

## Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress

Samuel Seabury

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*Winners write the histories. The Loyalists of the American colonies can be difficult to see in the pages of our history. In 1774, "Loyalist Associations" were formed to oppose the Continental Congress and other "illegal" acts. As members of the minority party during a period of intense public passion, Loyalists faced public pressure and mob action, and received minimal publicity from the press. After fighting began, Loyalists were often left without the means to publish their sentiments. An exception was Samuel Seabury (1729-1796), an Anglican minister who wrote a series of pamphlets that can help us to understand the views and concerns of Loyalists. Seabury characterizes the supporters of revolution as merchants with no concern for the harm that their economic policies will bring to American farmers. The following excerpt is from the first pamphlet published by Seabury, which provoked a fervent response from a hitherto unknown young patriot, Alexander Hamilton.*

PERMIT me to address you upon a subject, which, next to your eternal welfare in a future world, demands your most serious and dispassionate consideration. The American Colonies are unhappily involved in a scene of confusion and discord. The bands of civil society are broken; the authority of government weakened, and in some instances taken away: Individuals are deprived of their liberty; their property is frequently invaded by violence, and not a single Magistrate has had courage or virtue enough to interpose. From this distressed situation it was hoped, that the wisdom and prudence of the Congress lately assembled at Philadelphia, would have delivered us. The eyes of all men were turned to them. We ardently expected that some prudent scheme of accommodating our unhappy disputes with the Mother-Country, would have been adopted and pursued. But alas! they are broken up without ever attempting it: they have taken no one step that tended to peace: they have gone on from bad to worse, and have either ignorantly misunderstood, carelessly neglected, or basely betrayed the interests of all the Colonies.

I shall in this, and some future publication, support this charge against the Congress, by incontestible facts: But my first business shall be to point out to you some of the consequences that will probably follow from the Non-importation, Non-exportation, and Non-consumption Agreements, which they have adopted, and which they have ordered to be enforced in the most arbitrary manner, and under the severest penalties. On this subject, I choose to address myself principally to You the Farmers of the Province of New-York, because I am most nearly connected with you, being one of your number, and having no interest in the country but in common with you; and also, because the interest of the farmers in general will be more sensibly affected, and more deeply injured by these agreements, than the interest of any other body of

people on the continent. Another reason why I choose to address myself to you is, because the Farmers are of the greatest benefit to the state, of any people in it: They furnish food for the merchant, and mechanic; the raw materials for most manufactures, the staple exports of the country, are the produce of their industry: be then convinced of your own importance, and think and act accordingly. . . .

. . . the Congress . . . intend to distress the manufacturers in Great-Britain, by depriving them of employment — to distress the inhabitants of Ireland, by depriving them of flax-seed, and of a vent for their linens, — to distress the West-India people, by with-holding provisions and lumber from them, and by stopping the market for their produce. And they hope, by these means, to force them all to join their clamours with ours, to get the acts complained of, repealed. This was the undoubted design of the Congress when these agreements were framed; and this is the avowed design of their warm supporters and partizans, in common conversation.

But where is the justice, where is the policy of this procedure? The manufacturers of Great-Britain, the inhabitants of Ireland, and of the West-Indies, have done us no injury. They have been no ways instrumental in bringing our distresses upon us. Shall we then revenge ourselves upon them? Shall we endeavour to starve them into a compliance with our humours? Shall we, without any provocation, tempt or force them into riots and insurrections which must be attended with the ruin of many — probably with the death of some of them? Shall we attempt to unsettle the whole British Government — to throw all into confusion, because our self-will is not complied with? Because the ill-projected, ill-conducted, abominable scheme of some of the colonists, to form a republican government independent of Great-Britain, cannot otherwise succeed? — Good God! can we look forward to the ruin, destruction, and desolation of the whole British Empire, without one relenting thought? Can we contemplate it with pleasure; and promote it with all our might and vigour, and at the same time call ourselves his Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects? Whatever the Gentlemen of the Congress may think of the matter, the spirit that dictated such a measure, was not the spirit of humanity . . . .

