefore, Dickinson

⁶⁴ In *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (1972; repr. New York, 1991), Pauline Maier describes how Bostonians began with violent resistance, but eventually settled on evasion of the law as the most expedient way to handle the oppression (53–70).

⁶⁵ *Letters*, 25

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

presented himself as someone who was “by no means fond of inflammatory measures” and explained that he would be “sorry that anything should be done which might justly displease our sovereign.”⁶⁷

Dickinson did not leave it to his readers to guess at and perhaps misconstrue his intentions in the heat of their passion for rights. He announced: “I will now tell the gentlemen, what is ‘the meaning of these letters.’” “The meaning of them,” he continued, “is to convince the people of these colonies, that they are at this moment exposed to the most imminent dangers; and to persuade them immediately, vigorously, and unanimously, to exert themselves, in the most firm, but most peaceable manner for obtaining relief.” But this is what most readers today have missed. His aim was to impress upon them that rights were important, but so was the manner in which they were asserted. “The cause of liberty,” he explained, “is a cause of too much dignity, to be sullied by turbulence and tumult.”⁶⁸ Those who believe that “riots and tumults” are the only way to solve the problem are, says Dickinson, “much mistaken, if they think that grievances cannot be redressed without such assistance.” He reiterated the idea of political obligation that was at the core of Quaker political thought: if a “government at some time or other falls into wrong measure” this nevertheless “does not dissolve the obligation between the governors and the governed.” “It is the duty of the governed,” he explained, “to endeavor to rectify the mistake.”⁶⁹ Like Penington and Penn, who argued throughout their lives and works for orderly, yet dramatic constitutional change without revolution, Dickinson suggested that a people “may change their king, or race of kings, and, retaining their ancient form of government, be gainers by changing.” Because the colonies were not an independent nation, they had to be especially careful as such change could result in independence, destruction of the fundamental constitution, and the demise of America as it succumbed to external threats and internal chaos.⁷⁰

Like other American founders, Dickinson had his eye on history for a guide, but he used it differently from most of his countrymen. While Whig thinkers used the English Civil War as an example of oppression

⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

rightly and effectively resisted,⁷¹ Dickinson, following his Quaker predecessors, used it as a negative example. Writing during and after the upheaval of the Civil War, Penington saw not revolution but an orderly process of reform as a “last remedy,” while Penn warned that when first principles were not preserved, “the *Civil Government* must receive and suffer a *Revolution*.”⁷² Likewise, Dickinson admonished against the overt disrespect for the law that the Puritans demonstrated in the revolt against Charles I. They could not, he argued, distinguish between instances of the king’s legitimate exercise of the law and an imagined “system of oppression.” Furthermore, “It was in vain,” he observed, “for prudent and moderate men to insist that there was no necessity to abolish royalty.”⁷³ It was precisely this difficulty in delineating the boundaries of *gubernaculum* (the power of the government) from *jurisdictio* (the rights of the people) that made any resistance difficult and peaceful resistance essential.⁷⁴

Dickinson then described several steps that the colonists should take to testify against the British government. First, they must organize themselves for their own protection, to eliminate the “confusion in our laws” that made the colonies vulnerable to oppression by the crown;⁷⁵ maintain “a perpetual jealousy, respecting liberty”; and exercise “utmost vigilance” against new oppressive laws.⁷⁶ This was the very purpose for which Quakers organized under the name of the Meeting for Sufferings in 1676 to oppose their persecution, with due respect to the government. They must retain power in themselves in order to resist oppression. At first, however, a people’s rights were closely circumscribed in the beginning of a disagreement with the secular authorities. “[The people] have not at first any other right,” he explained, “than to represent their grievances,

⁷¹ Bernard Bailyn emphasizes that the political thought of the English Civil War and Commonwealth period brought the “disparate strands of thought together” for the revolutionary leaders in *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 34.

⁷² Isaac Penington, *The Fundamental Right, Safety and Liberty of the People* (London, 1651), 7; Penn, *One Project for the Good of England*, 1.

⁷³ *Letters*, 70.

⁷⁴ On this constitutional dilemma, see Charles Howard McIlwain, *Constitutionalism: Ancient and Modern*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1947).

