

John Dickinson: The Cautious Patriot

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History**

In 1776, rebel agitator John Adams called John Dickinson a “piddling Genius” who gave “a silly Cast to our whole Doings” at the Second Continental Congress.¹ He also claimed Dickinson “suffered by the Timidity of . . . over grown Fortunes.”² In other words: he was a fool and a coward. Adams was wrong. The majority of historians also portray Dickinson as the villain of the Second Continental Congress who tried to stop the Resolution on Independence. They too have unfairly represented Dickinson’s character. Despite historians’ efforts to affix some sort of ideological label to Dickinson, whether conservative or radical,³ it has proven nearly impossible to do so. His life and career seem to defy any sort of category and ultimately it is not important to which end of the political spectrum he belonged. It is more significant that during his career in public office, John Dickinson proved, however cautious, to be an ardent defender of American liberties who acted from a genuine desire to protect and strengthen the American Colonies. He deserves to be numbered among the patriots of the Revolution.

During his lifetime, Dickinson enjoyed a widespread reputation as a brilliant and fair statesman, ultimately winning the respect of even his opponents. He proved numerous times he was willing to adhere to his principles in the face of rejection and danger to his own security. He enjoyed immense popularity when he protested the taxes imposed by Great Britain, but found himself reviled when he opposed independence. By focusing on Dickinson’s decision against independence in 1776, contemporary historians overlook Dickinson’s active role in the political life of the American Colonies throughout the Revolutionary period from 1764 to 1783.

Early Life and Career

John Dickinson was born in 1732 to wealthy Quakers, Samuel and Mary Dickinson in Maryland. He left for Great Britain in 1752 and spent three or four years studying law at Middle Temple. There he learned Enlightenment philosophy from some of the best practitioners of law at the time.⁴ Not all of Dickinson’s experiences in London were positive and his observations of Parliament did not leave him with the

¹ John Adams, *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1979), III: 89.

² *Ibid.*, III, 56.

³ For the purposes of this paper: a conservative is one who does not want to separate from Great Britain for any reason and believes that ruling authority belongs to the monarch. A radical is one who desires immediate separation from Great Britain and believes that power rests with the people.

⁴ U.S. Army Center of Military History, *John Dickinson: Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution*, A Bicentennial Series (Washington D.C.: n.p., 1986), Page 2 in an unpaginated pamphlet.

impression of a virtuous, august body working for the betterment of the British people. As historian John Ferling states, Dickinson “concluded that the English were an intemperate and immoral people . . . that the political system was hopelessly corrupted, and that the nation was in the hands of diabolical mediocrities.”⁵ Dickinson’s disgust at the workings of the British political system made him highly apprehensive of any increased royal authority in the American Colonies. Although he wished the British Parliament to remain as far removed from the Colonies as possible, Dickinson still held some respect for British ideals and its protection of the “rights of man.”

Upon returning to the American Colonies, Dickinson opened a law practice in Delaware and was elected to the local assembly. He inherited a large tract of land in Pennsylvania and was subsequently elected to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1762. This marked the beginning of his prominent political career.

The Farmer Speaks

Having just fought the costly French and Indian War in the American Colonies, the British Parliament decided the Colonists should pay part of the cost of the war. In 1764, the Sugar Act became the first of many taxes designed to raise revenue in the Colonies for the British government. Parliament’s actions outraged the Colonists’ sense of their liberties and rights as English citizens. Today, it is widely known that Boston and New England exploded in angry protest; John Dickinson’s response to the taxes is often overlooked. At the time, it would have been impossible to ignore Dickinson’s contribution to the outcry against British taxation.

Dickinson wrote numerous pamphlets protesting the imposition of Parliament’s taxes and was popularly known as “the Penman of the Revolution.”⁶ His pamphlets, especially “The Farmer’s Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies,” were widely circulated among the Colonies and earned Dickinson the acclaim of even such radicals as Samuel Adams.⁷ During the initial protests against British taxation, Dickinson was heralded as a great patriot and “the friend of Americans, and the common benefactor of mankind.”⁸ This reputation remained with Dickinson until he opposed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, when many of his fellow Americans thought Dickinson turned his back on the principles he proclaimed in his pamphlets. This is not true. The ideals and opinions he held when lambasting Parliament for its treatment of the Colonies were the same standards that led him to oppose independence.

