



Franklin's Turn: Imperial Politics and the Coming of the American Revolution

ON JANUARY 29, 1774, Benjamin Franklin stood silently in the Privy Council chamber (popularly known as the Cockpit), representing a Massachusetts petition to oust its current governor and lieutenant governor, Thomas Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver. Spectators quickly filled all available seats in the chamber, leaving minimal standing room. As Franklin noted, “there never was such an appearance of privy counsellors on any occasion, not less than thirty-five, besides an immense crowd of other auditors.” They came, Franklin stated, to see some “entertainment.” Alexander Wedderburn, solicitor general and counsel for Hutchinson and Oliver, gave the crowd their show by verbally attacking Franklin for over an hour. Amid a cheering, laughing, and clapping multitude, Wedderburn slammed his fist into a pillow situated on the table in front of him as he called Franklin a thief, an “incendiary,” and a man who “moves in a very inferior orbit.”¹

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¹ Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Feb. 15, 1774, in Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, CT, 1959–), 21:86 (hereafter *PBF*); “The Final Hearing before the Privy Council Committee for Plantation Affairs . . . Wedderburn’s Speech before the Privy Council,” in *PBF*, 21:37–70. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* are available online at franklinpapers.org/franklin/.

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The infamous Cockpit episode is often represented in historical treatments of Franklin as the watershed moment that solidified his “alienation” and “Americanization.”² The event caps a standard historical narrative focused on Franklin’s British American identity, his reaction to aggressive parliamentary acts, and his petty squabbles with imperial officials. In the historical literature, the Cockpit affair has represented “in microcosm the causes of the revolution” by symbolizing the irrationality of an arrogant ministry that alienated loyal subjects.³

Nevertheless, well before the event in the Cockpit, a fundamental transformation of Benjamin Franklin’s understanding of the empire and the imperial constitution occurred that had little to do with personal intrigues and aggressive parliamentary acts. From the 1750s, Franklin had promoted a vision of a “consolidating Union,” a British nation composed of “one Community with one Interest.”⁴ His proposals for imperial reform addressed far more than representation in Parliament; he advocated for an imperial currency, new colonies, and a restructuring of the Acts of Trade and Navigation. In 1768, however, Franklin abandoned this vision of a larger British nation for an imperial federation and even started arguing for the natural right of expatriation, the ultimate justification for independence.

Franklin changed his mind due to the difficulty of achieving imperial reform and as a result of his frustrating experience with English politics. Analyzing Franklin’s ideas for imperial reform and his attempts to persuade imperial officials of its necessity reveals far more about his transformation, and about the coming of the American Revolution, than an explanation that attributes this change in thought to the symbolic event in the Cockpit or to an inchoate crisis of identity. His writings expose the

² Jack P. Greene, “The Alienation of Benjamin Franklin, British American,” in *Understanding the American Revolution: Issues and Actors*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), 249; Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), 151. Greene and Wood both make identity the central component of their studies of Franklin. The importance of identity in interpreting Franklin is discussed below, in note 5. For other studies that use the Cockpit as a pivotal moment, see Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1986); Robert Middlekauff, *Benjamin Franklin and His Enemies* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); William B. Wilcox, “Franklin’s Last Years in England: The Making of a Rebel,” in *Critical Essays on Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Melvin H. Buxbaum (Boston, 1987); Cecil B. Currey, *Road to Revolution: Benjamin Franklin in England, 1765–1775* (Garden City, NY, 1968); and Sheila L. Skemp, *Benjamin and William Franklin: Father and Son, Patriot and Loyalist* (New York, 1994).

³ Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia*, 228.

⁴ Franklin to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:65; Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:449.

inner workings of an informed colonial intellectual who observed in the governance of the empire structural and functional problems that he believed threatened its very existence.⁵ Yet Franklin could not move men or measures in England. The unstable and divisive politics of England restricted negotiation and limited the possibilities for reform. Franklin's experience with English politics led him to believe that the British government could barely govern England, let alone an extended empire. With a growing disdain for the processes of English government, Franklin jettisoned his idea for a closer union with Britain and articulated and embraced a vision of the colonies as distinct states.⁶

Ultimately, this transformation placed Franklin outside the acceptable political thinking of those governing the empire and effectively ended his ability to negotiate reconciliation between the colonies and Britain on what he considered acceptable terms. By 1768, reconciliation could not be achieved simply by returning to the ambiguous imperial relationship of the pre-1763 status quo, which Franklin found untenable. The imperial government, Franklin maintained, should recognize the colonies as "different states" under the same king and "absolutely independent" from Parliament. British officials refused to accept such a political position, and the little negotiation that Franklin could muster quickly faltered and fell apart.⁷ His inability to negotiate reconciliation with Britain is significant

⁵ Because scholars such as Gordon S. Wood and Jack Greene focus on Franklin's identity, Franklin's plans for imperial reform have taken on a specific meaning. They are seen as highlighting Franklin's imperial inclinations and his identity as a Briton. While Franklin's plans certainly demonstrate his self-identification with the empire and Britain, they also highlight long-existing problems of governance in the empire that Franklin sought to reform. He was not, as Greene argues, enamored with the status quo. See Jack Greene, "Alienation of Benjamin Franklin," 255–59; Greene, "The Background of the Articles of Confederation," *Publius* 12 (autumn 1982): 22–25; and Wood, *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 115–16.

⁶ While historians have given some attention to Franklin's initial ideas for imperial reform and a parliamentary union, his transition to an articulation of an empire of distinct states has been given less attention and little significance. Wood, for example, argues that the transformation of Franklin's view of the empire occurred during the disputes over the Stamp Act. He posits that Franklin's vision was "precocious," but leaves off his investigation of this change, stating that Franklin "hesitated to follow out the logic of this doctrine of sovereignty" because of his hopes for reconciliation. This was definitely the case before 1768, as Franklin often wrote about the distinctness of the colonies in a negative light to promote his vision of "consolidating union," but after 1768 Franklin did not hesitate to draw out the full implications of this vision of an imperial federation. Moreover, this transition marks a critical juncture in the possibilities for reconciliation in the empire. Wood, *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, 123.

⁷ Franklin, "Arguments Pro and Con: I," *London Chronicle*, Oct. 18–20, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:233–37. The British government did not find the position of the colonies as distinct states an acceptable proposal for reconciliation until the Carlisle Commission of 1778, but by that time any possibility for reconciliation within the empire was too late.

not only to our understanding of Franklin but to that of the imperial crisis as well. Franklin was a major colonial political figure in the empire and a leading voice for the colonies—he held the colonial agency for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Massachusetts—and so this failure of diplomacy had a considerable impact on the colonies’ ability to achieve a political settlement in the empire.

