

British Actions and Colonial Reactions

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Introduction

From the beginning of colonization, the British government believed that if the American colonies were kept free of needless restrictions, they would grow in wealth and in numbers. So, Britain allowed colonial governments to handle their own affairs, including control over local taxes. This policy has come to be known as salutary (or benign) neglect. The colonists became comfortable with this arrangement, but it came to an end in the aftermath of the French and Indian War.

Following the British victory in The French and Indian War, Britain became the world's dominant colonial empire. But the war effort had been very expensive, and when it was all over, Great Britain needed to pay its debtors, organize a government in the newly acquired lands and guard the colonists from Indian attacks.

Grenville's Policy Changes

In 1763, a new prime minister, George Grenville, created a series of policies to help England achieve its goals. One of the first actions was to pass the Proclamation of 1763. This law set a border line for the western edge of the colonies to keep the settlers and Native Americans apart in order to avoid another expensive conflict. But it only made things worse for everyone.

The colonists were frustrated that they couldn't move west into the land they had fought for and won. Even worse, leaving the territory unpopulated opened the door for unrest. Native Americans united under an Ottawa leader, named Pontiac, who wanted to win back the territory and give it to France, who they preferred over the British. They attacked the weakly guarded forts, terrorized settlers who had defied the proclamation line and raided towns along the western frontier. When France refused to get involved, the attack, known as Pontiac's Conspiracy, fell apart. However, it frightened the British government, which sent 10,000 troops to guard the proclamation line. It was a military expense they couldn't afford.

Sugar, Quartering and Stamp Acts

Grenville introduced other policies that were meant to raise needed money and establish control over the increasingly unhappy colonists. The Sugar Act, in 1764, increased existing taxes on sugar products and other imported goods, such as wine, coffee, textiles and indigo. As punishment for dodging the tax, violators would be tried at a new court in Canada, depriving colonists of their right to a trial by a jury of their peers. Early the next year (1765), the Quartering Act was passed, requiring colonists to pay for food and shelter for the soldiers they hated without being repaid for their expenses.

Worst of all was the Stamp Act, which Grenville forced through Parliament in March of 1765. This required a stamp on all printed materials, including legal documents, newspapers and leisure materials, such as playing cards and books. It was the first time Americans had been required to pay a tax directly to England instead of going through their colonial legislatures first. From the British point of view, it made sense that the colonies should pay their share of the cost of their own protection, but the colonists became enraged.

When the Stamp Act passed in England, a fiery young member of the Virginia legislature named Patrick Henry wrote a statement calling for unified opposition to the law. He claimed it violated the English Bill of Rights. He believed that only the Virginia assembly could tax Virginians since they were not represented in Parliament. His boldness frightened some of his colleagues, but Henry was unyielding. 'If this be treason,' he defiantly announced, 'make the most of it.' In May, the legislature passed the Virginia Resolutions, which stated that anyone who tried to impose any tax on the people of Virginia other than its own General Assembly "shall be deemed an Enemy to this his Majesty's Colony". Newspapers printed the Resolutions widely, and people in other colonies took notice.

New York merchants started calling for a boycott, asking colonists to voluntarily stop buying the taxed items once the law went into effect. In Boston, a lawyer named James Otis published a pamphlet telling colonists that there should be 'no taxation without representation'- and everywhere, people took up that cry. Another Massachusetts colonist, Samuel Adams, organized a secret society called the Sons of Liberty. At first, they just organized protests and spread the word about the upcoming boycott. Soon, though, individual chapters of the Sons of Liberty emerged in towns throughout the colonies. Many of the members began harassing people who had agreed to become stamp agents who would collect the taxes, forcing them to resign. Later, the Sons of Liberty terrorized anyone who cooperated with the British laws.

By October, James Otis had called for a Stamp Act Congress to be held in New York City. Representatives of nine colonies attended, and together they wrote a petition to the king asking for a repeal of the Stamp Act before it went into effect. They stated that it was a violation of their rights as British citizens for a new tax to be placed on them without having direct representation in Parliament. Though King George III ignored their letter, the action unified opposition to the king and allowed many of the emerging leaders from different colonies to meet for the first time.

On November 1, 1765, the Stamp Act went into effect, and business ground to a halt as a result of the organized boycott. Riots broke out in a few cities. Imports decreased so much that British merchants in England even began asking Parliament to repeal the Act. Almost no revenue was being generated from the Act, but the agents and officers who were there to collect the taxes cost a lot of money. Finally, King George III fired Prime Minister Grenville. After heated debate, Parliament decided to repeal the Stamp Act in 1766. However, the British reasserted their authority over the colonies by passing the Declaratory Act, which proclaimed Parliament's right to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever".

Americans thanked the king by expressing their loyalty and lifting the boycott on British imports. Most simply ignored the Declaratory Act and celebrated their victory. They recognized that it was the first time their generation had successfully defied the king and won, not realizing that the real struggle had really just begun.

The Townshend Acts

With the Stamp Act repealed, Britain still needed to raise money in the colonies to pay for troops and other expenses. Britain's new finance minister, Charles Townshend, proposed new series of taxes on imports, or duties, to raise money in America. Approved in 1767, the Townshend Acts places duties on imports like glass, paper, paint, lead, and tea. In addition, the acts allowed British officers to issue writs of assistance. These blank search warrants gave officers the right to enter homes and businesses looking for smuggled or illegal goods.

News of the Townshend Acts sparked immediate protests throughout the colonies. People were furious that Parliament had again passed a tax without their consent. Colonists were also angry about the writs of assistance, which many believed went against their natural rights as defined by English philosopher, John Locke. According to the law of nature, Locke wrote, "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions".

Colonists Protest

In response to the Townshend Acts, merchants in Boston organized another boycott of British goods that swiftly spread to other colonies. Many colonists who had not previously participated in politics became politically active; protests, sometimes violent, became common. Fearing disorder, British officials called for more troops to be sent to the colonies. This action angered colonists- even those who wanted peace- and set the stage for the wider conflict to come.

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