



George Washington: From Loyal British Subject to American Patriot

By Aileen P. Mattson,

George Washington University



In 1754, George Washington was an ardent English subject. During the French and Indian War, he described “the heriock spirit” of free-born Englishmen, the “laudable Ambition” of serving his country and meriting its applause, and his duty to preserve his majesty’s “property, his dignity, and his lands.”¹ Yet in 1774, he described Parliament as tyrannical and despotic, and insisted that “Government is pursuing a regular Plan at the expence of Law & justice, to overthrow our Constitutional Rights & liberties.” He was certain “as much as I am of my Existance, that there is no relief for us [colonists] but in their distress.”² What had happened in twenty years to make him change his opinion toward Britain so drastically? In four separate areas, Britain’s second-class treatment of the colonists affected Washington’s life: his position in the military, his wealth and prosperity, his land investments, and how he paid taxes.

To begin with, Washington earned respect and status as a hero in the French and Indian War. Despite his obvious qualifications and service, the Crown repeatedly denied his request for a royal commission and placed him under the command of less

¹ William W. Abbott et al., eds., *The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series* (10 vols., Charlottesville, Virginia, 1983-1993), To Horatio Sharpe, April 24, 1754; To Francis Fauquier, December 9, 1758, 1:86; 6:165.

² To Bryan Fairfax, July 20, 1774, PGW(C), 10:128-131.



GW

qualified, royally commissioned officers. The Virginia Regiment, which was the provincial unit that he led, continuously received poorer treatment and less recognition and reward than regular units stationed in the colonies, despite their meritorious actions. Secondly, as an agriculturalist, Washington depended on an economic system that favored British merchants over colonial planters. He had no control over how and where his crops could be sold, and received low prices for them despite their acceptable quality. The lack of manufacturing in the colonies forced him to spend more money shipping needed goods from England, which often did not arrive on time or in proper condition. Thirdly, as a veteran, he earned frontier land in the Ohio Valley, as promised by the governor. He had great difficulty, however, achieving the right to survey this land and legally claim it as his own. Because the Crown thought it advantageous, it denied the promised land to colonial veterans initially to reserve it for the Indians and later to grant it to English companies. Finally, beginning in 1765 Parliament passed numerous acts to tax the colonists in order to pay the excessive debt incurred during the war with France. No matter how Washington protested or reasoned with government officials, they seemed determined to deny the colonists their constitutional rights. This constant second-class treatment wore on Washington so much that he eventually rejected the nation that he had loved and fought for in order to help create an entirely new one that he hoped would uphold the principles of liberty and justice.



As a colonel in the Virginia Regiment, Washington received his commission from the colonial governor, Robert Dinwiddie. Although Washington considered his rank equal to regular officers with commissions from the king, not everyone shared his view.³ Regular officers continuously received the best campaigns, posts, and treatment from the government, despite the fact that colonial forces were better qualified as a result of their intimate knowledge of the land. Washington asserted that his men were “as well acquainted with all the Passes and difficulties as any [royal] Troops that will be employd, and they may answer any purpose intended by them.”⁴ The British government did not listen even to high-ranking colonial officers such as Washington.

Washington often complained of disappointments and losses the army incurred because of the government’s refusal to heed colonial advice about their own homeland. “My strongest representations of matters relative to the peace of the Frontiers are disregarded as idle & frivolous,” he protested, “my propositions and measures, as partial & selfish; and all my sincerest endeavours for the service of my Country, perverted to the worst purposes.”⁵ Twenty years prior to the start of the Revolutionary War, Washington felt the unfairness with which Britain treated her colonial subjects. He was also beginning to doubt his government and criticize its actions. When British officials on the Ohio frontier talked of negotiating with the French and Indians rather

³ Adam Stephen to George Washington, October 4, 1755, PGW(C), 2:72.

⁴ To Henry Bouquet, July 21, 1757, PGW(C),5:311.

⁵ To John Robinson, December 19, 1756, PGW(C), 4:67.



than risk their lives and fortunes to fight them, Washington accused them of “very dishonourable purposes . . . unworthy the thoughts of a British Subject.”⁶ In looking out for the future fate of Virginia he asserted that British officials were not fully acquainted with the situation and circumstances of the frontiers and therefore in no position to make command decisions.⁷

Not only did the British government ignore colonial officers’ valuable input regarding conducting of the French and Indian War, it supported the degradation of colonial rank as inferior to that of regular officers. In a particular instance, a storekeeper from Trenton, New Jersey, John Dagworthy, received a temporary royal captaincy. and used its authority to contest Washington’s command of colonial troops at Fort Cumberland, Maryland, as a provincial colonel. This deeply offended Washington. “I can never submit to the command of Captain Dagworthy, since you have honoured me with the command of the Virginia Regiment,” he wrote to Governor Dinwiddie.⁸ Although Dinwiddie assured him that he outranked Dagworthy, the question of the equality of provincial versus royal commissions continued. Only a proclamation from the king granting royal commissions to colonists holding provincial ones could settle this question. Washington began requesting this as early as 1755, when he expressed to his second in command, Adam Stephen, “I have Sanguine

⁶ To Robert Dinwiddie, April 24, 1756, PGW(C), 3:46.