* * *

By as early as the 1750s, Franklin had developed plans for the future of the empire that were informed by his understanding of the changes taking place within the colonies. The colonial population had grown from an estimated 265,000 in 1700 to just over 2 million in 1770. With an average annual increase of 3 percent, the population, as Franklin noted in his “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” doubled every twenty years. The colonial economy expanded accordingly over the course of the eighteenth century. Due to the development of commerce and industry and the diversification of crops, the colonies’ long-term rate of growth doubled that of Britain.⁸

Franklin recognized that these demographic and economic changes drastically altered the internal dynamics of the colonies. The basic institutional and constitutional mechanisms for governing the empire that existed in 1765 had not changed significantly since the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁹ The empire suffered from a lack of currency and from disparate and contradictory paper money laws. Population growth and the formation of internal markets for trade outpaced the regulations set forth in the antiquated Acts of Trade and Navigation. Franklin argued that American commerce and manufacturing, which grew with its population, should be cultivated, not inhibited. According to Franklin, an inadequate currency policy and “restraining the trade or cramping the manufacturers” only served to distress the colonies, and “to distress, is to

⁸ John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, 1985), 54; John J. McCusker, “Colonial Statistics,” chap. Eg, in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, ed. Susan B. Carter et al. (New York, 2006), online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ISBN-9780511132971.Eg.ESS.01>, accessed Aug. 1, 2010.

⁹ Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, vol. 4, *England’s Commercial and Colonial Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1938); Ian R. Christie, *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754–1783* (New York, 1966).

weaken, and weakening the Children, weakens the whole Family." Adding to his frustrations, internal dissension and intercolonial conflict proliferated. Describing the government of Pennsylvania, but addressing a problem he saw throughout the colonies, Franklin noted that the body "that ought to keep all in Order, is itself weak, and has scarce Authority enough to keep the common Peace."¹⁰

In order to "strengthen the whole," Franklin imagined the empire as "one Community with one Interest." Discussing the troubles of imperial defense, imperial policies, and the governance of the colonies in 1754 with then governor of Massachusetts William Shirley, Franklin concurred with his correspondent on a vision for the future of the empire as a greater British nation. The vicissitudes of colonial politics—the intra- and intercolonial squabbling—had only, as far as Franklin was concerned, promoted within the empire deep divisions that threatened its future existence. Any initiative for defense, for example, was beset by the "*Particular whims and prejudices*" of the individual colonies.¹¹ Compounding this problem, the "private interest[s]" of a few in England, particularly "petty corporation[s]," merchants, and artificers, shaped imperial policies concerning trade and manufacturing. Colonial representation in Parliament, he argued, would erase such distinctions "and greatly lessen the danger of future separations." This level of inclusion would have radically transformed the constitutional makeup of the British Empire. In Franklin's view, colonial representation in Parliament was a step toward a consoli-

¹⁰ Franklin, "The Interest of Great Britain Considered," 1760, in *PBF*, 9:47; Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:449; Franklin, "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind," 1755, in *PBF*, 4:225; Franklin, "Cool Thoughts on the Present Situation of Our Public Affairs," Apr. 12, 1764, in *PBF*, 11:153. In a January 2008 conference paper at the AHA, Douglas Bradburn argued that the causes of the American Revolution stemmed from an imperial breakdown long in the making. Demographic and economic growth in the colonies, coupled with a failure of the empire to evolve, adapt, and meet these changing circumstances, led to a breakdown in the empire and to the American Revolution. Douglas Bradburn, "Rise of the States: The Problem of Order and the Causes of the American Revolution" (manuscript in the author's possession). Many of Franklin's ideas for reform showcase these long-existing problems in the governance of the empire. Moreover, his experiences in England highlight the limits of the possibilities for these reforms and the centrality of English politics, both popular and parliamentary, in setting these limits.

¹¹ Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:449; Franklin, "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union," July 1754, in *PBF*, 5:399, 401, 402. Through his experience with colonial politics and his efforts to create a colonial union at Albany, Franklin began to view imperial distinctions as a fundamental problem. One of the main reasons Franklin supported the creation of a colonial union at Albany was his expectation that such a union would eventually erase colonial distinctions. He hoped that "by this connection" the colonies would "learn to consider themselves, not as so many independent states, but as members of the same body." Franklin, "Reasons and Motives for the Albany Plan of Union," 401–2.

dated empire in which the colonies would operate not as so many distinct states but as “so many *Counties* gained to Great Britain.”¹²

Franklin’s plans for the empire included far more than colonial representation in Parliament; they also tackled the reform of imperial policies and the creation of more effective administrative institutions. Imperial policies that tended to treat the colonies as existing only for the benefit of the mother state—policies that had emerged at a time when the British mainland colonies were sparsely populated—Franklin deemed inexpedient and out-of-date by midcentury.¹³

One major problem, the lack of a common imperial currency or a standardized method for making bills of credit legal tender, hampered the colonial economy and created internal factionalism. According to Franklin, for want of a uniform policy, the value of colonial paper money suffered from “Irregularity” and resulted in some “Injustice.” While paper money worked in some colonies, such as New Jersey, it did not in others, such as Rhode Island. Colonists recognized the problem and argued in the 1730s for a uniform plan. By the 1740s, the Board of Trade and Parliament also conceded that there were troubles with American currency. Nevertheless, Parliament, instead of fixing the problem with long-term goals in mind, looked to the status quo and merely reinforced existing policy by ordering that all governors obey the Act of 1708 regulating the price of foreign coin. Parliament refused to sign any currency bill without an attached “suspending clause.” The king’s veto power remained the controlling mechanism, and the colonial governments fractured over the power of the purse and the viability of paper money. Such internal disputes, Franklin maintained, resulted in “clogging and embarrassing all the Wheels of Government.”¹⁴

A dismayed Franklin insisted to George Grenville, Lord Hillsborough, Lord Chatham, and other agents and officers of the Crown

¹² Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 4, 1754, and Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:443, 449 (italics added).

¹³ Nor was Franklin the only one harboring these sentiments. In her dissertation, “Re-Writing the Empire,” Heather Schwartz focuses on themes of imperial union and institutional reorganization in the political atmosphere before and during the American Revolution. She has unearthed over 130 plans to reform the empire. Heather Schwartz, “Re-Writing the Empire: Plans for Institutional Reform in British America, 1643–1788” (PhD diss., Binghamton University, 2011).

