

John Dickinson - Letters from “A Farmer” - 1768



“Let us consider our selves as men—freemen—Christian freemen—separated from the rest of the world, and firmly bound together by the same rights, interests and dangers. ... for posterity, to whom, by the most sacred obligations, we are bound to deliver down the invaluable inheritance; ... you may surely, without presumption, believe, that Almighty God himself will look down upon your righteous contest with gracious approbation. You will be a “band of brothers,” cemented by the dearest ties, and strengthened with inconceivable supplies of force and constancy, by that sympathetic ardor, which animates good men, confederated in a good cause. Your honor and welfare will be, as they now are, most intimately concerned; and besides, you are assigned by divine providence, in the appointed order of things, the protectors of unborn ages, whose fate depends upon your virtue. Whether they shall arise the generous and indisputable heirs of the noblest patrimonies, or the dastardly and hereditary drudges of imperious task-masters, you must determine.”

John Dickinson, Letters from “A Farmer,” Letter XII., Philadelphia, February 15, 1768.

My Dear Countrymen—Some states have lost their liberty by particular accidents : but this calamity is generally owing to the decay of virtue. A people is travelling fast to destruction, when individuals consider their interests as distinct from those of the public. Such notions are fatal to their country, and to themselves. Yet how many are there, so weak and sordid as to think they perform all the offices of life, if they earnestly endeavour to encrease their own wealth, power, and credit, without the least regard for the society, under the protection of which they live; who, if they can make an immediate profit to themselves, by lending their assistance to those, whose projects plainly tend to the injury of their country, rejoice in their dexterity, and believe themselves entitled to the character of able politicians. Miserable men! of whom it is hard to say, whether they ought to be most the objects of pity or contempt: but whose opinions are certainly as detestable, as their practices are destructive.

Tho' I always reflect, with a high pleasure, on the integrity and understanding of my countrymen; which, joined with a pure and humble devotion to the great and gracious author of every blessing they enjoy, will, I hope, ensure to them, and their posterity, all temporal and eternal happiness; yet when I consider, that in every age and country there have been bad men, my heart, at this threatening period, is so full of apprehension, as not to ‘permit me to believe, but that there may be some on this continent, against whom you ought to be upon your guard—men, who either hold, or expect to hold certain advantages, by setting examples of servility to their countrymen. Men, who trained to the employment, or self taught by a natural versatility of genius, serve as decoys for drawing the innocent and unwary into snares. It is not to be doubted but that such men will diligently bestir themselves on this and every like occasion, to spread the infection of their meanness as far as they can. On the plans they have adopted, this is their course. This is the method to recommend themselves to their patrons.

From them we shall learn, how pleasant and profitable a thing it is, to be for our submissive behavior well spoken of at St. James's, or St. Stephen's; at Guildhall, or the Royal Exchange. Specious fallacies will be drest up with all the arts of delusion, to persuade one colony to distinguish herself from another, by unbecoming condescensions, which will serve the ambitious purposes of great men at home, and therefore will be thought by them to entitle their assistants in obtaining them to considerable rewards.

Our fears will be excited. Our hopes will be awakened. It will be insinuated to us, with a plausible affectation of wisdom and concern, how prudent it is to please the powerful—how dangerous to provoke them—and then comes in the perpetual incantation that freezes up every generous purpose of the soul in cold, inactive expectation—“that if there is any request to be made, compliance will obtain a favorable attention.”

Our vigilance and our union are success and safety. Our negligence and our division are distress and death. They are worse—they are shame and slavery. Let us equally shun the benumbing stillness of overweening sloth, and the feverish activity of that ill informed zeal, ‘which busies itself in maintaining little, mean, and narrow opinions.

Let us with a truly wise generosity and charity, banish and discourage all illiberal distinctions, which may arise from differences in situations, forms of government, or modes of religion. Let us consider our selves as men—freemen—Christian freemen—separated from the rest of the world, and firmly bound together by the same rights, interests and dangers. Let these keep our attention inflexibly fixed on the great objects, which we must continually regard in order to preserve those rights, to promote those interests, and to avert those dangers.

Let these truths be indelibly impressed on our minds—that we cannot be happy without being free—that we cannot be free without being secure in our property—that we cannot be secure in our property, if without our consent, others may, as by right, take it away—that taxes imposed on us by Parliament, do thus take it away—that duties laid for the sole purpose of raising money, are taxes—that attempts to lay such duties should be instantly and firmly opposed—that this opposition can never be effectual, unless it is the united effort of these provinces—that therefore benevolence of temper towards each other, and unanimity of councils are essential to the welfare of the whole—and lastly that for this reason every man amongst us, who in any manner would encourage either dissension, diffidence, or indifference between these colonies is an enemy to himself and to his country.

The belief of these truths, I verily think, my countrymen, is indispensably necessary to your happiness. I beseech you, therefore, “teach them diligently unto your children, and talk of them when you sit in your houses, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

What have these colonies to ask, while they continue free? Or what have they to dread, but insidious attempts to subvert their freedom? Their prosperity does not depend on ministerial favours doled out to particular provinces. They form one political body of which each colony is a member. Their happiness is founded on their constitution; and is to be promoted by preserving that constitution in unabated vigor, throughout every part. A spot, a speck of decay, however small the limb on which it appears, and however remote it may seem from the vitals, should be alarming. We have all the rights requisite for our prosperity. The legal authority of Great Britain may indeed lay hard restrictions upon us; but like the spear of Telephus, it will cure as well as wound. Her unkindness will instruct and compel us, after some time, to discover in our industry and frugality, surprising remedies—if our rights continue unviolated. For as long as the products of our labor, and the rewards of our care, can properly be called our own, so long it will be worth our while to be industrious and frugal. But if when we plow—sow—reap—gather—and thresh—we find, that we plow—sow—reap—gather—and thresh for others, whose pleasure is to be the sole limitation how much they shall take and how much they shall leave, why should we repeat the unprofitable toil? Horses and oxen are content with that portion of the fruits of

their work which their owners assign them, in order to keep them strong enough to raise successive crops; but even these beasts will not submit to draw for their masters, until they are subdued by whips and goads.