⁷ To John Robinson, December 19, 1756, PGW(C), 4:67.

⁸ December 5, 1755, PGW(C), 2:172.



expectation's we soon shall receive [royal commissions] if they are not already on their way."⁹ As the months wore on, however, it became evident that these commissions were not coming. Washington feared this delay was ominous. If they did not come he would consider leaving the military altogether, since "it will be useless for me to go to a place where I am to be commanded and directed by another, who can have no other pretence, than that of having a Commission from the King."¹⁰ He did not consider the king's favoritism a sufficient reason to outrank his experience and knowledge.

What made this rank inferiority even more obscene was the fact that the Virginia Regiment had contributed more toward the war effort and endured more discomforts than any other! It was the first to arms in the French and Indian War, spent three full years engaged in continuous, bloody action, and because of their small numbers, was constantly in motion with no winter quarters. They endured these hardships with "great Spirit and cheerfulness" at first, but the hazard to life, fortune, and health promoted languor and indifference among the troops by the beginning of 1757. Washington's disgust with their unjust conduct is evident as he complained, "we labour under every disadvantage, and enjoy not one benefit which regulars do. . . . Our Services are slighted, or have not been properly represented to His Majesty: otherwise the best of Kings would have graciously taken Notice of Us in turn." Washington could not believe that their status as Americans would deprive them of the benefits of British

⁹ November 18 1755, PGW(C), 2:172.

¹⁰ To John Robinson, December 5, 1755, PGW(C), 2:204.



Subjects and lessen their claim to advancement. If regular troops had served three bloody campaigns, they certainly would have received royal notice and benefits, but it was evident that Britain viewed the Virginia Regiment as less important and worthy than regulars.¹¹

For four years, Washington attempted to convince authorities of the deservedness of royal commissions for provincial officers and better treatment of the Virginia Regiment. While they were posted upon the Ohio River at Fort Duquesne, he “endeavoured to shew [to General Edward Braddock] that the Kings Troops *ought* to garrison it” since Washington’s men were left there in miserable condition. They had inadequate clothing in harsh winter weather and risked death if their situation did not change.¹² While Washington’s regiment did receive more blankets, they never received orders for their relief and replacement. As time wore on, Washington became “quite dispirited” at the prospect before him. The arrogance of British regulars, who were ultimately in charge, continuously blocked the Virginia Regiment from winning distinction and participating in the important and glorious battles of the war.

When Washington heard that his regiment has missed a golden opportunity to seize Fort Duquesne because they were building a road under orders from the British, he realized that Britain had no intent of allowing the Virginia Regiment to fight for glory and distinction. He lamented, “it has long been the luckless Fate of poor Virginia

¹¹ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, March 10, 1757, PGW(C), 2:112-114.

¹² George Washington to Francis Fauquier, December 1, 1758, PGW(C), 6:162.



to fall a Victim to the views of her Crafty Neighbours; and yield her honest efforts to promote their common Interests, at the expence of much Blood & Treasure: while her sincerety justified her Measures.” Washington’s loyalty toward Virginia, his home, is unmistakable in this passage. His love of his homeland would make the transition from British patriot to American rebel easier once his grievances toward Britain intensified. In 1758, though, Washington assumed, like most others, that the king’s ministers and advisors were to blame for the wasting away of the Virginia Regiment. He wished to “let [the king] know how grossly his [Honor] and the Publick money has been prostituted.”¹³ While disappointed in the government and its treatment of colonists, he still considered himself a British subject and retained his loyalty to the king. The colonists’ assumptions that the king was ignorant of the wrongdoings done to them and that his ministers were behind it would continue for the next fifteen years. In 1759, being “very distressed” by the condition of his Virginia Regiment and the lack of “common humanity,” Washington finally did what he had threatened for years: he resigned his commission in protest of the iniquitous treatment he and other colonists were receiving and returned to private life at Mount Vernon.¹⁴

In his private life also, though, Washington would struggle against colonial discrimination from the merchants who sold his crops, namely tobacco, in London. He

¹³ George Washington to John Robinson, September 1, 1758 PGW(C), 5:432.