¹⁴ Franklin, “The Legal Tender of Paper Money in America,” Feb. 13, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:35; Joseph Ernst, *Money and Politics in America, 1755–1775: A Study in the Currency Act of 1764 and the Political Economy of Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1973), 18–42; Franklin, “Cool Thoughts,” in *PBF*, 11:153.

that the empire needed a “fixed, steady, uniform Value” for all colonial paper currency, backed by mortgage-loan securities, in order to correct this problem in the colonies. His plan for “an equal Currency for all Amer[ica]” called for the establishment of new imperial institutions, new loan offices in each of the colonies, new imperial officers to staff those offices, and a standardized policy for the emission of bills and the maintenance of securities. In essence, Franklin envisioned a bureaucratic structure tying the colonies closer together with themselves and with the metropole.¹⁵

Franklin likewise contended that imperial impositions that cramped and restrained trade, manufacturing, and imperial expansion should be repealed or reconsidered after a parliamentary union. Franklin opined that imperial policies only created “great and violent jealousies.” He well knew that colonial settlers already pushed westward beyond the control of the empire, that hatters still made hats, that slitting mills continued to grow, and that colonists, whether in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, openly defied imperial trade regulations. As Franklin asked Shirley in December 1754, “what imports it to the general state, whether a merchant, a smith, or a hatter, grow rich in *Old* or *New* England?” The “strength and wealth of the whole,” he resolved, was necessary to sustain the empire and to prevent its ultimate collapse. Consequently, Franklin promoted new colonies in the Ohio Valley, joined the Grand Ohio Company, attempted to push through grants of land in the Board of Trade, and hobnobbed with other imperial officials.¹⁶

The aggressive acts of Parliament of the 1760s initially solidified Franklin’s belief in the necessity of a consolidated empire and policy reform. Writing in May 1764 to Richard Jackson, colonial agent for Pennsylvania, Franklin reasoned that “two distinct Jurisdictions or Powers of Taxing cannot well subsist together in the same Country.” “If you chuse to tax us,” he concluded, “give us Members in your Legislature and let us be one People.” For Franklin, such a union could heal the widening breach in the empire. As he posited to Joseph Galloway in 1767, “I doubt People in Government here will never [*sic*] be satisfied without some

¹⁵ Franklin, “Legal Tender of Paper Money,” in *PBF*, 14:36; William Riddell, “Benjamin Franklin and Colonial Money,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 54 (1930): 60; Franklin, “Scheme for Supplying the Colonies with a Paper Currency,” Feb. 11–12, 1765, in *PBF*, 12:47.

¹⁶ Franklin, “Magna Britannia: Her Colonies Reduc’d (Explanation and Moral),” [Jan. 1766?], in *PBF*, 13:66; Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:449.

Revenue from America, nor America ever satisfy'd with their imposing it; so that Disputes will, from this Circumstance besides others, be perpetually arising, till there is a consolidating Union of the whole."¹⁷

Franklin did not confine his proposals for reform to an official and formal audience. He utilized a growing popular political interest in England to present his visions for imperial reform to a larger English public. Between 1765 and 1768, he published fifty-five letters and articles in the London press. He used these writings not only to attack parliamentary taxation but also to convince the populace of the deleterious effect of the longstanding imperial laws and regulations. As in his private correspondence, Franklin's letters in the London press lambasted trade regulations, the stifling of manufacturing, and the lack of an imperial currency. He put forth that should the imperial government "persist in restraining their Trade, distroying their Currency, and Taxing their People by Laws made by a Legislature, where they are not Represented," the "whole state" would be "weakened" and "perhaps ruined for ever!"¹⁸

To combat this weakness of the empire and ensure its future strength and stability, Franklin's publications also tackled the necessity of imperial reform. He informed English readers that it was "*highly the interest of this country* to consolidate its dominions, by *inviting*, and even (if it has a power) *compelling* the Americans as well as Irish to submit to an union, send representatives hither, and make one common p——t of the whole." In 1766, he published in the *London Chronicle* three of his old letters to William Shirley of 1754 that argued for the importance of restructuring the Acts of Trade and Navigation and the necessity of a consolidated empire. Likewise, he published his thoughts on an imperial currency and wrote the chapter on its necessity in Thomas Pownall's *Administration of the Colonies*. Nevertheless, neither Franklin's prognostications in the press nor his arguments to imperial officials had any effect.¹⁹

¹⁷ Franklin to Richard Jackson, May 1, 1764, in *PBF*, 11:185; Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Apr. 14, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:122. See also Franklin's letter to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:62.

¹⁸ Franklin, "Magna Britannia: Her Colonies Reduc'd (Philadelphia Explanation)," [1767–1768?], and "Magna Britannia . . . (Explanation and Moral)," in *PBF*, 13:71, 66. Franklin made similar arguments in his "N. N.: Reply to Vindex Patriae," *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 28, 1765, in *PBF*, 12:413. See also his "Reply to Coffee-House Orators," *London Chronicle*, Apr. 7–9, 1767; "On the Propriety of Taxing America," *London Chronicle*, Apr. 11, 1767; "Right, Wrong, and Reasonable," *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Apr. 18, 1767; and "On Smuggling," *London Chronicle*, Nov. 21–24, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:102, 110, 129, 315.

¹⁹ Franklin, "N. N.: Reply to Vindex Patriae on American Representation in Parliament," *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 29, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:65; Franklin, "A Lover of Britain:

The “unsettled State of the Ministry,” Franklin believed, hindered his ability to promote reforms. As one ministry settled into office, rumors of a new one abounded. Between 1760 and 1770, the English government rotated through seven different ministries, and Franklin complained that all public business was at a standstill until “the ministry is established.” He found the frequent changes in the ministry exasperating. When attempting to impress upon the Chatham administration in 1767 the necessity of colonial paper money and the repeal of the Currency Act, he found his attempts “frustrated” by the “strong Talk” of a new ministry.²⁰

In addition to the frustration caused by frequent turnovers of administrations, the ministerial cabinets were, as John Brooke argues, “a jumble of opinions.” The 1760s witnessed a clash of political worlds. The Old Corps Whigs—the world of Walpole, Pelham, and Newcastle’s broad-bottom coalitions—had transformed into a more factionalized political existence. There were Grenvillites, Bedfordites, Chathamites, Rockinghamite Whigs, and a growing popular opposition unattached to a parliamentary faction. This factionalism had a profound impact on the functioning of several different administrations. Lord Chatham’s cabinet, for example, included not only Chathamites such as Lord Shelburne and Lord Camden but men from the Grenville and Rockingham factions. Accordingly, no clear direction or policy emerged. Although Chatham intended to quell party interests when putting together his cabinet, his administration proved fractured and politically divisive. As Franklin pointed out, internal factionalism made any attempt to reform the empire exceedingly difficult, as time was “wasted in Party Contentions about Power and Profit, in Court Intrigues and Cabals, and in abusing one another.”²¹

The chief obstacle to reform and the redress of grievances, however, proved to be the fact that avenues of negotiation within the empire were diminishing as a result of Parliament’s rigid attitude toward opposition. Parliament adopted this disdainful mood in response to an outbreak of

Preface to Three Letters to William Shirley,” *London Chronicle*, Feb. 6–8, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:118. The three letters to William Shirley were written between December 3, 1754, and December 22, 1754 (see *PBF*, 5:441–49); Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the Colonies*, 4th ed. (London, 1768), 243–53.