⁷⁵ In this instance, Dickinson was questioning parliamentary authority over the colonial legislatures and arguing that the latter, along with the colonial courts, had the right to determine which aspects of the British common law and statutes ought to apply to them in their particular circumstances. His recommendation in practical terms was to pass laws in America delimiting the extent of English laws in the colonies and allow the courts to determine rules for their regulation and practice (*Ibid.*, 55).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

and to pray for redress.”⁷⁷ Dickinson’s method would have been very familiar to those who had attended a Quaker meeting—to fulfill the obligation to speak when led by God to do so, to “publish” one’s dissent:

while Divine Providence, that gave me existence in a land of freedom, permits my head to think, my lips to speak, and my hand to move, I shall so highly and gratefully value the blessing received, as to take care, that my silence and inactivity shall not give my implied assent to any act, degrading my brethren and myself from the birthright, wherewith heaven itself “hath made us free.”⁷⁸

After they were sufficiently organized and in agreement about their grievances, Dickinson then advised speaking through the ancient British tradition of “petitioning of our assemblies.”⁷⁹ But this was only the beginning of a process that was increasingly informed by Quaker principles.

Should petitioning not be effective, there were other means of a “firm, but modest exertion of a free spirit” on a “public occasion.”⁸⁰ Only after all the conventional measures had failed did “opposition become justifiable.” But by “opposition” Dickinson still did not mean violence or disruptive activities, such as the mob uprisings so common at this time. Rather, he favored opposition “which can be made without breaking the laws, or disturbing the public peace.”⁸¹ The course he outlined from there was one of peaceful resistance: “This,” he explained, “consists in the prevention of the oppressors reaping advantage from their oppressions, and not in their punishment.” Dickinson suggested that “If . . . our applications to his Majesty and the parliament for redress prove ineffectual, let us then take *another step*, by withholding from Great Britain all the advantages she has been used to receive from us.”⁸² This subtle suggestion would not have been lost on the colonists. It would have been clear to his audience that Dickinson was referring to the civil disobedience against the Stamp Act only three years earlier; that is, simply ignoring the offending laws. They would also exert pressure on Parliament through the power of their own provincial assemblies. With their “purse strings” the people “have a

⁷⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 16. Dickinson is citing St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, 5:1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁸¹ Ibid., 18.

⁸² Ibid., 20.

constitutional check upon the administration, which may thereby be brought into order *without violence*." Using their own power, he argued, "is the proper and successful way to obtain redress of grievances." He asked, "How often have [kings] been brought to reason, and peaceably obliged to do justice, by the exertion of this constitutional authority of the people?"⁸³ This is "the gentlest method which human policy has yet been ingenious enough to invent."⁸⁴ This is in part what he meant by bearing their testimony against the injustice. Only if all these measures had been exploited and failed should revolution even be considered. But these cases, he assured the colonists, are rare.⁸⁵ In advocating such peaceful means—passing laws, petitioning, civil disobedience, and monetary leverage—Dickinson's underlying message was that the power is ultimately with the people to limit the government, but that they must do so as members of the constituted polity. Their protest might be extralegal, but it should not be extraconstitutional.

If Dickinson's overall message about resistance was emerging as different from the political thought and methods of his countrymen, so too was his patriotism of another sort. He expressed it as a God-given spirit of loyalty to the British constitution that was not incompatible with a love of rights. It was a "spirit that shall so guide you that it will be impossible to determine whether an *American's* character is most distinguishable for his loyalty to his Sovereign, his duty to his mother country, his love for freedom, or his affection for his native soil."⁸⁶ To Dickinson, those who might rush to revolution did so only "under pretenses of patriotism."⁸⁷ He agreed with Penn who wrote, "Let us go together as far as our way lies, and Preserve our Unity in those Principles, which maintain our Civil Society. . . . [I]t is both Wise and Righteous to admit no Fraction upon this Pact, no violence upon this Concord."⁸⁸ In a prophetic moment, Dickinson made a final attempt in his last letter to clarify his position and preempt what would become the accepted interpretation of this work: "I shall be extremely sorry, if any man mistakes my meaning in any thing I have said." "If I am an *Enthusiast* for any thing, it is in my zeal for the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁸ Penn, *One Project for the Good of England*, 6.