¹⁴ George Washington to Francis Fauquier, December 9, 1758; George Washington to Richard Washington, May 7, 1759 PGW(C), 6:165, 319.



constantly complained that his tobacco did not draw the price it warranted and that his neighbors' tobacco fetched higher prices, even though they were of the same quality.¹⁵ He tried several different companies but none satisfied him. In 1759 he complained that his tobacco sold for one-third its value, and carped, "Certain I am no Person in Virginia takes more pains to make their Tobo. Fine than I do and tis hard then I should not be as well rewarded for it."¹⁶ His letters to different British merchants all carry the same tone of disbelief that his tobacco sold for so much less than his neighbors': "I cant imagine how it happens that the last Tobo Shipd you shd be of a worse quality than formerly – the Overseers all Affirm to me that the Tobo was of the same kind & quality here," and "Colo. Fairfax's Tobo was . . . of the same kind exactly [as] mine . . . I could conceive no reason therefore why his Tobacco shoud so far out sell mine." Unfortunately, these complaints had no effect.¹⁷

Washington also protested the condition in which many of his ordered goods arrived: much of his cargo was missing, damaged, or even useless because of the carelessness of the merchants in London. The British Navigation Acts stipulated that the colonies could not manufacture and must import all their goods from Great Britain, using only British ships. He needed many of these goods for the farming season, so when they did not arrive he had to buy them from others in America at inflated

¹⁵ To Anthony Bacon and Company, September 10, 1757; PGW(C), 4:400.

¹⁶ To Richard Washington; May 7, 1759; To Robert Carey & Co., April 3, 1761, PGW(C), 6:319; 7:35.

¹⁷ To James Gildart, June 12, 1759; To Robert Carey & Co., April 26, 1763, PGW(C), 6:326; 7:204.



prices.¹⁸ This time spent either without needed items or finding replacement items could have instead been spent increasing quality or production of his crops to make more money. One can imagine the annoyance and expense colonial planters endured because of British merchants' carelessness. Washington continued to complain to these merchants for the next decade, but to no avail.¹⁹

This economic system was designed to benefit the merchants in Britain, and it did so at the exploitation of colonial planters.²⁰ Merchants made it very easy for the planters to buy what they needed for their crops on credit. Washington's debt, like that of most other upper class Virginian planters, grew steadily in the first half of the 1760s. To add to his troubles, in 1763, British merchants had persuaded the Crown to order payment of debts in sterling, not colonial paper money, which greatly devalued the value of colonial currency.²¹ He wrote in frustration to Cary & Co., "It may also be looked upon, as unlucky at least, that the Debts which I thought I collected, and actually did remit to you should be paid in Bills void of credit." He continued expressing his irritation to their demand for money, since he could not pay his debt faster than his crops would allow him to make enough money to do so.²²

¹⁸ George Washington to Thomas Knox, December 16, 1757, PGW(C), 5:72.

¹⁹ George Washington to Richard Washington, December 16, 1757; to Thomas Knox, January 1758; to Richard Washington, March 18, 1758; to James Gildart, June 12, 1759; to Robert Carey & Co., August 10, 1764, PGW(C), 5:73, 87, 105; 6:325; 7:323.

²⁰ Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, (The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 68-70.

²¹ Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, 74.

²² August 10, 1764, PGW(C), 7:323.



Washington took great pride in all that he did, and invested much time and effort to make his tobacco crop the best in Virginia. While he recognized that he did not cultivate the paramount tobacco in Virginia, he knew also that the main reason for his debt was due to the economic system.²³ As advancement in the military had been based on connections rather than merit, so also tobacco prices were based on associations rather than on their quality. This disgusted Washington, who prized the notion of earning rewards through hard work and talent. Washington realized that the creditors in Britain were becoming more demanding as the colonies sunk further into debt. He expressed “it is but an irksome thing to a free mind to be any ways hampered in Debt,” and so began taking measures to raise himself from the debt that forced his dependency to these creditors.²⁴ He went on to inquire about the price of hemp, and gradually switched away from tobacco toward other crops that would make him more profit, especially wheat.²⁵

Washington also took great pains to reduce his purchases from England. It had become customary in colonial Virginia for upper-class planters to buy lavish clothing and furnishings on credit in addition to necessities for their crops. Many men felt they needed to continue this practice to uphold their social status, even as their debts began to mount. Washington, on the other hand, pioneered the realization that these imports

²³ George Washington to Robert Cary & Co., August 10, 1764, PGW(C), 7:323.

²⁴ To Robert Carey & Co., August 10, 1764, PGW(C), 7:325.

²⁵ George Washington to Capel and Osgood Hanbury, September 20, 1765, PGW(C), 7:394-395.