²⁰ Franklin to Hugh Roberts, July 7, 1765, in *PBF*, 12:201; Franklin to William Franklin, July 26, 1765, in *PBF*, 12:221; Franklin to Joseph Galloway, May 20, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:163.

²¹ Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754–1790* (London and New York, 1964), 98; Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Aug. 8, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:228.

popular protests that revolved around domestic grievances that were often fueled by the growing imperial dispute. By the 1760s, clubs and societies that existed outside the purview of elite parliamentary leadership had sprung up in London and throughout the provincial towns of England. Such extraparliamentary politics, while providing many people with a sense of their own voice, simultaneously demonstrated their marginalization in a political system that treated popular opposition as illegitimate and unworthy of formal recognition. Such a realization helped generate, according to historian Kathleen Wilson, a “radical rhetoric” that expressed frustration with political exclusion and led to “more far-reaching demands for change.”²² The popular press started to decry not only the existence of rotten boroughs but also the relationship between representatives and their constituents. Banners, flags, handbills, and tickets adorned in hats promoted “Annual Parliaments” and “Equal Representation.”²³ Throughout the latter half of the 1760s and early 1770s, London witnessed numerous riots and public political ceremonies challenging the authority of the government. As a result, British politicians became fixated on political instability and methods by which to cure it.²⁴

The crisis in relations with the North American colonies that stemmed from parliamentary taxation exacerbated political problems in England. Colonial grievances agitating for representation in Parliament resonated with an English public that harbored similar complaints.²⁵

²² Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (London and New York, 1995), 227–28.

²³ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 212–29; Lucy S. Sutherland, *The City of London and the Opposition to Government, 1768–1774: A Study in the Rise of Metropolitan Radicalism* (London, 1959), 12.

²⁴ My understanding of English politics is largely based on the works of John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (London and New York, 1976); Robert R. Rea, *The English Press in Politics, 1760–1774* (Lincoln, NE, 1963); Sutherland, *City of London and the Opposition to Government*; and Wilson, *Sense of the People*.

²⁵ Colonial grievances, however, did not speak to everyone. As Eliga Gould has recently shown, colonial resistance to parliamentary taxation divided Britain between those who sympathized with the colonies and those who supported the government. Gould often depicts the majority of Britons as supporters of the government and parliamentary taxation. Pamphlets serve as the central component of Gould’s study, although in the years leading up to the American war, Parliament attempted to stifle popular opposition in the press. Nevertheless, Gould excellently demonstrates that after the colonists changed their argument from inclusion in Parliament to exclusion many in England expressed their antipathy toward this position and thus supported imperial measures against the colonies. Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, 2000), xv–xvii, 140–47. Parliamentary action against the printers of London is discussed in more detail below.

Because of this connection, London newspaper publishers and printers such as John Almon and Henry S. Woodfall readily made available colonial grievances and colonial political tracts.²⁶ Famous anonymous writers such as Junius attacked imperial policy, petitions from the London Livery and the electors of Middlesex drew on colonial grievances to make their cases, and the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights (SSBR) and the Constitutional Society sent adulations to the colonies for their resistance. As John Horne and John Glynn, members of the SSBR, proclaimed to the Assembly of South Carolina, "Our cause is one—our enemies are the same."²⁷

The instability within the ministry and the eruption of popular political protest led many in Parliament to level blame for public discontent and political volatility on what they viewed as a few mischievous malcontents (notably John Wilkes) and, more broadly, on the very notion of popular opposition. Opposition, according to one anonymous pamphlet extolling the ministry, did nothing more than "controvert every thing advanced by an administration in the gross, and without exception." Popular opposition, the pamphlet continued, promoted through that "dirty channel of the common news-papers," threatened to level "all *distinctions* by which peace, regularity and good government subsist amongst mankind" and should, as such, be discountenanced.²⁸

Many in Parliament concurred, and they responded by stifling the popular press. Between 1763 and 1773, Parliament took part, in the words of historian Robert Rea, in an "orgy of printer-baiting."²⁹ As one member of the House of Commons noted in 1768, "We have been putting off affairs of the greatest consequence, and the time of Parliament has

²⁶ John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769–1782* (Kingston, ON, 1987), 13, 31. Sainsbury, "The Pro-Americans of London, 1769 to 1782," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978): 423–54; C. C. Bonwick, "An English Audience for American Revolutionary Pamphlets," *Historical Journal* 19 (1976): 355–74.

²⁷ The full letter is in R. T. H. Halsey, *The Boston Port Bill as Pictured by a Contemporary London Cartoonist* (New York, 1904), 111. Franklin was no stranger to the popular politics of London. He frequented the coffee houses and taverns of London and joined the Club of Honest Whigs, which included members such as Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, James Burgh, Joseph Jefferies, and the founder of the SSBR, Richard Oliver. Franklin's acquaintances during his years in England led some, such as Lord Hillsborough, to label him a "Republican, a factious mischievous Fellow." Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Jan. 13, 1772, in *PBF*, 19:16; Franklin to William Franklin, Jan. 30, 1772, in *PBF*, 19:47.

²⁸ *A Vindication of the Present Ministry* (London, 1766), 12, 38, 40, 50. See also Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, 55–76.

²⁹ Rea, *English Press in Politics*, 149.

been taken up in what? In examining horse-waterers and newspaper-jackals.”³⁰ Parliament attempted to control and suppress the opposition by issuing general warrants and information ex officio for libel against the printers and writers of London and its environs.³¹ The purpose of the attacks on the press, according to Lord Camden (writing under his nom de plume, “Candor”), was to repress all hints of opposition. “Men known to be in opposition to the Ministry,” he explained, had “their studies rummaged, whenever a galling or abusive pamphlet came out,” all “for the sake of getting at private correspondence and connections, and for the business of disarming the opposition.”³²

Consequently, some publishers flouted the power of the Parliament, and others grew extremely cautious. William Woodfall, part owner of the *Public Advertiser* and sole owner of the *Morning Chronicle*, found that his “slumbers were discomposed by nightly visions of Newgate, yeoman ushers, and serjeants-at-arms.” Publishers and printers such as Charles Say of the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* and Richard Nutt and John Meres of the *London Evening Post*, who experienced firsthand the power of Parliament, issued warnings in their papers. Say advised “all who honour this paper with their favours” to “have a regard for the safety of the printer.” Likewise, Nutt and Meres instructed their contributors that their statements “must have some softening; for truths are told in so spirited a manner that we dare not run the risque of publishing it.” Even John Almon confessed to John Wilkes in March 1767, “I am now not concerned in any of the public papers,” as “they are so often brought before the House of Lords, and there is so little faith among the printers.”³³

³⁰ Sir Henry Cavendish, *Sir Henry Cavendish's Debates of the House of Commons during the Thirteenth Parliament of Great Britain, Commonly Called the Unreported Parliament, May 10, 1768 to May 3, 1770*, ed. J. Wright (London, 1841), 111.