perpetual dependence of these colonies on their mother country.”⁸⁹ He closed the *Letters* with the admonition to Americans to

call forth into use the *good sense* and *spirit* of which you are possessed. You have nothing to do, but to conduct your affairs *peaceably—prudently—firmly—jointly*. By *these means* you will support the character of *freemen*, without losing that of *faithful subjects*—a good character in any government—the best under a *British* government. You will *prove*, that *Americans* have that true *magnanimity* of soul, that can resent injuries, without falling into rage.⁹⁰

Quaker theory and action culminated both in Dickinson’s *Farmer’s Letters* and later in Pennsylvania’s disinclination to declare independence from Britain. The Quakers’ reluctance was not necessarily because they were unpatriotic or otherwise unconcerned with their rights and liberties, but because, many of them believed, a revolution was unnecessary and the same ends could be achieved for America without violence and with the preservation of the fundamental constitution.⁹¹ Over one hundred years of suffering at the hands of government and achieving their ends through legal constitutional means had taught Quakers that if they persisted patiently in peaceful protest, eventually their grievances would be addressed. The *Farmer’s Letters* were thus intended for more than simple suggestions on how to resist the British. They advocated change; but they were certainly not intended to foment revolution. They were intended to save the constitutional relationship between Britain and America as the best means to protect American liberty. “Heaven,” he would continue to stress as the conflict intensified and revolution seemed likely, “seems to have placed in our hands means of an effectual, yet peaceable resistance, if we have the sense and integrity to make proper use of them. A general agreement between these colonies of non-importation and non-exportation

⁸⁹ *Letters*, 82.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹¹ The Quaker position on resistance and independence is much more complicated than can be discussed here. On Quakers in the Revolution, see Isaac Sharpless, *The Quakers in the Revolution* (1902; facsimile ed., Honolulu, HI, 2002); Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (1957; repr. New York, 1968); Arthur J. Mekeel, *The Relation of the Quakers to the American Revolution* (Washington, DC, 1979); Thomas M. Doerflinger, “Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation, 1760–1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (1983): 197–226. On the Quaker Reformation, see Marietta, *Reformation of American Quakerism*.

faithfully observed would certainly be attended with success.”⁹² In sum, while superficially there is much in Dickinson’s argument that looks Whiggish, ultimately Whigs could justify revolution as legitimate; Dickinson did not.

Towards Independence

In the early phase of the conflict, when most were for peace rather than war, Dickinson had the adoration of his countrymen. John Adams remarked that he was a “very modest Man, and very ingenious as well as agreeable,” with “an excellent Heart, and the Cause of his Country lies near it.”⁹³ Cousin Samuel agreed, naming him “a true Bostonian.”⁹⁴ As the tenor of the times changed to favor independence, however, Dickinson did not change with it. He held his position in favor of reconciliation and quickly became viewed as a conservative. One historian calls him, somewhat misleadingly considering the complexity of Dickinson’s thought, the “leader” of the conservatives.⁹⁵ It is important to note that Dickinson’s stance did not change—he did not vacillate from radical to moderate to conservative.⁹⁶ It was the sentiment around him that changed, causing his apparent move to conservatism. As he put it himself, “My Principles were formed very early in the Course of this unhappy Controversy. I have not yet found Cause to change a single Iota of my political Creed. I have never had & now have not any Idea of Happiness for these Colonies for several ages to come, but in a State of Dependence upon & subordination to our Parent State.”⁹⁷ He, like seventeenth-century Quakers, was a radical, but not a revolutionary.

As the conflict intensified and popular sentiment was clearly heading the country towards war, Dickinson appealed to Pennsylvanians to use Quaker techniques, to trust and emulate “the good men who have promoted the pacific Measures of this Province.” Throughout the history of the colony, he explained, the Quakers had employed a special kind of

⁹² John Dickinson, “Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America,” 2:499.

⁹³ *John Adams’ Diary*, Sept. 12, 1774, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 1:64.

⁹⁴ Samuel Adams to Joseph Warren?, Sept. 25, 1774, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 1:100.

⁹⁵ Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774–1781* (1940; repr. Madison, WI, 1970), 82, *passim*.

⁹⁶ For this interpretation, see especially Flower, *Conservative Revolutionary*.

⁹⁷ John Dickinson, “Notes for a Speech in Congress,” May 23, 1775, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 1:378.