John Dickinson consistently maintained that the taxes imposed by Great Britain threatened more than American pocket books. The actual monetary inconveniences of the new taxes were minimal and Dickinson was more concerned with the detrimental effects Parliament’s acts had on American freedoms. Dickinson employed the powerful metaphor of the tree of liberty to drive his argument home, “The question is not ‘whether

⁵ John Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003), 69.

⁶ U.S. Army Center of Military History.

⁷ John Dickinson, “The Farmer’s Letters to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies: Preface,” in *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, vol. I*, 138-39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

some branches shall be lopped off?' The axe is laid to the root of the tree; and the whole body must infallibly perish, if we remain idle spectators of the work."⁹ With these words, Dickinson reminded the Colonists that all the liberties in their possession were threatened by Parliament, but that these freedoms could not be taken without the consent of the Colonies.

While some Colonists were calling for "no taxation without representation," Dickinson went a step further and proclaimed that Parliament had *no right* to tax the Colonies under any circumstances. The Colonists did not vote for members of the British Parliament; therefore, Parliament had no authority to tax the Colonies. Parliament should have no sway over the Colonies and the Colonies should have no power in Britain. Over a century of salutary neglect when "no statute was ever passed for the sole purpose of raising a revenue on the colonies" was all the proof Dickinson needed that the American Colonies had "the indisputable, the acknowledged exclusive right . . . to tax themselves."¹⁰ Since the Colonies had sovereignty over their own internal affairs, Dickinson determined that they also possessed "the same rights, that all free states have, of judging when their privileges are invaded, and of using all prudent measures for preserving them."¹¹ Dickinson had no intention of trusting Parliament to remain respectful of American rights and liberties and urged his fellow Colonists to persistently defend those rights.

Dickinson strongly held that the majority in Parliament simply did not realize how detrimental the taxes were to the Colonies' liberties and the prosperous trade between the New World and the Old. He believed there were only a few repressive ministers in Parliament pushing the various taxes forward. The monarch was simply unaware of the transgressions against his loyal subjects in the American Colonies: "I do also believe, that not one half of the members of the house of commons, even of those who heard it read, did perceive how destructive it [taxation] was to American freedom."¹² This is a large part of the reason why Dickinson insisted on nonviolence and non-separation from Great Britain. He did not think separation would be necessary, since he was convinced that Parliament would be reasonable and repeal the hated acts if the issue was explained to that body.

Even though Dickinson promoted action against the threatening tax acts, he also advised that all protests be cautious and prudent. Echoing his earlier declaration made during the royalist government fight in the Pennsylvania Assembly, Dickinson stressed the need for cool consideration before action was taken. To this end, he outlined several means that needed to be employed before resorting to violence. The first measure Dickinson proposed was that of writing letters and petitions to King George III. Dickinson distributed over a dozen pamphlets decrying the taxes.

Dickinson fiercely detested mob violence and cautioned against aggression. He thought it would weaken the Colonists' protests. If the British government saw the Colonies as a hotbed of anarchy, it would respond with force to restore order. Dickinson thought it important that the Colonists present themselves as reasonable and articulate to:

⁹ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter IX," 224.

¹⁰ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter V," 183.

¹¹ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter VI," 202.

¹² *Ibid.*, 206.

. . . 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.¹³

He not only argued for nonviolent means, but also stressed the importance of remaining loyal British subjects. Dickinson was adamant that George III would be pleased by the Colonists' protests: "The British nation . . . must, I am convinced, be better pleased to hear their children speaking the plain language of freemen, than muttering the timid murmurs of slaves."¹⁴

Dickinson was prepared systematically to challenge every tax that Parliament passed but was not willing to seek separation from the British Empire. He wanted it to be, "impossible to determine whether an American's character is most distinguishable, for his loyalty to his sovereign, his duty to his mother country, his love of freedom, or his affection for his native soil."¹⁵ Dickinson thought the best way to preserve American rights was to remain within the British Empire. While he acknowledged that Parliament's taxes were oppressive and should be challenged, he also envisioned Britain as the freest nation in the world and stated: "there is no other people mentioned in history, that I recollect, who have been so constantly watchful of their liberty, and so successful in their struggles for it, as the English."¹⁶

Although Dickinson adamantly opposed violence and separation, he did include some dire warnings to Britain in his writings. He cautioned Britain that it would be better to deal with the Colonists while they were still reasonable. He stressed that if Britain did not take action to correct the oppressive taxes, the Colonists might feel forced to address the problem themselves and, "A people does not reform with moderation."¹⁷ Even in the 1760's, Dickinson could not completely rule out the possibility of violence and reminded Parliament what happened to Charles I when that monarch refused to listen to his subjects' complaints.¹⁸