³¹ Rae, *English Press in Politics*, 110, 143–44. Local magistrates seized private papers, took printers into custody, and hauled them before the King's Bench, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons. Once before the court, the detainee was most likely reprimanded with a stiff fine, on average one hundred pounds, and in some cases sent to Newgate or the pillory. According to Robert Rea, printers lost up to a week's ability of work and were “several shillings out of pocket in fees and gratuities to sundry doorkeepers and petty officials” each time they were brought in on a charge of libel. Rae, *English Press in Politics*, 144.

³² Candor [Lord Camden], *A Letter from Candor to the Public Advertiser* (London, 1764), 31–32.

³³ Quote of Woodfall in Alexander Andrews, “History of the Newspaper Press,” *New Monthly Magazine* 109 (1857): 493. Quotes of Say, Nutt, and Meres in William T. Laprade, “The Stamp Act in British Politics,” *American Historical Review* 35 (1930): 744n20; and *London Evening Post*, Mar. 20, 1764. Quote of John Almon to John Wilkes in Rae, *English Press in Politics*, 149.

Grievances both domestic and imperial received similar disdain from Crown, Lords, and Commons. This was especially true as colonial and domestic complaints coalesced. The colonies, according to Franklin, had “many Friends among” the populace of London, particularly the electors of Middlesex and the London Livery, whom he described as “loving and honouring the Spirit of Liberty, and hating arbitrary Power of all Sorts.” He applauded their inclusion “among their Grievances the unconstitutional Taxes on America.”³⁴ Some members in the House of Commons, nevertheless, expressed their opinion that petitioners were merely “a few despicable mechanics, headed by base-born people, booksellers, and broken tradesmen,” those “scum of the people, unworthy to enter the gates of his majesty’s palace.” As Charles Jenkinson, MP for Appleby, argued, “to found . . . the authority of this House upon the popular voice, is vain and idle.” Colonial petitions, likewise, received little recognition. Barlow Trecothick, MP and alderman for the city of London and colonial agent for New Hampshire, caustically remarked, “The practice of refusing to receive petitions from America is, it seems, to be continued.”³⁵

To make matters worse, the empire had changed the way it managed the colonies. In January 1768, the ministry attempted to streamline its management of its North American empire by creating a secretary of state for the colonies. At first, Franklin applauded the efforts of the ministry to update its management, but when he observed how the office actually functioned, he changed his mind. The first secretary of state, Lord Hillsborough, proved no friend of America. Obsessed with proper form, and incensed by what he viewed as colonial truculence, he refused to recognize agents who were not approved by both the colonial assemblies and the governors, effectively denying numerous agents access to the central power governing the colonies, Franklin included. Where Franklin had once been able to grease the palms of members of the Board of Trade and petty office holders to advance colonial business, he was now cut off and unable to travel within the inner governing circles of the empire.³⁶

³⁴ Franklin to Samuel Cooper, Apr. 27, 1769, in *PBF*, 16:117; Franklin to James Bowdoin, July 15, 1769, in *PBF*, 16:176–77. For an example of domestic uses of colonial grievances, see “The Humble Petition of the Freeholders of the County of Middlesex,” *London Magazine, or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, May 1769, 227–28.

³⁵ Thomas De Grey and Charles Jenkinson in the House, Jan. 9, 1770, *Cobbett’s Parliamentary History of England* (London, 1813), 16:690, 696; Barlow Trecothick in the House, Jan. 25, 1769, *Cavendish’s Debates*, 185.

³⁶ For Franklin’s initial response see “On the New Office of Secretary of State for the Colonies,” *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 21, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:17. Less than a year later, as

The contemptuous disposition of the British government toward opposition and popular grievances is significant for two reasons. First, it displays the seizing up of negotiation within the empire; the press was at least muffled, and grievances were thrown out on mere pretense. This factor alone not only angered Franklin but hampered his ability to present grievances through the proper bureaucratic channels and to utilize the fourth estate. Second, parliamentary action against opposition sparked conflict, sometimes violent, in London. The inability and unwillingness of the government to quell these disturbances by any other means than the show of force correlated, in Franklin's mind at least, with the same problems the governments of the colonies faced and, moreover, with imperial policy. Together these issues changed Franklin's attitude on the future of the empire and the colonies' place within it.

The unwillingness of the imperial government to hear and redress grievances irritated Franklin, who concluded that the members of Parliament were "partial, prejudiced and interested Judges" who had "no true Idea of Liberty, or real Desire to see it flourish or increase." The presentation of petitions was, according to Franklin, "the ancient well contrived channel of communication between the head and members of this great Empire, thro' which the notice of grievances could be received that remedies might be applied." That channel, however, "hath been cut off." Parliament refused to recognize grievances, and Lord Hillsborough had repeatedly dismissed petitions and agents on mere punctilios about form. Speaking of the Dutch Revolt, Franklin argued that the "History of a similar conduct in the Ministry of Spain with regard to the Low Countries, makes one doubt a little the prudence (in any Government how great soever) of discouraging Petitions, and treating Petitioners (how mean soever) with contempt."³⁷

Hillsborough refused to accept agents, Franklin abused the minister in the press and in letters to the colonies. See Franklin to Dennys De Berdt, printed in the *Public Advertiser*, Aug. 31, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:196. Hillsborough, according to Franklin, looked at agents "with an evil eye" and wanted "to get rid of them, being as he has sometimes intimated, of opinion that agents are unnecessary." Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Feb. 5, 1771, in *PBF*, 18:25. Nor was Franklin the only agent who thought along these lines. Edmund Burke, agent for New York, argued that this "new plan" for the acceptance of agents marked the "destruction of one of the most necessary Mediums of communication between the Colonies and the parent Country." Edmund Burke to James De Lancey, Dec. 4, 1771, in *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Chicago, 1984), 222.

³⁷ Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Jan. 9, 1769, in *PBF*, 16:10; Franklin, "A Purported Letter from Paris," *Public Advertiser*, Jan. 17, 1769, in *PBF*, 16: 19; Franklin, "The Rise and Present State of Our Misunderstanding," *London Chronicle*, Nov. 6–8, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:268.