"Turbulence" to defend the "publick Happiness." This turbulence "was cautious: it was firm: it was noble: it was gentle: it was ~~religious~~ devout: In short, their Policy was like the Religion they professed." It protected rights while preserving the "public Tranquility."⁹⁸ He likewise reminded the colonists of their peaceful efforts in the Stamp Act controversy. He praised his countrymen in their handling of the matter, writing, "You behaved as you ought. . . . [You] proceeded in your usual business without any regard to [the Stamp Act]. . . . The act [was] thus revoked by you" before it was formally repealed by Parliament.⁹⁹ An early enemy of Quakers aptly observed that they "Repeal, not verbally, yet virtually, so far as their Power reaches, all Acts of Parliament which suit not their *Light Within*."¹⁰⁰

In his *Letters*, Dickinson explained that "Wise and good men in vain oppose the storm" of violent resistance. As though he anticipated the suffering he and Friends would ultimately experience by toeing this line, the Farmer wrote, they "may think themselves fortunate, if, endeavouring to preserve their ungrateful fellow citizens, they do not ruin themselves." He prophesied, "Their prudence will be called baseness; their moderation guilt" and "their virtue" may "lead them to destruction."¹⁰¹ And indeed, in the turmoil of the Revolution, a number of prominent Philadelphia Quakers were arrested. Amid much harassment and destruction of their property, two Friends were also hanged as traitors.¹⁰² George Savile's 1688 characterization of a trimmer summarized the attitude of the Revolutionaries towards the Quakers' moderation well: "But it so happens, that the poor *Trimmer* hath all the Powder spent on him alone . . . there is no danger now to the state . . . but from the Beast called a *Trimmer*."¹⁰³

Neither would Dickinson emerge unscathed in his efforts to balance "our *little vessel*."¹⁰⁴ As tensions rose, his reputation among those in favor

⁹⁸ John Dickinson, untitled document, n.d., in John Dickinson, 1681–1882, n.d., Political, 1774–1807, n.d., R. R. Logan Collection.

⁹⁹ John Dickinson, "Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America," 2:475, 476, 479.

¹⁰⁰ Francis Bugg, *The Pilgrim's Progress, from Quakerism to Christianity* (London, 1698), 38.

¹⁰¹ *Letters*, 19.

¹⁰² Sharpless, *Quakers in the American Revolution*, 172–206.

¹⁰³ George Savile, *The Character of a Trimmer* (London, 1688), preface.

¹⁰⁴ Wrongly cited in Colbourn, "John Dickinson, Historical Revolutionary," 272, as appearing in *Life and Writings*, ed. Stillé and Ford, 2:326.

of independence began to falter. By 1775, John Adams was calling Dickinson a "piddling genius," someone who was "warped by the Quaker interest."¹⁰⁵ Others suspected that he might have been unduly influenced in matters of governmental policy by the Quakerism of his immediate family. Charles Thomson, Dickinson's friend, claimed that Dickinson's Quaker mother and wife "were continually distressing him with their remonstrances."¹⁰⁶ And, indeed, Dickinson later said, "I took it for granted, that my Behaviour would be supposed to be influenced by too strong an addiction to the [Society of Friends], ~~if that Society would approve my Conduct.~~"¹⁰⁷

Quaker political theorist Jonathan Dymond wrote in 1829 that "The tumult and violence which ordinarily attend any approach to political revolutions are such, that the best and proper office of a good man may be rather that as a moderator of both parties than a partisan with either."¹⁰⁸ On the eve of the Revolution, Dickinson continued his efforts at reconciliation. The best known of these is the Olive Branch Petition of July 5, 1775. A reluctant and impatient Congress appointed a committee to draft a final plea to the crown to reconcile. John Jay produced a draft with harsh language and threats of rebellion, but it was Dickinson's version, proclaiming the colonies' suffering, their loyalty to the king, and placing the blame for the controversy with the king's ministers that was adopted and submitted.¹⁰⁹ The king, of course, dismissed the petition and the war proceeded. The next day, after approving the Olive Branch Petition, Congress issued A Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms. Various drafts were produced in a tense collaboration between Thomas Jefferson and Dickinson. One added fiery and aggressive tones, promising a formidable threat from America and a prolonged war. The other used language that was mild and conciliatory. While logic would seem to suggest that Jefferson would have penned the more bellicose lines and, indeed, he later claimed to have written them, the historical

¹⁰⁵ John Adams to James Warren, July 24, 1776, and *John Adams' Diary*, Sept. 24, 1775, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 1:658, 2: 50.