GW

were hurting the colonies' economies and the planters' fiscal independence. "Our whole Substance does already in a manner flee to Great Britain," he asserted. Lessening their imports from Britain would hurt British manufacturers and make the colonists aware of the fact that they did not need the luxuries imported from Britain because "the necessaries of life are (mostly) to be had within ourselves."²⁶ At Mount Vernon, he began to manufacture flour, make the slaves' clothing, and fish in the Potomac as profitable enterprises.²⁷ It is obvious that a defensive mentality against Great Britain was growing in Washington's mind, although the notion of having to choose between Britain and the colonies lay years away.

Another measure Washington took to achieve financial independence was by procuring frontier lands. In 1754 Governor Dinwiddie issued a proclamation promising 200,000 acres of bounty lands to veterans of the Virginia Regiment in the French and Indian War. The Crown, however, issued a Royal Proclamation in 1763 reserving the country west of the Allegheny Mountains to the Indians, which blocked the claims of these regimental veterans. Once again, the British government protected its own interests at the expense of the colonists'. Britain feared that too many colonists in the interior of the continent would be to Britain's disadvantage for several reasons. Colonists in the interior would be further from their control, and the distance from water would compel these settlers to manufacture articles they would otherwise buy

²⁶ To Francis Dandridge, September 20, 1765, PGW(C), 7:395.

²⁷ Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, 83.



from Britain. This would lead to a further divergence of interests between mother country and colonies.²⁸

Many colonists, however, chose to settle the frontier illegally in order to secure their lands. Washington encouraged this, because once a squatter settled on a piece of land it was very difficult to remove him. He knew that the king would eventually grant the veterans the lands to which they had rights, and “any Person therefore who neglects the present opportunity of hunting out good Land & in some measure Marking & distinguishing them for their own (in order to keep others from settling them) will never regain it.” He saw the proclamation as “a temporary expedient to quiet the Minds of the Indians” and predicted it “must fall of course in a few years especially when those Indians are consenting to our Occupying the Lands.” He proposed to join William Crawford in attempting to secure some of the most valuable lands before others settled it.²⁹

Britain reopened the Ohio Valley to white settlers, but disputes over where and how much land these veterans had rights to continued, hampering Washington’s plan to “secure a good deal of Land.”³⁰ He wrote to Lord Botetourt, Virginia governor, protesting the number of grants that appeared upon the council books in comparison with the number of petitions submitted, and the “inevitable consequences” that would

²⁸ Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, 103-104.

²⁹ To William Crawford, September 17, 1767, PGW(C), 8:27-29.

³⁰ To William Crawford, September 17, 1767, PGW(C), 8:28.



follow a delay in granting the veterans their land. These consequences were the loss of the lands to other white settlers. For months Washington continued to request the order for the lands upon the terms of Dinwiddie's proclamation with no results.³¹ So when he received a report that land in the Ohio Valley was granted to "a Company of Gentlemen in England" he must have been furious!³² The fact that Britain would retract its promise of land to colonial veterans, who sacrificed life, fortune, and health in the French and Indian War, yet grant that land to English "gentlemen" was outrageous.³³ Washington kept his temper under control, however, and further attempted to reason with Botetourt. "Any delay in the prosecution of our Plan would amount to an absolute defeat of the Grant inasmuch as Emigrants are daily Seating the choice Spots of Land." Knowing these emigrants could receive a legal title to this land under the condition of possession and improvement, Washington lowered his expectations from the governor, requesting only to be allowed to survey their land while they waited for an official grant.³⁴ This also had no effect.

A full five years after the lands reopened to white settlers, and almost twenty years after Dinwiddie's proclamation, Washington was still trying to obtain the rights to his portion of the 200,000 acres. He tried to convince Lord Dunmore, Virginia governor, to grant them the titles to the land despite contradicting orders from Parliament,

³¹ December 8, 1769, PGW(C), 8:272.

³² George Washington to Lord Botetourt, September 9, 1770, PGW(C), 8:379.

³³ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, March 10, 1757, PGW(C), 4:112-114.

³⁴ September 9, 1770, PGW(C), 8:379.



because the king had granted an exception to the Proclamation of 1763 for veterans. They cleverly ascertained the governor's right to allow them to survey the lands since "these Lands have ever been considered as appertaining to Virginia." At this time in 1773, they were competing with colonial officers from Pennsylvania in addition to squatters for the land. They pleaded with Dunmore that he was the only one who could "accelerate their just rights" since the pretensions of Pennsylvania officers, squatters and the English gentlemen, were "not better founded than their own."³⁵ None of these attempts worked. At this time, however, tensions between the colonies and Britain were reaching an all time high, and the grants the colonists were begging for (and never to receive) would soon become irrelevant.

