

Name: Mark Smith
Role: John Dickinson



School: Maggie L. Walker Governor's School
Committee: The Second Continental Congress

Introduction

Dear Sir,

The "immedicabile vulnus" (irreparable injury) is at length struck. The rescript to our petition is written in blood. The impious war of tyranny against innocence has commenced in the neighborhood of Boston.

Thus wrote John Dickinson to Arthur Lee of Virginia on April 29th, 1775 in response to the Battles at Lexington and Concord. This letter, composed less than a fortnight before the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia, displays Dickinson's characteristic nuance. First he establishes the facts, then and only then does he draw his conclusions. Firstly, the colonies and the British Empire had entered in a state of war, for "this most unnatural and inexpressibly cruel war began with the butchery of unarmed Americans at Lexington." Secondly, "that the continent is preparing most assiduously for a vigorous resistance." Most importantly, "while we revere and love our mother country, her sword is opening our veins." Nothing could be more characteristically "Dickinsonian" than juxtaposing sincere love of mother country with the cruel truth of British aggression in the early stages of the American Revolutionary War.¹

With the skills of an international relations analyst, Dickinson cautioned against alliances with France and Spain, for fear of having to "wear their chains" as the oppression of one colonial power was traded for the domination of another. Yet, at his core, Dickinson realized exactly what it meant to be an American and summed it up in a few succinct sentences. "Our towns are but brick and stone," he wrote, "and mortar and wood. They, perhaps, may be destroyed. They are but the hairs of our heads. If sheared ever so close, they will grow again. We compare them not with our rights and liberties."² Stirring as the letter remains today, those words reflect Dickinson's mental state as he embarked upon the odyssey of the Second Continental Congress. Part outraged, part cautious, Dickinson demonstrated time and again, true to his Quaker roots, that peaceful measures should be the Congress' first recourse, and violence reserved as only a last, defensive resort. Neither radical nor loyalist, Dickinson could be considered a pragmatist, a leader unafraid of compromise for the sake of both national unity and the general good.

Topic 1: Legal Issues

With the passage of the "revenue-enhancing" Townshend Acts in 1767, the young lawyer Dickinson made a name for himself as a constitutional critic of parliamentary overreach. Arguing against the constitutionality of the Townshend duties, Dickinson concluded that, rather than only providing the revenue needed to quarter troops in the colonies, the duties were also being used to siphon away the "power of the purse" state legislatures had possessed to control Royal Governors' salaries. Or, as Alden writes in *A History of the American Revolution*, Dickinson persuasively argued that "the primary purpose of Britain was to strengthen her hold upon America, not to compel the Americans to assume their faire share of the burdens of empire."³

¹ John Dickinson, "John Dickinson to Arthur Lee," 1775, in *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence*, comp. John Rhodehamel (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2001), pp. 21-24.

² Ibid.

³ John R. Alden, *A History of the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1976), p. 96.

Name: Mark Smith
Role: John Dickinson



School: Maggie L. Walker Governor's School
Committee: The Second Continental Congress

The American Colonists rallied around Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, his chosen vehicle for disseminating logical, reasoned argument against the Townshend Acts. "If the Parliament may lawfully deprive New York of any of her rights, it may deprive any or all the other colonies of their rights...to divide, and thus to destroy, is the first political maxim in attacking those who are powerful by their union." Realizing the strength of the American colonies as a united front, Dickinson opposed violence that would only galvanize British opposition to American self-government, writing, "I am by no means fond of inflammatory measures; I detest them...but a firm, modest exertion of a free spirit should never be wanting on public occasions."⁴ Instead of resorting to violence, Dickinson supported the boycotts of British products which ultimately led to the Acts' repeal, pioneering an early form of highly effective protest for which he would advocate on multiple occasions later on in his political career.

Earlier experience representing Pennsylvania in the 1765 Stamp Act Congress established his belief, later transformed into the pithy motto "No Taxation without Representation," that "no taxes be imposed on them [the colonies] but with their own consent, given personally, or by their representatives."⁵ Beyond his opposition to the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts, Dickinson's legal perspective rested on a few assumptions. First, he considered the American colonists as British citizens permitted to a certain degree of self-government by right of royal charter and by necessity of 3,000 miles of ocean separating *patria* and colony. Thus, Americans were entitled to the same rights as British citizens, including proportional, not virtual, representation.

Topic 2: Economic Consequences

At the time a wealthy aristocrat and owner of the largest plantation in the colony of Delaware, Dickinson undoubtedly possessed a vested interest in stability and reconciliation with Great Britain, the colonies' largest trading partner. Higher taxes and trade restrictions certainly cut into his profit as a planter, and like many of the merchant and planter class, Dickinson's views aimed to preserve and enhance the status quo rather than bring forth a new order, like American independence.

Topic 3: Social Consequences

Although lacking the propagandistic tendencies of New England firebrands like Samuel Adams, Dickinson's skill with the pen allowed him to rouse sentiments in those who read his works, such as the 1768 "Liberty Song," which goes, "In Freedom we're born and in Freedom we'll live. / Our purses are ready. Steady, friends, steady; / Not as slaves, but as freemen our money we'll give."⁶ One solution to the growing crisis between Britain and her colonies, according to Dickinson, was the peaceful boycott; he favored reconciliation over war.

⁴ Letter by John Dickinson, "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania," December 1767, accessed February 12, 2013, Web.

⁵ Denise Kiernan and Joseph D'Agnes, "John Dickinson: The Signer Who Never Signed," in *Signing Their Rights Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who Signed the United States Constitution* (Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books, 2011), p. 127.

⁶ John Dickinson, "The Liberty Song," 1768, in *The Quotable Founding Fathers*, ed. Buckner F. Melton, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2004), pp. 169-170.