¹⁰⁶ Thomson cited in Mekeel, *Relation of the Quakers to the American Revolution*, 136.

¹⁰⁷ John Dickinson to unknown, Elizabethtown, Aug. 25, 1776, in John Dickinson, 1681–1882, n.d., Correspondence, 1762–1808, R. R. Logan Collection.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Dymond, *Essays on the Principles of Morality, and on the Private and Political Rights and Obligations of Mankind* (New York, 1845), 326.

¹⁰⁹ John Jay, draft of the Olive Branch Petition, 1775, in Government Documents, Revolution and Early National Period, 1765–1788, John Dickinson Family Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.

record proved him wrong when the draft with the harsher language was found in Dickinson's papers in Dickinson's own hand.¹¹⁰ And on closer inspection, Dickinson's authorship of these portions actually makes more sense. Dickinson was trying to avert war; Jefferson was, if not in favor of it, then at least not opposed. Thus Dickinson, unlike Jefferson, had a motive to write a declaration that would give the British pause. His tack was to produce such "apprehensions" in England that they might "procure Relief of all our Grievances."¹¹¹ Similarly, Dickinson's language in his other publications became more aggressive during this period. While never advocating revolution or violence, treatises such as *An Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great-Britain* (1774) stressed more forcefully the necessity of resistance. There is thus a continuity of purpose between the Olive Branch Petition and the Declaration that belies the superficial impression either that Jefferson wrote the Declaration or Dickinson had come to support revolution. Even as the war was being fought, Dickinson asked Congress, "can any thing less than absolute Necessity justify such a Conduct in the Sight of the Creator?"¹¹²

By late 1775, Dickinson was the clear leader of the powerful anti-revolution faction, centered in Pennsylvania. And the radicals were frustrated by the Pennsylvania Assembly's interference with the move towards independence. That colony, located centrally, with the largest city, and one of the largest ports, was crucial for the success of the Revolution. Since the Quakers, with Dickinson as their representative, showed no signs of acquiescence, John Adams effectively orchestrated a coup of the Pennsylvania government by disgruntled factions of the populace, which resulted in the Quakers' loss of power, the abolition of the 1701 Pennsylvania Charter of Privileges, and the eventual creation of the 1776 constitution.¹¹³ Dickinson vehemently opposed this forcible change of

¹¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the genesis of this document, see Julian P. Boyd, "The Disputed Authorship of The Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms, 1775," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (1950): 51–73. A close comparison of the drafts can be found in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al., (Princeton, NJ, 1950–), 1:187–219.

¹¹¹ Dickinson, "Notes for a Speech in Congress" (1775), 1:372.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 376

¹¹³ On the struggle over Pennsylvania government during this period, see J. Paul Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776: A Study in Revolutionary Democracy* (Philadelphia, 1936); R. A. Ryerson, "Political Mobilization and the American Revolution: The Resistance Movement in Philadelphia, 1765–1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 31 (1974): 565–88; and Anne M. Ousterhout, *A State Divided: Opposition in Pennsylvania to the American Revolution* (New York, 1987).

government and decried the new constitution as illegitimate. Even after the Declaration of Independence had passed, Samuel Adams resented Dickinson's power in that state, claiming that he "has poisond the Minds of the People, the Effect of which is a total Stagnation of the Power of Resentment, the utter Loss of every manly Sentiment of Liberty & Virtue. I give up [Philadelphia] & [Pennsylvania] for lost until recover[d] by other Americans."¹¹⁴ With Dickinson in mind, John Adams spoke with contempt of men with "timid and trimming Politicks."¹¹⁵

Independence

On July 1, 1776, the day before the vote on independence, Dickinson opposed the break with Britain in his last speech before Congress. Exemplifying the Quaker conviction that "whatsoever tendeth to break that Bond of Peace and Love, must be testified against,"¹¹⁶ and in full awareness of the consequences of his actions, he said, "My Conduct, this Day, I expect will give the finishing blow to my once too great, and my Integrity considered, now too diminish'd Popularity." Martyring himself politically to testify for "a Truth known in Heaven," he said, "I might indeed, practise an artful, an advantageous Reserve upon this Occasion [but] Silence would be guilt. I despise its Arts—I detest its Advantages. I must speak, tho I should lose my Life, tho I should lose the Affections of my C[oun]trymen."¹¹⁷ On July 2, Dickinson absented himself from the vote on independence. By such an act, he knew that the vote would be unanimous and the Revolution would proceed. In preparation for the moment of independence, however, he had already helped raise troops in Pennsylvania and had drafted the Articles of Confederation. He then joined his battalion to fight the British.