The Stamp Act of 1765 marked a major turning point in British-colonial relations. In debt from the high cost of war with France, Parliament issued its first direct tax on the colonies. Unlike other British taxes, the Stamp Act was an *internal* tax to be levied on things produced within the colonies, such as newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets and broadsides, legal documents, insurance policies, ship's papers, licenses, dice, and playing cards. The revenue from this tax would help pay regular troops stationed in the colonies. This bold assertion of Parliament's right to tax colonists regardless of their lack of representation in Parliament infuriated many, especially those it affected most such as lawyers, printers, tavern owners, and land speculators. As a result, the base of

³⁵ November 2, 1773, PGW(C), 9:356.



opposition against Britain broadened. Colonists feared this tax would be the first of many, and that Britain was deliberately aiming to weaken the colonies.³⁶

Washington called the Stamp Act an “unconstitutional method of Taxation” and a “direful attack upon [colonists’] Liberties.”³⁷ In several letters, he declared his strong opposition to the act, since “the whole product of our labour hitherto has centered in great Britain, what more can they desire?” He did not know what would come out of this “ill Judgd measure,” but he predicted its failure, asserting that its advantageousness toward Britain would fall short of the ministry’s expectations.³⁸

Washington recognized the colonists’ frustration with Britain’s discrimination, and that they would be willing to work together to have the Stamp Act repealed. He had long suggested inter-colonial cooperation as key to the success of the colonies as a whole. As early as 1758, he formatted a plan to organize colonial fur trade with the Indians with commissioners from each colony so that “all the attempts of one colony undermining another and thereby weakening and diminishing the general system, might be frustrated.”³⁹ In 1765, he supported inter-colonial cooperation for non-importation in protest of the Stamp Act.

³⁶ Richard B. Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History, Sixth Edition* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 87.

³⁷ To Francis Dandridge, September 20, 1765, PGW(C), 7:395-396.

³⁸ To Robert Carey & Co., September 20, 1765, PGW(C), 7:401-402.

³⁹ To Francis Fauquier, December 2, 1758, PGW(C), 6:161.



He also understood why the Stamp Act would fail on an economic level. Taxes would lessen importation of British goods, which would hurt the manufacturers. People would realize that they could forego many luxuries imported from Britain and make the items they needed to survive in America. “This consequently will introduce frugality; and be a necessary stimulation to Industry – Great Britain may then load her Exports with as Heavy Taxes as She pleases but where will be the consumption?” He declared that nothing would compel the colonists to barter their money or staple commodities for British manufactured items if they could supply them more cheaply for themselves in America.⁴⁰ The fact that he seemed to understand the big picture while the government did not further diminished his confidence in Britain. Its audacity at claiming the right to tax indiscriminately decreased his incentive to remain loyal to the mother country. When Virginia Governor Francis Fauquier heard that the House of Burgesses adopted modifications of Patrick Henry’s resolutions against the Stamp Act, he promptly dismissed it. In response, Washington decided to seek election to the House from Fairfax County.⁴¹ While he had held the office in Frederick County previously, Fairfax County was much more involved in the confrontation with Britain. This was the first time he acted politically to involve himself in the mounting disputes with Great Britain.

⁴⁰ To Robert Carey & Co., September 20, 1765, PGW(C), 7:401-402.

⁴¹ August 1765, PGW(C), 7:384n.



As Washington predicted, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act because decreased imports from the colonies hurt British manufacturers and merchants. Washington rejoiced alongside his fellow colonists, exclaiming “had the Parliament of Great Britain resolvd upon enforcing it the consequences I conceive woud have been more direful than is generally apprehended both to the Mother Country & her Colonies.”⁴² He knew that the continuation of the Stamp Act would have led to intensification of rebellion in the colonies, which would have provoked harsh reaction from Britain. Two of his friends and colonial supporters in Britain, however, warned him that too much celebration in America over the Stamp Act’s repeal might induce Parliament to assert its authority over the colonies and “bring on such Consequences upon you & your real Friends here that we even should dread to think of it.” They were referencing the possibility of war between Britain and the colonies, though they “apprehended that there was the least degree of probability of it.”⁴³

If tensions between Britain and her colonies continued to rise, war was a very real possibility. Washington himself referred to the impending conflict as “Scenes of confusion and distress.” He alleged that to end these tensions and prevent a conflict, Britain should give the colonies more freedom instead of attempting to assert more control. Allowing the colonies to pursue trade, agriculture, and manufacturing would benefit the mother country economically, as well, since the money raised would

⁴² To Robert Carey & Co., July 21, 1766, PGW(C), 7:457.

⁴³ Capel and Osgood Hanbury, March 27, 1766, PGW(C), 7:431.



ultimately center in Great Britain “as certain as the Needle will settle to the Poles.”⁴⁴

This is the end Washington desperately hoped for so that Britain and the colonies would stay united.