The first distress will fall on ourselves: it will be more severely felt by us, than by any part of all his Majesty's dominions; and it will affect us the longest. The fleets of Great-Britain command respect throughout the globe. Her influence extends to every part of the earth. Her manufactures are equal to any, superior to most in the world. Her wealth is great. Her people enterprising, and persevering in their attempts to extend and enlarge and protect her trade. The total loss of our trade would be felt only for a time. Her merchants would turn their attention another way. New sources of trade and wealth would be opened: New schemes pursued. She would soon find a vent for all her manufactures in spite of all we could do. Our malice would hurt ourselves only. Should our schemes distress some branches of her trade, it could be only for a time; and there is ability and humanity enough in the nation to relieve those that are distressed by us, and to put them in some other way of getting their living.

The case is very different with *us*. We have no trade but under the protection of Great-Britain. We can trade no where but where she pleases. We have no influence abroad, no ambassadors, no consuls, no fleet to protect our ships in passing the seas, nor our merchants and people in foreign countries. Should our mad schemes take place, our sailors, ship-carpenters, carmen, sail-makers, riggers, miners, smelters, forge-men, and workers in bar-iron, &c. would be immediately out of employ; and we should have twenty mobs and riots in our own country, before one would happen in Britain or Ireland. Want of food will make these people mad, and they will come in troops upon our farms, and take that by force which they have not money to purchase. And who could blame them? Justice, indeed, might hang them; but the sympathetic eye would drop the tear of humanity on their grave . . .

Common sense cannot utterly have quitted the city. There must be some merchants who are sensible of the evil tendency of this Non-consumption, Non-importation and Non-exportation agreement. But where is the man who has had honour enough to avow his sentiments and oppose it? Shew him to me, and I will reverence him as the noblest work of God. Six honest merchants, who had honour, virtue, and courage enough, openly to avow their sentiments, and act accordingly, would yet save you, and their country, from ruin. But the conduct of the merchants presents a very different prospect. Whatever their particular sentiments may be, they all appear to acquiesce in this fatal determination of our deluded Congress. They seem to have expected it; for it is said, that they have imported much more largely than usual: This makes me suspect that this bustle about Non-importation, &c. has its rise, not from Patriotism, but selfishness. I have heard that merchants sometimes make an artificial scarcity, by engrossing particular commodities in a few hands, that they may avail themselves of the necessity of the buyer, and get a good price. We Countrymen are in this situation. No more goods can be imported: the merchants have us at their mercy: let them set their price ever so high, necessity will oblige us to come to their terms. Consider the matter in another light, and still it will appear, that this Non-importation scheme will and must raise the prices of goods; not only now, but probably for some years to come . . . .

Look well to yourselves, I beseech you. From the day that the exports from this province are stopped, the farmers may date the commencement of their ruin. Can you live without money? Will the shop-keeper give you his goods? Will the weaver, shoemaker, blacksmith, carpenter, work for you without pay? If they will, it is more than they will do for me. And unless you can sell your produce, how are you to get money? . . . .

Think a little, and then tell me — when the Congress adopted this cursed scheme, did they in the least consider your interest? No, impossible! they ignorantly misunderstood, carelessly neglected, or basely betrayed you. But, it is said, that all legal processes are to be stopped, except in criminal cases. — That is to say — the lower class of people are to be deprived of their daily bread, by being thrown out of employment by the Non-Exportation agreement; to prevent starving, many of them will be tempted to steal; if they steal, they are to be hanged. The dishonest fellow, who owes money, may, by refusing payment, ruin his creditor; but there

is no remedy, no process is to be issued against him. This may be justice, but it looks so much like cruelty, that a man of a humane heart would be more apt to call it by the latter, than the former name. But pray, by whose authority are the courts of Justice to be shut up, in all civil cases?—Who shall DARE to stop the Courts of justice?—A very pretty story indeed! I buy a cow of my poor neighbour, and I promise to pay him at Christmas: he wants the money to pay his shoe-maker, taylor, &c. my rascally neighbour, on the other side, owes me ten pounds; I depend upon this money to pay for the cow: he refuses payment: the Courts of Justice are shut up: I cannot sue him, nor can I pay my debt for want of the money . . . .

The grand security of the property, the liberty, the lives of Englishmen, consists in the due administration of justice. While the courts are duly attended to, and fairly conducted, our property is safe. As soon as they are shut, every thing is precarious: for neither property, nor liberty, have any foundation to stand upon.