Moreover, Parliament's attempt to stifle popular agitation in the press directly affected Franklin's ability to defend colonial resistance and present colonial grievances to the public. In 1768, Franklin noted to his son that he had difficulty publishing his tracts. Writing about the *London Chronicle*, Franklin complained, "The editor of that paper one Jones seems a Grenvillian, or is very cautious," as "his corrections and omissions" had "drawn the teeth and pared the nails of my paper, so that it can neither scratch nor bite. It seems only to paw and mumble."³⁸ Between 1765 and 1768, Franklin averaged around fourteen publications a year; between 1769 and 1773 this rate dropped to an average of four per year.³⁹

Between 1769 and 1772, we know that at least four of Franklin's publications never made it to press. In the first, "A Horrid Spectacle of Men and Angels," Franklin castigated the English government for its "Destruction of Civil LIBERTY" and its "boasts of enjoying Freedom itself," while it "would ruin others for vindicating their common Right to it." The second, "An Account against G. G.," written for the *Public Advertiser*, assailed the policies of Grenville and his faction, particularly Lord Hillsborough, the American secretary. This article was never published and remained in manuscript form. The third and fourth, respectively titled "On the Conduct of Lord Hillsborough" and "A Reply to a Defender of Lord Hillsborough," were savage attacks on the ability and policies of the American secretary and, significantly, on the entirety of imperial governance. Franklin attempted to publish "On the Conduct of Lord Hillsborough" in the *Public Advertiser* on two occasions and was denied each time.⁴⁰ These four articles, by attacking the actions, decisions, and policies of the government, would have been deemed seditious and dangerous to what Parliament considered "the peace and good order, as well as the dignity, of his Majesty's government." Moreover, refusal to publish Franklin's articles was completely comprehensible, as such statements were particularly perilous for printers at a time when the

³⁸ Franklin to William Franklin, Jan. 9, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:16.

³⁹ These averages are taken from *PBF*, vols. 12–20, and Verner W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758–1775* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1950). The averages do not include "The Colonist's Advocate" letters written in 1770, as Carla H. Hay argues persuasively that these were authored by James Burgh, not Benjamin Franklin. See Hay, "Benjamin Franklin, James Burgh, and the Authorship of 'The Colonist's Advocate' Letters," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 111–24.

⁴⁰ These articles are located in *PBF*, 16:18–19, 19–26; 19:216–26, 296–97.

Parliament was demonstrating to “the people, that we are determined to exert ourselves” to suppress all notions of “sedition” in the press.⁴¹

Parliament’s actions toward the press, opposition, and popular grievances played a role in the general disorders on the streets of London. Riots over Wilkes’s imprisonment on May 10, 1768, culminated in the Massacre of St. George’s Field, during which British troops killed at least six people. Parliament’s insistence on stifling the press also resulted in crowd action in which a mob harassed incoming legislators, forcing them to flee through a gauntlet run up to the House doors. Charles James Fox was sent sprawling into a gutter, and Lord North had to dash for his life as the mob overturned his carriage, demolished it, and then proceeded to attack him with a constable’s staff. During the melee North lost his hat, which the mob tore into small pieces and sold as “relics and monuments of their fury.”⁴² Between 1766 and 1770 there were, additionally, silk-weaver riots, grain riots, and crowd activity by coal heavers, sailors, watermen, coopers, glass grinders, sawyers, hatters, and tailors.⁴³

By the middle of 1768, the instability of the ministry, the stifling of opposition, Parliament’s refusal even to consider petitions, and the general disorder on the streets of London weighed heavily on Franklin’s mind. For Franklin, the lawlessness of London conjured up images of the “Disorders on our Frontiers, and the extreme Debility if not wicked Connivance of our Government and Magistrates” in Pennsylvania. Since the early 1760s, Franklin had deplored the weakness of Pennsylvania’s government and its inability to deal with the “lawless” frontier as he sought to transform the province into a royal colony. In the same vein, Franklin wanted to remove instability within the entire empire through imperial reform and the formation of a stronger “consolidating Union.”⁴⁴

To Franklin’s dismay, though, the English government was in a “Situation very little better” than Pennsylvania, as “all respect to law and government seems to be lost.” Writing just four days after the Massacre at St. George’s Field, Franklin expressed his consternation that “Even this Capital, the Residence of the King, is now a daily Scene of lawless Riot and Confusion.” Mobs and crowds patrolled “the Streets at Noon Day,

⁴¹ *Cavendish’s Debates*, 101–6.

⁴² Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third* (London, 1845), 4:302–3.

⁴³ Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, 18.

⁴⁴ Franklin to John Ross, May 14, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:128; Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Apr. 14, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:125.

some Knocking all down that will not roar for Wilkes and Liberty." He saw "Coalheavers and Porters pulling down the Houses of Coal Merchants . . . Sawyers destroying the new Sawmills; Sailors unrigging all the outward-bound Ships," and "Weavers entering Houses by Force, and destroying the Work in the Looms." Yet instead of redressing the public's grievances or even considering petitions, the ministers were "divided in their Counsels, with little Regard for each other, worried by perpetual Oppositions, in continual Apprehension of Changes." Their only solution was to send "Soldiers firing among the Mobs and killing Men, Women and Children." He concluded that a "great black Cloud" hovered over London, "ready to burst in a general Tempest."⁴⁵

With this realization, all talk of a consolidated union, a British nation composed of "one Community with one Interest," vanished from Franklin's writing.⁴⁶ Over the course of the 1750s and 1760s, Franklin thought long and hard on what was right, what was just, what was reasonable, and, ultimately, what would govern effectively. For the greater part of the 1760s, all those thoughts added up to a closer union with Britain, but by the latter half of 1768, that idea was no longer desirable. Writing in the *London Chronicle* on October 20, 1768, Franklin laid bare his new vision for the future of the empire. The colonies, Franklin contended, were "different states" under the same king.⁴⁷ While Franklin had flirted with the idea of the colonies as dominions under the king before, he had always prefaced his statements as unsettled and the imperial relationship as ambiguous. In essence, Franklin had believed that the colonies could be subjects under the king or that they could be subjects of the King-in-Parliament, but the relationship had never been settled.⁴⁸

By the latter half of 1768, however, no middle ground remained, and no ambiguity existed. The colonies, in Franklin's mind, were and ought to be distinct states under the king. Although many in England would find this notion of the colonies as distinct states absurd, a claim "founded on an impossibility, an *imperium in imperio*," Franklin argued that "a King may be constitutionally King of two different states, as was formerly the

⁴⁵ Franklin to John Ross and Franklin to Joseph Galloway, May 14, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:127, 128. See also Franklin to William Franklin, Apr. 16, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:98.

⁴⁶ Franklin to William Shirley, Dec. 22, 1754, in *PBF*, 5:449.

⁴⁷ Franklin, "Arguments Pro and Con: I," *London Chronicle*, Oct. 20, 1768, in *PBF*, 15:233–37.