Dickinson added strength to his warning by maintaining that: "Officers employed by the crown, are, while according to the laws they conduct themselves, intitled to legal obedience and sincere respect,"¹⁹ but if the government stepped outside its constitutional bounds then people had the right to protest. Some called this rebellion, but Dickinson did not agree with that verdict. To him, rebellion was unjustified and illegal; however, protecting one's rights from destruction by the government was not only legitimate, but noble. In a brilliant stroke, Dickinson simultaneously reassured Great Britain that the Colonies would not seek independence and warned it could happen if the taxes were not repealed: "We never can be made an independent people, except it be by Great-Britain herself; and the only way for her to do it, is to make us frugal, ingenious, united and

¹³ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter XII," 282-83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁵ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter III," 169.

¹⁶ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter XI," 259.

¹⁷ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter XI," 257.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257-58.

¹⁹ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter XII," 279.

discontented.”²⁰ Dickinson’s interest in staying with Britain was based on his love for the ideals that Britain developed over the centuries and those liberties that evolved even further in America. Dickinson honestly believed the American Colonies would be safer and their rights better protected under British control.

In his efforts to guard his rights as an Englishman, Dickinson had no intention of appealing only to Parliament’s love of liberty, but spoke to Britain’s pocketbook as well. If Parliament would not listen to arguments on the “rights of man,” maybe it would listen to practicality. Great Britain and the American Colonies needed each other; it was completely impossible for one to be prosperous without the other:

How many British authors have demonstrated, that the present wealth, power and glory of their country, are founded upon these colonies? As constantly as streams tend to the ocean, have they been pouring the fruits of all their labours into their mother's lap.²¹

He tried to warn Britain that if the current policy of taxation continued it would only restrict trade between the Colonies and their mother country. This, he hoped, was an argument the British would take to heart, but he knew it would not have the same pull on the Colonists. The raw materials of the Colonies were wanted throughout Europe; they could trade with almost anyone. So, Dickinson proposed a general boycott of British goods.²² He hoped the economic pressure would bring Parliament back to its senses.

Throughout the late 1760s and early 1770s Dickinson persistently called on the Colonists to act in defense of their rights, but he never went as far as the New England radicals. He remained a calming and restraining force in the Colonies and acted as the voice of reason. During this time, Dickinson was able to appease most radicals by calling for action, but did not go far enough for some. On the other hand, even his asking for restrained, peaceful protest could not satisfy conservative Tories. In their opinion, Dickinson was challenging the King’s authority and that was unpardonable. The lack of support Dickinson found among Tories makes it impossible to dismiss him as a conservative. This makes it difficult to group him with any particular segment of the colonial population.

Regardless of Dickinson’s political affiliation, he consistently worked to preserve the rights of the Colonies. During the years of taxation, Dickinson earned the respect and admiration of his fellow Colonists, because they saw him at the forefront of the American drive to secure the blessings of liberty. This changed when he refused to support independence and many Colonists began to denounce him as a traitor. As John Adams wryly noted, “Mr. Dickinson never can maintain his Popularity for more than two or three Years together.”²³ Ironically, the principles Dickinson argued in opposition to Parliament’s taxes were the same reasons why he resisted independence.

²⁰ John Dickinson, “The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America, Considered, In a letter from a gentleman in Philadelphia, to his friend in London. . . . 1765,” in *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, vol. I*, 85-86.

²¹ Dickinson, “Farmer’s Letters: Letter V,” 188-89.

²² Dickinson, “Farmer’s Letters: Letter III,” 173.

²³ John Adams, IV: 398.

No Separation

The Colonists continued to protest the taxes, but Parliament refused to listen, and by the 1770s violence erupted. The Boston Massacre and Tea Party rapidly radicalized colonial opinion, which reached its first peak at the Battle of Lexington and Concord in April, 1775.