Tell me not of Delegates, Congresses, Committees, Riots, Mobs, Insurrections, Associations, — a plague on them all. — Give me the steady, uniform, unbiassed influence of the Courts of Justice. I have been happy under their protection, and I trust in God, I shall be so again.

But after all, some of you, I fear, look forward with pleasure, to those halcyon days of security, when the Courts shall be shut. Undisturbed by the clamours of creditors, undismayed by the fight of the Sheriff, you think to pass your lives in quietness and peace. — But ah! my friends! trust not the fatal, the ill-judged security. You would not, I hope, be so dishonest as not to do your utmost endeavour to pay your debts; besides, while the Courts of Justice are shut, you will be apt to be careless. You will neglect paying your interest, your debts will accumulate, your creditors will be irritated; and as soon as a legal process can be commenced, you will be ruined before you can look about you . . . .

You ought, my friends, to assert your own freedom. Should such another attempt be made upon you, assemble yourselves together: tell your supervisor, that he has exceeded his commission: — That you will have no such Committees: — That you are Englishmen, and will maintain your rights and privileges, and will eat, and drink, and wear, whatever the public laws of your country permit, without asking leave of any illegal, tyrannical Congress or Committee on earth.

But however, as I said before, do as you please: If you like it better, choose your Committe, or suffer it to be chosen by half a dozen Fools in your neighbourhood, — open your doors to them,— let them examine your tea-cannisters, and molasses-jugs, and your wives and daughters petty-coats, — bow, and cringe, and tremble, and quake, — fall down and worship our sovereign Lord the Mob. — But I repeat it, By H—n, I will not. — No, my house is my castle: as such I will consider it, as such I will defend it, while I have breath. No King's officer shall enter it without my permission, unless supported by a warrant from a magistrate. — And shall my house be entered, and my mode of living enquired into, by a domineering Committee-man? Before *I* submit, I will die: live *you*, and be slaves . . . .

Let me intreat you, my Friends, to have nothing to do with these men, or with any of the same stamp. Peace and quietness suit *you* best. Confusion, and Discord, and Violence, and War, are sure destruction to the *farmer*. Without peace he cannot till his lands; unless protected by the laws, he cannot carry his produce to market. Peace indeed is departed from us for the present, and the protection of the laws has ceased. But I trust in God, there is yet one method left, which, by prudent management, will free us from all our difficulties; restore peace again to our dwellings, and give us the firm security of the laws for our protection. Renounce all dependence on Congresses, and Committees. They have neglected, or betrayed your interests. Turn then your eyes to your *constitutional* representatives. They are the true, and legal, and have been hitherto, the faithful defenders of your rights, and liberties; and you have no reason to think but that they will ever be so. They will probably soon meet in General Assembly. Address yourselves to them. They are the proper persons to obtain redress of any grievances that you can justly complain of. You can trust their wisdom and prudence, that they will use the most reasonable, constitutional, and effectual methods of restoring that peace and harmony, between Great Britain and this province, which is so earnestly wished for by all good men, and which is so absolutely necessary for the happiness of us all. Present a petition to them, intreating them to take the matter into their own hands, and to labour earnestly to accomplish so blessed a purpose. But beware of giving them any directions how to proceed. As soon as ever you attempt to instruct them, you lay yourselves open to be duped and fooled by designing men, in the drawing of your instructions. Some will instruct them to do one thing, and some another, and you will embarrass, but not help forward their deliberations.

Your REPRESENTATIVES know perfectly the state of the unhappy breach between our mother country and us. They want no information in this point. The more you trust them at this time, the more you will put it in their power to serve you; and the greater obligation you will lay them under to serve you faithfully, and effectually. Only beseech them to heal this unnatural breach; to settle this destructive contention; that peace and quietness, and the firm protection of law, and good government, may again be our happy lot. Would the several counties, or towns in the province, conduct themselves in this manner, God, I am confident, would bless, and give a prosperous issue to so good a work. And whatever you may be taught by designing men, to think of the government at home, they, I am certain, would embrace us with the arms of friendship; they would press us to their bosoms, to their hearts, would we give them a fair opportunity. This opportunity our Assembly alone can give them. And this opportunity, I trust, they will give them, unless we prevent all possibility of accommodation, by our own perverseness, and ill conduct. And then, God only knows where our distresses may terminate.

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