⁴⁸ Franklin, "N. N.: On the Tenure of the Manor of East Greenwich," *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Jan. 11, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:22; Franklin to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:64–71.

case here, when the Parliaments of England and Scotland were absolutely independent of each other." The colonies, Franklin maintained, had a constitutional arrangement similar to that of Scotland before the union and therefore existed as different states under the king and independent of Parliament.⁴⁹ In 1769, Franklin further separated the colonies from Britain by arguing that they were composed of different peoples. The colonists were no longer "British Subject[s]" but "American Subject[s] of the King." Those writers and political thinkers with whom he had agreed before 1768 who still argued for a consolidated union, such as Thomas Crowley, Franklin deemed "a little cracked."⁵⁰

Such ideas pushed Franklin beyond the boundary of accepted political thought in England. While men such as William Strahan, Franklin's friend and correspondent, instructed the printer of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* to "trust, with some Degree of Confidence, in the Justice and the Wisdom of Parliament," Franklin wrote differently to the colonies.⁵¹ To Joseph Galloway he explained, "the Publick affairs of this Nation" were "in great Disorder."⁵² The British government had no "wise regular Plan," and Britain suffered under "unjust and blundering Politics." "We govern," Franklin concluded to his son, "from Hand to Mouth." Privately, Franklin asked, "How can we suppose they [Parliament] will be just to us at such a Distance, when they are not just to one another?" The answer, Franklin believed, was that they could not be trusted. Expressing indignation while reflecting on his experiences with the vagaries of English politics, he complained of "the *unequal Representation*, too, that prevails in this

⁴⁹ Franklin, "Arguments Pro and Con: I," in *PBF*, 15:233. The formulation of an idea of the colonies as independent states cannot be understated, as it was a crucial element in the justification for resistance against the empire and a central idea in the formation of statehood and federalism after American independence. See Douglas Bradburn, *The Citizenship Revolution: Politics and the Creation of the American Union, 1774–1804* (Charlottesville, VA, and London, 2009), 60, 61–100, 291. See also David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, KS, 2003), 263–66. Moreover, Franklin's articulation of the colonies as independent states within an empire of states was much earlier than other known colonial articulations such as James Wilson's and Thomas Jefferson's in 1774. Wilson, *Considerations on the Nature and the Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* (Philadelphia, 1774), and Jefferson, *Summary View*, Aug. 1774, both in *American Archives*, ser. 4, ed. Peter Force (Washington, DC, 1837), 1:690–91.

⁵⁰ Franklin, "Marginalia in a Pamphlet by Allan Ramsay," in *PBF*, 16:304; Franklin to William Franklin, Sept. 1, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:387.

⁵¹ William Strahan to David Hall, Apr. 4, 1770, in "Some Further Letters of William Strahan, Printer," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 60 (1936): 478.

⁵² Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Mar. 21, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:118.

Kingdom, they are so far from having Virtue enough to attempt to remedy, that they make use of it as an Argument why we should have no Representation at all. Be quiet, says the Wag in the Story, I only p[iss] o[n] y[ou]: I sh[it] o[n] t[he] o[ther].” Trust in Parliament, in short, was “totally lost.”⁵³

The only effectual remedy was the establishment of a constitution “ascertaining the relative Rights and Duties of each.” Such a constitution, he believed, would rid the colonies of the “Corruption and Servility of Parliament.” Grievances would have a better chance of being redressed, and the agents of the separate states might have more negotiating power. “When they [the colonies] come to be considered in the light of *distinct states*,” Franklin exhorted, “possibly their agents may be treated with more respect, and considered more as public ministers,” but “if agents can be allowed here on no other footing than is now proposed, we should omit sending any, and leave the crown, when it wants our aids, or would transact business with us, to send its minister to the colonies.”⁵⁴

Although not many politicians would accept such a constitution, Franklin weighed all imperial policies with *his* understanding of the imperial relationship in mind. The ordering of British troops into Boston and the subsequent violence that erupted on March 5, 1770, for example, he found deplorable. “Instead of preventing complaints by removing the causes,” he argued, “it has been thought best that Soldiers should be sent to *silence* them.” The mere presence of British troops in Boston, or any colony for that matter, was not “agreeable to the British Constitution,” for, he reasoned, “the King who is Sovereign over different States” could not “march the Troops he has rais’d by Authority of Parliament in one of the States, into another State, and quarter them there in time of Peace, without the Consent of the Parliament of that other State.”⁵⁵

Once articulated, Franklin’s turn away from a closer union to Britain and toward a vision of the colonies as independent states took him down radical paths that challenged fundamental assumptions not only of sover-

⁵³ Franklin to William Franklin, Apr. 6, 1773, and Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Feb. 14, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:145, 65; Franklin, “Marginalia in *An Inquiry*, an Anonymous Pamphlet,” in *PBF*, 17:330–31; Franklin to Galloway, Mar. 21, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:119.

⁵⁴ Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Jan. 11, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:23; Franklin to Galloway, Apr. 20, 1771, in *PBF*, 18:77; Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Feb. 5, 1771, in *PBF*, 19:103; and Franklin to Cushing, Apr. 13, 1772, in *PBF*, 18:25.

⁵⁵ Franklin, “The Rise and Present State of Our Misunderstanding,” in *PBF*, 17:270; and Franklin to Joseph Galloway, June 11, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:168.

eignty but of subjecthood. He had already concluded that Americans were not British subjects, but American subjects of the same king. By 1773, as he pored over press articles calling for parliamentary acts to ban emigration to the colonies, and as the prospects for new colonies floundered, Franklin expressed his opinion “that it is the natural Right of Men to quit when they please the Society or State, and the Country in which they were born, and either join with another or form a new one as they may think proper.”⁵⁶

Such thoughts of the natural right of expatriation stemmed from Franklin’s evolving understanding of the history of the colonies. As he articulated a vision of the colonies as distinct states, he justified this position by presenting a picture of colonial settlement under the king as one of contract and choice. The colonies, Franklin argued to Lord Kames, “were planted at the Expence of private Adventurers” who “*voluntarily* engag’d to remain the King’s Subjects, though in a foreign Country, a Country which had not been conquer’d by either King or Parliament, but was possess’d by a free People.” Similarly, he argued “that every Briton who is made unhappy at home, has a Right to remove from any Part of his King’s Dominions into those of any other Prince where he can be happier,” or emigrants could “purchase Territory in another Country” and “either introduce there the Sovereignty of their former Prince” or “erect a new State of their own.”⁵⁷

Franklin realized that his opinions differed substantially from “those great Common Lawyers” of England. In fact, such thoughts were beyond the pale, as expatriation was antithetical to British subjecthood. According to Douglas Bradburn, “British subjecthood depended upon feudal conceptions of perpetual natural allegiance, enshrined by such standards as Coke’s interpretation of *Calvin’s Case* of 1603.” Moreover, *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, in which Blackstone stated that a “natural-born subject of one prince cannot by act of his own, no, not by swearing allegiance to another, put off or discharge his natural allegiance to the for-

⁵⁶ Franklin to William Franklin, July 14, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:300.