The repeal of the Stamp Act was indeed only a small victory for the colonies. Parliament immediately issued the Declaratory Act in 1766, which asserted its authority to raise revenue in the American colonies through internal taxation. The colonists protested the Stamp Act for the fundamental reason of asserting that Parliament did *not* have this authority. When Parliament agreed to the Townshend Acts in 1767, tensions once again heightened. These acts imposed import duties on glass, lead, paints, paper, and tea.⁴⁵ Unlike the Stamp Act these taxes were external, yet they still outraged the colonists, who did not recognize Parliament’s right to tax them at all. In response, colonies again encouraged protest, and debated upon the best course of action to do so. “At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou’d be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors,” Washington stressed to George Mason, a neighboring Virginia planter and politician. Washington knew the time had come to organize the colonies and take action, instead of just complaining.

⁴⁴ To Capel and Osgood Hanbury, July 25, 1767, PGW(C), 8:15.

⁴⁵ Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History*, 90.



Washington's fear that the conflict would turn bloody intensified. "That no man shou'd scruple, or hesitate a moment to use a[r]ms in defence of so valuable a blessing, on which all the good and evil of life depends; is clearly my opinion; yet A[r]ms I wou'd beg leave to add, should be the last resource." Washington did not want armed conflict, but deemed liberty a cause worth fighting for. Colonial government had already tried addresses to the throne and protests to Parliament with no result. "How far then their attention to our rights & priviledges is to be awakened or alarmed by starving their Trade & manufactures, remains to be tried."⁴⁶ Non-importation seemed the only option. If it did not work, armed conflict was the last resort. As a member of the House of Burgesses, Washington took a leading role in forming Virginia's non-importation association to promote the repeal of the Townshend duties.⁴⁷ He greatly hoped that this measure would compel Great Britain to realize how serious the colonists were about defending their rights and liberties. Only if Britain realized this and compromised with them could they avoid war.

The seriousness with which Washington took the non-importation scheme demonstrated his loyalty to both Virginia and the colonies as a whole. He put a great deal of thought into which items to permit so the colonists would not suffer too greatly and could continue to farm and fish. He also debated about how to deal with non-

⁴⁶ To George Mason, April 5, 1767, PGW(C), 8:177.

⁴⁷ PGW(C), 8:180n.



compliers of the agreement. He decided that they “ought to be stigmatized, and made the objects of publick reproach” since refusing to observe non-importation demonstrated either selfishness or agreement with Parliament’s violation of their rights. Yet, like most colonists, he still hoped for reconciliation between Britain and America. When the Virginia Burgesses petitioned Parliament and the king for repeal of the Townshend duties, they implored the king’s “Fatherly goodness and Protection” and assured “their most cordial and inviolable attachment to your sacred Person and Government.” Washington also disagreed with non-exportation, since “the Colonies are considerably indebted to Great Britain” and needed revenue to pay their debts. Refusing to pay the debts owed to British merchants was wrong and only to be used as an absolute last resort.⁴⁸ Washington did not want the colonies to use the duties as an excuse to avoid paying what they owed to Britain. When Lord North became the head of government in Britain in 1770, he repealed all the Townshend duties except the tax on tea. This quelled non-importation and for the next three years, the colonies had little reason to cooperate against Britain.⁴⁹

Parliament’s passing of the Tea Act in May of 1773 initiated a chain of events that marked a significant turning point in Washington’s view toward Britain’s treatment of her colonies. The Tea Act allowed the East India Company to sell its tea directly to the colonies so that it only had to pay the Townshend duty and not an additional duty in

⁴⁸ To George Mason, April 5, 1767, PGW(C), 8:177; Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, 88.

⁴⁹ Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History*, 92-93.



London. This would save the company from financial collapse, and allow it to compete with tea smugglers, who had previously dominated the tea trade in the colonies with their cheaper prices. While Britain expected the colonists to be happy at the new cheaper price on tea, colonists were enraged at Britain's forcing them to pay the Townshend duty for their tea, and boycotted it altogether. In protest of the Tea Act, the Sons of Liberty in Boston boarded some East India Company ships and threw 342 crates of tea into the Boston Harbor. While George Washington did not approve of the Bostonians' conduct in destroying the tea, Britain's response toward Boston outraged him once again.⁵⁰ Britain passed a series of laws designed to punish and control Boston rebels. Together they were known in America as the Intolerable Acts.