Let us take care of our rights, and we therein take care of our prosperity. “Slavery is ever preceded by sleep.” Individuals maybe dependent on ministers, if they please. States should scorn it; and if you are not wanting to yourselves, you will have a proper regard paid you by those, to whom if you are not respectable, you will be contemptible. But, if we have already forgot the reasons that urged us, with unexampled unanimity, to exert ourselves two years ago, if our zeal for the public good is worn out before the homespun cloaths, which it caused us to have made, if our resolutions are so faint, as by our present conduct to condemn our own late successful example—if we are not affected by any reverence for the memory of our ancestors, who transmitted to us that freedom in which they had been blest; if we are not animated by any regard for posterity, to whom, by the most sacred obligations, we are bound to deliver down the invaluable inheritance; then, indeed, any minister, or any tool of a minister, or any creature of a tool of a minister, or any lower instrument or administration, if lower there be, is a personage whom it may be dangerous to offend.

I shall be extremely sorry, if any man mistakes my meaning in anything I have said. Officers employed by the crown, are, while according to the laws they conduct themselves, entitled to legal obedience, and sincere respect. These it is a duty to render them; and these no good or prudent person will withhold. But when these officers, through rashness or design, desire to enlarge their authority beyond its due limits, and expect improper concessions to be made to them, from regard for the employments they bear, their attempts should be considered as equal injuries to the crown and people, and should be courageously and constantly opposed. To suffer our ideas to be confounded by names on such occasions, would certainly be an inexcusable weakness, and probably an irremediable error.

We have reason to believe, that several of his Majesty's present ministers are good men, and friends to our country; and it seems not unlikely, that by a particular concurrence of events, we have been treated a little more severely than they wished we should be. They might not think it prudent to stem a torrent. But what is the difference to us, whether arbitrary acts take their rise from ministers, or are permitted by them? Ought any point to be allowed to a good minister, that should be denied to a bad one? The mortality of ministers, is a very frail mortality. A—may succeed a Shelburne—A may succeed a Cornwallis,

We find a new kind of minister lately spoken of at home—”The minister of the House of Commons.” The term seems to have peculiar propriety when referred to these colonies, with a different meaning annexed to it, from that in which it is taken there. By the word “minister” we may understand not only a servant of the crown, but a man of influence among the commons, who regard themselves as having a share in the sovereignty over us. The “minister of the house” may, in a point respecting the colonies, be so strong, that the minister of the crown in the house, if he is a distinct person, may not choose, even where this sentiments are favorable to us, to come to a pitched battle upon our account. For though I have the highest opinion of the deference of the house for the King's minister, yet he may be so good natured, as not to put it to the test, except it be for the mere and immediate profit of his master or himself.

But whatever kind of minister he is, that attempt to innovate a single iota in the privileges of these colonies, him I hope you will undauntedly oppose; and that you will never suffer yourselves to be either cheated or frightened into any unworthy obsequiousness. On such emergencies you may surely, without presumption, believe, that Almighty God himself will look down upon your righteous contest with gracious approbation. You will be a “band of brothers,” cemented by the dearest ties, and strengthened with inconceivable supplies of force and constancy, by that sympathetic ardor, which animates good men, confederated in a good cause. Your honor and welfare will be, as they now are, most intimately concerned; and besides, you are assigned by divine providence, in the appointed order of things, the protectors of unborn ages, whose fate depends upon your

virtue. Whether they shall arise the generous and indisputable heirs of the noblest patrimonies, or the dastardly and hereditary drudges of imperious task-masters, you must determine.

To discharge this double duty to yourselves, to your posterity, you have nothing to do, but to call forth into use the good sense and spirit of which you are possessed. You have nothing to do, but to conduct your affairs peaceably, prudently, firmly, and jointly. By these means you will support the character of freemen, without losing that of faithful subjects—a good character in any government—one of the best under a British government—you will prove, that Americans have that true magnanimity of soul, that can resent injuries, without falling into rage; and that though your devotion to Great Britain is the most affectionate, yet you can make proper distinctions, and know what you owe to yourselves, as well as to her—you will, at the same time that you advance your interests, advance your reputation—you will convince the world of the justice of your demands, and the purity of your intentions. While all mankind must with unceasing applauses, confess, that you indeed deserve liberty, who co well understand it, so passionately love it, so temperately enjoy It, and so wisely, bravely, and virtuously assert, maintain, and defend it.’

“Certe ego libertatem, quae mihi a parente meo tradita est, experiar: Verum id frustra an ob rem faciam, in vestra manu situm est, quirites.”

For my part, I am resolved to contend for the liberty delivered down to me by my ancestors; but whether I shall do it effectually or not, depends on you, my countrymen.

“How little soever one is able to write, yet when the liberties of one’s country are threatened, it is still more difficult to be silent.”

A Farmer.¹

Endnotes:

1. Peabody, Selim, American Patriotism: Speeches, Letters and Other Papers which Illustrate the Foundation, the Development, the Preservation of the United States of America; Page 24-28, John Alden Publishers, New York, New York, 1881.

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