To those such as John Adams, or much of posterity, who attributed to Dickinson timidity or other self-interested motives in resisting independence, he would say privately:

¹¹⁴ Samuel Adams to James Warren, Dec. 12, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 5:601.

¹¹⁵ John Adams to William Tudor, June 24, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 4:306.

¹¹⁶ Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: Being an Explanation and Vindication of the Principles and Doctrines of the People Called Quakers* (1675; repr. New York, 1827), 57.

¹¹⁷ John Dickinson, "Notes for a Speech in Congress," July 1, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 4:352.

What can be more evident than that I have acted on Principle? Was there a Man in Pennsylvania, that possessed a larger share of the public Confidence...than I did? Or that had a more certain Prospect of personal advantages from Independency, or of a smaller chance of advantages from Reconciliation? . . . I knew most assuredly & publicly declared in Congress that I should lose a great Part of my popularity and all the benefits of an artful, or what some would call a prudent Man, might coin it into—I despised them, when to be purchased only by violation of my Conscience—I should have been a Villain, if I had spoken and voted differently from what I did—for I should have spoken & voted differently from what I judged to be for the Interest of my Country. . . . While I was there voluntarily & deliberately, step by step, sacrificing my Popularity . . . what would be my object & whom was I trying to please? The Proprietary People are known to be & to have been uniformly my deadly foes throughout my Life. Was it to please the People called Quakers? Allow it— What was I to obtain by pleasing them? All things were converging to a Revolution in which they would have little Power. Besides, I had as much displeased quieted them by other measures I took as I did others by opposing the Declaration of Independence.¹¹⁸

Through all the turmoil, John Dickinson's political actions at the moment of independence were complex, but hardly as enigmatic as many have suggested. They are comprehensible when understood in the light of Quaker theologico-politics. In a Quaker meeting, individual dissent was tolerated, and even encouraged, provided it followed a specific process. Those with minority viewpoints were allowed and expected to try to convince their brethren that theirs was the correct understanding of God's will; but only to a certain extent. If an interpretation or "leading" was disavowed by the meeting as a whole, the individual was obliged to submit his will to the meeting and not undermine its mission. Since Dickinson, as a "Quaker" politician, was acting consistently with the idea of the civil polity as the meeting writ large, his actions were not only consistent, but perfectly in keeping with appropriate Quaker political behavior. In his description of the Quaker decision-making process, Michael Sheeran explains how a Quaker may take the position of disagreement without obstructionism: "The meeting is left aware of the dissenter's opinion, yet the dissenter has indicated a wish not to keep the matter from moving forward. Equivalently, the objector has thus endorsed the action of the

¹¹⁸ John Dickinson to unknown, Elizabethtown, Aug. 25, 1776.

group by implying that in his or her own judgment the objection is not serious enough to prevent action.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, after Dickinson spoke his peace, rather than continue to dissent from the Declaration, which he knew was going to win majority approval, he abstained from the vote in Congress and allowed Pennsylvania to support the Declaration. Sheeran describes the interesting position in which this act places the individual. It shifts him from a position of dissent to one of tacit endorsement: “[he] tends to take some responsibility for the decision, even to feel some obligation for making it work out well in practice.”¹²⁰ Accordingly, after the passage of the Declaration, Dickinson supported his country fully by taking up arms and working to perfect an American constitution. As Dickinson himself explained it: “Although I spoke my sentiments freely,—as an honest man ought to do,—yet when a determination was reached upon the question against my opinion, I regarded that determination as the voice of my country. That voice proclaimed her destiny, in which I was resolved by every impulse of my soul to share, and to stand or fall with her in that scheme of freedom which she had chosen.”¹²¹ Sheeran calls this technique of withdrawing one’s opposition, though not one’s disagreement, “virtually an art form of graciousness.”¹²²

Reflecting on political obligation and resistance in the next century, Quaker theorist Jonathan Dymond confirmed the propriety of Dickinson’s actions. “If I had lived in America fifty years ago,” he said,

and had thought the disobedience of the colonies wrong, and that the whole empire would be injured by their separation from England, I should have thought myself at liberty to urge these considerations upon other men, and otherwise to exert myself (always within the limits of Christian conduct) to support the British cause.