The Intolerable Acts stripped away Massachusetts colonists' rights and spread fear among the other colonies of Britain's gross abuse of power. The Boston Port Act closed the Port of Boston until restitution was made for the tea, which Britain enforced by setting up a blockade. Since the Port of Boston was a major source of supplies for all of Massachusetts, colonists protested that this punished the entire colony instead of just the individuals involved. The Administration of Justice Act, known in Massachusetts as the Murder Act, protected crown officials from major suits before hostile provincial courts and allowed them to be tried in Britain. This effectually gave crown officials freedom to act against colonists without fear of repercussion from colonial courts, as

⁵⁰ George Washington to George William Fairfax, January 10, 1774, PGW(C), 10:94-99.



long as they claimed they acted to put down a riot or to collect revenue. The Massachusetts Government Act virtually annulled the Massachusetts charter, eliminating Massachusetts colonists' say in their government and giving complete control to the king and his officials. The Quartering Act, which pertained to all the colonies, legalizing the quartering of troops in uninhabited houses, barns, and other buildings. Finally, the Quebec Act instituted reforms favorable to the French Catholic inhabitants of Quebec, and extended its boundaries south to the Ohio River, over parts of which Virginia, Connecticut, and Massachusetts had claims. While the Quebec Act was not related part of the Intolerable Acts, the timing of its passage led colonists to believe Britain was showing preferential treatment toward Canada as further punishment for their rebellion.⁵¹

Washington called the Boston Port Act "oppressive and arbitrary" and the House of Burgesses met to call for a day of fasting and prayer to protest it. Upon learning of this, though, Governor Dunmore suddenly and unexpectedly dismissed the legislature. British officials' determination to control the colonists and stifle their protests infuriated colonists further and gave them reason to unite. The day after they were dissolved, the Burgesses convened at a tavern to continue discussion of how to work with other colonies to best dispute Britain's injustice toward Massachusetts. Their resolve stated Boston's "piteous and melancholy situation" and suggested the "Assistance and

⁵¹ Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History*, 97-98.



Cooperation of the other Colonies.” They read aloud a letter sent to all the other colonies from a Boston Town Meeting, requesting “a general association against exports and imports, of every kind, to or from Great Britain.”⁵² Washington was not the only colonist planning inter-colonial cooperation against Britain.

The Burgesses declared that Americans would never be taxed without consent, and that the plight of Boston was the cause of America, because “we shall not suffer ourselves to be sacrificed by piecemeal though god only knows what is to become of us.” Washington described the urgency of the situation in a letter to his dear friend George Fairfax, “Things seem to be hurrying to an alarming Crisis, and demand the speedy, united Councils of all those who have a regard for the common cause My patience is entirely exhausted in waiting till the business as they call it, is done, or in other words till the exchange is fix’d.”⁵³ The Boston Port Act and the Intolerable Acts pushed George Washington over the edge and forced him to stand firmly united with the colonies against Great Britain. He was impatient with trying to reason with Great Britain and wanted the impending conflict to be over.

His waning loyalty toward Britain and waxing devotion toward America is evident in a series of letters he exchanged with Bryan Fairfax. While a supporter of the Virginia non-importation, Fairfax was deeply conflicted over with whom his loyalty rested. He criticized the Bostonians’ refusal to pay for the tea and questioned whether

⁵² Enclosure, PGW(C), 10:99, 10n.

⁵³ January 10, 1774, PGW(C), 10:94-99.



the Tea Act warranted the colonists' militant response. "If the same outrage had been committed in any foreign Port," he argued, "[would] the Government . . . have acquiesced without demanding and enforcing Restitution?" He did not think England's response was uncalled-for considering the conduct of the Boston people, who have "all along appeared to me to shew a different Spirit from the Rest of the Colonies." Fairfax believed the colonists ought to abide by their Constitution and the laws passed by their superiors.⁵⁴ He begged Washington to try petitioning the Crown instead of resorting to non-importation agreements, to which Washington replied, "have we not tried this already? Have we not addressed the Lords, and remonstrated to the Commons? And to what end? Did they deign to look at our petitions?" None of the petitions the colonists had sent to Parliament over the years had yielded any change in British-American relations. Washington continued to argue that the non-importation scheme would have some effect, and if it was not enough than the "last extremity," war with Britain, was their only option. "Whether this is now come, is the question." Washington knew war was inevitable, he just did not know when.⁵⁵

Washington demonstrated his American patriotism in his arguments to Fairfax. His "Innate Spirit of freedom" told him that the measures the British administration had been pursuing were "repugnant to every principle of natural justice." He asserted that "the Acts of a British Parliament are not longer Govern'd by the Principles of

⁵⁴ August 5, 1774, PGW(C), 10:144-150.

⁵⁵ July 4, 1774, PGW(C), 10:109-110.



justice – that it is trampling upon the valuable Rights of American’s.” Parliament would stop at nothing to control the colonies, no matter how much it violated their rights. He was certain that something must happen to redefine the relationship between America and Great Britain; if Britain did not agree to this, then the colonists would not “submit to every Imposition that can be heap’d upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject [as] Slaves.”⁵⁶ He desperately wanted Britain to recognize that the colonists would take no more abuse; then it might come to a compromise instead of insisting on controlling the colonists through legislation.