⁵⁷ Franklin to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:62 (*italics added*); Franklin, “On a Proposed Act to Prevent Emigration,” 1773, written for the *Public Advertiser* but never printed, in *PBF*, 20:527; Franklin to William Franklin, July 14, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:300. As with Franklin’s formulation of the idea of the colonies as distinct states, he articulated an idea of the natural right of expatriation earlier than many of his colonial compatriots. See, for example, Thomas Jefferson’s *Summary View*, which is often cited as the first full-fledged articulation of the natural right of expatriation in the colonies before the American Revolution.

mer," were less than ten years old.⁵⁸ These were the acceptable positions in Britain concerning subjecthood and expatriation, and Franklin had pushed them aside.

Franklin's thoughts on sovereignty and subjecthood became known in the political circles of England and effectively alienated Franklin from those governing the empire. His personal letters were often "rubbed" open by imperial officials, and his few letters in the press during his last years in England sparked significant controversy. Franklin's intimate correspondences made their way to the American secretary, Lord North, and other ministers, and even the press published Franklin's private letters without his consent. In addition, Franklin published in September 1773 two political satires in which he skewered imperial policies, attacked parliamentary sovereignty, and attempted to cast the notion of perpetual natural allegiance of British subjecthood as absurd.⁵⁹

Such "political Opinions," as William Strahan noted, put Franklin "not only on bad Terms with Lord Hillsborough, but with the *Ministry in general*."⁶⁰ Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench and the principle promoter of the government's attack on the printers of London, found Franklin's writings "*very ABLE and very ARTFUL* indeed; and would do mischief by giving here a bad impression of the measures of government; and in the colonies, by encouraging them in their contumacy."⁶¹ The political opinions expressed in Franklin's private letters and in the press played a significant role in his "Bull-baiting" in the Cockpit and his subsequent dismissal as deputy postmaster for America.⁶² Franklin even learned "that Copies of several Letters" of his to Thomas Cushing were "sent over here to the Ministers, and that their Contents are treasonable for which I should be prosecuted if Copies could be made

⁵⁸ Franklin to William Franklin, July 14, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:303; Bradburn, *Citizenship Revolution*, 105. Blackstone quoted in Bradburn.

⁵⁹ Franklin to William Franklin, Dec. 2, 1772, in *PBF*, 19:416; Franklin, "Rules by Which a Great Empire May be Reduced to a Small One," *Public Advertiser*, Sept. 11, 1773, and "An Edict by the King of Prussia," *Public Advertiser*, Sept. 22, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:389–99, 413–18. The *Critical Review* (London), for example, published excerpts of a June 8, 1770, letter to Samuel Cooper in which Franklin argued that parliamentary sovereignty over America was a claim "founded only on Usurpation." *Critical Review* 36–40 (1774): 199.

⁶⁰ William Strahan to William Franklin, Apr. 3, 1771, in *PBF*, 18:65.

⁶¹ Franklin to William Franklin, Oct. 6, 1773, in *PBF*, 20:436.

⁶² Franklin to Jane Mecom, Nov. 1, 1773, and Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Jan. 5, 1774, in *PBF*, 20:457, 21:5; Franklin, "Extract of a Letter from London," Feb. 19, 1774, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Apr. 20, 1774, in *PBF*, 21:112.

Evidence.” Franklin worried about the rumors circulating in London of “apprehending me, seizing my papers, and sending me to Newgate.”⁶³

Franklin’s experience in the Cockpit, his dismissal from office, and even rumors about jailing him for sedition, however, had little impact on his understanding of the status of the colonies in the empire. The vision of the colonies as distinct states, which he had formulated before those dramatic events, endured. When David Barclay, John Fothergill, and Lord Richard Howe, supposedly on the authority of some ministers, asked Franklin to compose terms for reconciliation in December 1774, Franklin adhered to his understanding of the imperial constitution. In his “Hints” for reconciliation, he opined that “Parliament had no Right” to tax America and considered “all Money extorted by it as so much wrongfully taken.” Moreover, Franklin stated flatly that the Navigation Acts should be reconsidered and “re-enacted in all the Colonies” and that “all the duties arising on them were to be collected” by the colonies and “paid into” their treasuries. He also called for the repeal of the acts “restraining Manufactures in the Colonies.” In short, his “Hints” rested on one principle: that the colonies were distinct states under the king and independent of Parliament. He demanded the repeal of all acts or policies that challenged that distinction, or else their reconsideration in those distinct states.⁶⁴

According to Barclay, Franklin’s terms “had been shewn high, and consider’d to contain Matter worth Notice.” Nevertheless, he concluded, “Lords high in Office” considered Franklin’s proposals “*inadmissible*.” Indeed, when Lord Howe learned of Franklin’s “Hints,” he claimed to be “rather sorry to find that the Sentiments express’d in it were” Franklin’s, “as it gave him less hopes of promoting” reconciliation with Franklin’s “Assistance.” There was, Howe stated, “no likelihood of the Admission of those Propositions.”⁶⁵

The reaction to Franklin’s proposals reflect just how politically out of step Franklin had become in the eyes of imperial officials by 1768. Franklin felt out the limits of the possible, stepped beyond them, and found himself in a position of no return. The colonists found themselves

⁶³ Franklin to Thomas Cushing, Apr. 16, 1774, and Feb. 15, 1774, in *PBF*, 21:191, 86.

⁶⁴ David Barclay to James Pemberton, Mar. 18, 1775, and Franklin to William Franklin, Mar. 22, 1775, in *PBF*, 21: 532, 540–99.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

in a similar situation when the first Continental Congress declared their independence of Parliament and their status as citizens of distinct states under the king in 1774. Neither Crown nor Lords nor Commons would accept such a notion, and the colonies, like Franklin, had stepped beyond the permissible notions of sovereignty within the empire.

Franklin's last years in England, his experience with the gritty and divisive politics of the metropole, and his disappointment with the possibilities of imperial reform all contributed to a significant evolution of political thought that was central to the coming of the American Revolution. His position on the place of the colonies in the empire transformed; he went from clamoring for inclusion to demanding exclusion, from promoting a model of a consolidated union to advancing one of distinct states under the king. The latter vision was the main factor in the formulation of an idea of the natural right of expatriation, the ultimate justification for independence. Such ideas were necessary components in the rationalization of colonial resistance and of severing ties with the Crown, the remaining bond holding the colonies to the empire in the 1770s. Moreover, Franklin's experiences with the government of England and his thoughts on imperial reform exposed long-standing structural and functional problems in the empire and a political system that possessed an ineffective mechanism for negotiation that only worsened over the course of the 1760s. Reform could not be achieved nor grievances redressed in such a system. The failure of negotiation was, perhaps, the most crucial event in the coming of the American Revolution. As Franklin himself noted about the causes of civil wars, when diplomacy fails, "the worst of Remedies becomes the only one, the Sword."⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Mar. 21, 1770, in *PBF*, 17:114.