He then described the course of peaceful resistance Americans could have pursued and the results it would have brought:

¹¹⁹ Michael Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, 1996), 66. See also *Faith and Practice: A Book of Christian Discipline*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1997), 28.

¹²⁰ Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 67.

¹²¹ Stillé and Ford, eds., *Life and Writings*, 1:204.

¹²² Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 67.

Imagine America to have acted upon Christian principles, and to have refused to pay [the tax], but without those acts of exasperation and violence which they committed. . . . Does any man . . . believe that England . . . would have gone on destroying them . . . if the Americans continually reasoned coolly and honorably with the other party, and manifested, by the unequivocal language of conduct, that they were actuated by reason and by Christian rectitude? . . . They would have attained the same advantage with more virtue, and at less cost.

And finally, he explained the position that the dissenter should take when the people decide on their course:

But when the colonies were actually separated from Britain, and it was manifestly the general will to be independent, I should have readily transferred my obedience to the United States, convinced that the new government was preferred by the people; that, therefore, it was the rightful government; and, being such, that it was my Christian duty to obey it.¹²³

In short, with the exception of taking up arms, he would have done what Dickinson did.¹²⁴

Conclusion

The British constitution for Dickinson was a tool with which to safeguard American liberties. When that tool was no longer accepted by his countrymen, he went to work creating a new one, the Articles of Confederation. His priority was always the preservation of American liberties by the surest means. Dickinson's record, when situated in the context of his culture, reflects not hesitancy, indecisiveness, or pessimism, but unambiguous resolve in favor of peace, freedom, and unity—and caution lest these things be lost in the heat of passion. While Dickinson

¹²³ Dymond, *Essays on the Principles of Morality*, 327–29.

¹²⁴ Critics will object that this significant exception compromises the argument. But we should remember that a good number of Quakers supported the Revolution and many took up arms. These men and women were disowned for a time, but most were eventually reinstated. On the “Free Quakers,” see Sharpless, *Quakers in the Revolution*. Similarly, despite his decision to fight, Dickinson never fell out of favor with Friends and, indeed, his popularity among them increased so that after the Revolution they considered him one of their primary spokesmen on their concerns about social justice. Because he was not a convinced member, but a fellow traveler, they could tolerate departures from their testimonies and traditional thought for good causes, which, despite their pacifism, many Quakers believed the Revolution was.

has often been painted as a traitor or a lukewarm patriot, if patriotism is defined by a denial of self for the good of one's country, then his absence from the vote on independence should be seen as one of the greatest patriotic acts of the Revolution. Furthermore, as the religious dissenters he followed, he chose derision and infamy rather than admiration and popularity. Very much in the Quaker mentality, he reflected on July 25, 1776, "I have so much of the spirit of Martyrdom in me, that I have been conscientiously compelled to endure in my political Capacity the Fires & Faggots of persecution."¹²⁵

Dickinson's contribution to American political thought is therefore both different from and more significant than what scholars have claimed. Advocate of rights though he was, he was no "Penman of the Revolution." In the 1760s and '70s Dickinson was expressing an idea that most Americans would not be articulating coherently until after the Revolution when they were faced with creating their own state and national constitutions—the idea of the perpetuity of a written constitution and the necessity for an internal process of amendment. These were ideas basic to Quaker political thought. Historians who have seen the significance of Dickinson's work as preparing the country for revolution have been interpreting it both with the benefit of hindsight—that America did eventually revolt—and without understanding the context of Dickinson's thought. Despite the fact that his writings did lead to the Revolution and he was compelled to abandon his nonviolent stance, his place in history is not among the leaders of revolutions, but rather as the first leader of a national peaceful protest movement. In this capacity, however, he actually did make a significant contribution to the Revolution—John Adams noted that "the delay of the Declaration to [1776] has many great advantages attending it," not the least of which was that it served to "cement the union."¹²⁶ The main significance of the priorities that Dickinson advocated lies, therefore, beyond the Revolution.

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¹²⁵ John Dickinson to Charles Lee, July 25, 1776, cited in Martha Calvert Slotten, "John Dickinson on Independence, July 25, 1776," *Manuscripts* 28 (1976): 189.

¹²⁶ John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, ed. Smith, 4:376.