In two of his letters to Bryan Fairfax, Washington did not even mean to argue his case. His passion was so intense, however, that it seems he could not even stop his hand from writing the words. “I began with telling you, that I was to write a short letter. My paper informs me I have done otherwise,” and “I intended to have wrote no more than an apology for not writing, but find I am Insensibly running into a length I did not expect.” Washington’s passion came from his conviction that there was a conspiracy against the colonies by Britain. “Does it not appear, as clear as the sun is in its meridian brightness, that there is a regular systematic plan formed to fix the right and practice of taxation upon us? Does not the uniform conduct of Parliament for some years past confirm this?” He advocated putting their virtue and fortitude to the severest test in order to renounce this plan of taxation and assert their rights. Far from

⁵⁶ August 24, 1774, PGW(C), 10:154-156.



Britain attempting to look out for her own interests, Washington avowed “I am as fully convinc’d, as I am of my existence, that there has been a regular Systematick Plan formd, to enforce [the Intolerable Acts]; and that nothing but Unanimity in the Colonies (a stroke they did not expect) and a firmness can prevent it.”⁵⁷

By the summer of 1774, Washington had very little loyalty remaining for Britain. He had emerged as a militant leader in Fairfax County. Along with George Mason and others, he authored the Fairfax Resolves, which were a list of statements directed toward Britain. The resolves asserted the colonies’ rights, the principles under which they wished to be governed, and grievances toward the Crown. While most of the colonies wrote similar resolves, only the militant Fairfax Resolves stated, “It is our greatest Wish and Inclination, as well as Interest, to continue our Connection with, and Dependence upon the British Government; but tho’ We are it’s Subjects, we will use every Means which Heaven hath given Us to prevent our becoming it’s Slaves.”⁵⁸ This suggestion of armed conflict evidenced the seriousness with which its authors took the situation. The Virginia General Assembly used the Fairfax Resolves as a model, and the First Continental Congress used the Virginia Assembly Resolves as the model for its resolves sent to Great Britain on behalf of the united colonies of America. Although Washington’s loyalty at this time was firmly directed toward America, he never at any point *wanted* war with Britain. From the First Continental Congress he wrote, “It is the

⁵⁷ July 4 1774; August 24, 1774 PGW(C), 10: 109-110, 154-156.

⁵⁸ July 18, 1774; PGW(C), 10:119-127.

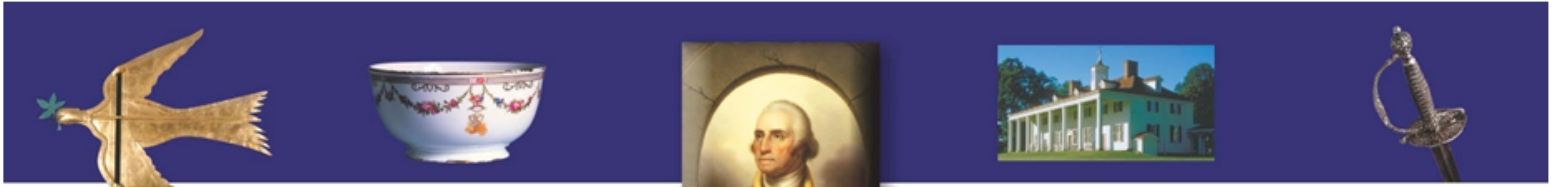


GW

ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty, that peace & tranquility, upon Constitutional grounds, may be restored, & the horrors of civil discord prevented.”⁵⁹ He knew, though, the inevitability of these horrors if Britain did not concede to their demands.

George Washington did not choose to renounce Britain and become an American patriot. Over a period of twenty years, he noticed the effects of Britain’s unfair treatment of the colonists in his military service, his dealings with London merchants, his efforts to procure land, and his attempts to assert colonial rights. He lost confidence in British government as it continually made decisions that negatively affected both America and Britain for the sole purpose of tightening control over the colonists. Furthermore, he suspected a deliberate plan on behalf of Britain to impose these ridiculous controls over America. His reasoning led him to deduce that Britain did not view her colonists as equal citizens, and his conscience would not let him idly watch as he and his fellow colonists were treated unjustly. Washington never desired conflict with Britain, but with each new dilemma he gradually came to accept that they it was going to change its attitude toward America, and that the inevitable war that would follow. The tone of his words became angrier over time and demonstrated his growing frustration with the situation – Britain simply refused to compromise, which made mending the disagreements between them impossible. Washington never stopped

⁵⁹ To Robert McKenzie, October 9, 1774, PGW(C), 10:171-172.



GW

being patriotic toward Britain, he simply chose his home, Virginia, over a repressive government across the Atlantic.