When the Second Continental Congress reconvened in May 1775, the body found it essential to justify the Colonists' taking up arms against British soldiers. Thomas Jefferson penned "The Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America . . . Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking up Arms" to explain colonial violence. Dickinson wrote his own draft and it was this version that was ultimately adopted by the Congress.²⁴ In 1775, the majority of Congress was still willing to follow Dickinson's lead; however, this would not be the case by the time the delegates were considering Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

By the summer of 1776, Dickinson lost his place at the forefront of the resistance movement and began to be seen as a hindrance to radicals such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Ironically, a petition to King George III authored in 1774 by Dickinson bears a striking resemblance to the Declaration of Independence. Each contained a lengthy list of grievances against the monarch which included: quartering soldiers in peacetime, abolishment of trial by jury, excessive fines, creation of a large bureaucracy over which the Colonists had no control, restrictions on trade, among numerous other complaints.²⁵ Dickinson would even have agreed with the sanctity of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,"²⁶ as it was crucial to Dickinson "to attain some degree of certainty concerning our lives, liberties and properties."²⁷

With all these similarities it seems unreasonable that Dickinson opposed the Declaration of Independence. The answer to this quandary is found in the preambles to the documents. The Declaration famously opens:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions

²⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 19.

²⁵ John Dickinson, "The Petition of Congress to the King's Most Excellent Majesty," in *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, Esquire, Late President of the State of Delaware, and of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, vol.2* (Wilmington, DE: Vincent Bonsal and Hezekiah Niles, 1801), 20-23,

<<http://deila.dickinson.edu/cgi-bin/docviewer.exe?CISOROOT=/ownwords&CISOPTR=22884>> (15 February 2005); Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence, 1776," in *A Documentary History of the United States, 7th ed.*, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Signet, 2002), 10-11.

²⁶ Jefferson in Heffner, 9.

²⁷ John Dickinson, "An Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great – Britain over the Colonies in America; with the Resolves of the Committee for the Province of Pennsylvania; and their Instructions to their Representative in Assembly, 1774," in *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, vol.1*, 20-23.

of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel to the separation.²⁸

On the other hand, Dickinson's petition opened much more meekly, "We your majesty's faithful subjects of the colonies . . . by this our humble petition, beg leave to lay our grievances before the throne"²⁹ and ended just as respectfully:

We ask but for peace, liberty, and safety. . . . Your royal authority over us, and our connection with *Great-Britain*, we shall always carefully and zealously endeavour to support and maintain. . . . We present this petition only to obtain redress of grievances, and relief from fears and jealousies, occasioned by the system of statutes and regulations adopted . . . for raising a revenue in *America*.³⁰

In other words, the Declaration of Independence was a justification for revolution and the grievances were put forth to that end; whereas, Dickinson's petition was a humble request to the King asking that the Colonists' grievances be addressed. Obviously, Dickinson could not support the Declaration's bid for independence while he favored reconciliation. This has caused many historians to unfairly catalog Dickinson as a Loyalist.

Historian Milton E. Flower is the main promoter of this theory and is largely responsible for Dickinson's reputation as a conservative. According to Flower, while Dickinson may have begun his career as a radical, he ended as a conservative in 1776.³¹ Other historians, such as John Ferling, have borrowed Flower's theme and have also portrayed John Dickinson as a "conservative revolutionary."³² Both historians assume that as a wealthy landowner and Quaker, Dickinson was innately conservative.³³ Thus, in the public consciousness, Dickinson has become at worst a Tory who had little love for American liberties, and at best a man who out of cowardice or conservatism failed to grasp that Britain was oppressive and independence the only option. These are obvious conclusions, if one looks only at Dickinson's actions with the benefit of hindsight, but a closer examination of his motives reveals that the first is not remotely true and as for the second, the worst that can be said of Dickinson is that he was too cautious.

Dickinson's call for nonviolent protest and petition seemed outmoded to many of the New England radicals by 1776, but this did not mean Dickinson was any less concerned with protecting the Colonies. He was honestly convinced that security was to be found in law, not anarchy. To Dickinson this necessitated remaining within the British Empire.

Dickinson worked throughout the summer of 1776 to prevent Richard Henry Lee's Resolution on Independence from coming to a vote. There were three parts to Lee's Resolution:

²⁸ Jefferson in Heffner, 9.

²⁹ Dickinson, "The Petition of Congress to the King's Most Excellent Majesty," 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³¹ Flower, 100 & 147.

³² Ferling, 177.

³³ Ferling, 137; Flower, 155.

That these United Colonies are and of right, ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be, totally dissolved.

--That it is expedient forthwith to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign alliances.

--That a plan of confederation be prepared and transmitted to the respective Colonies for their consideration and approbation.³⁴

In the furor and excitement that greeted this proposal, Dickinson again acted as the calm, cool voice of reason and advised his colleagues to consider the situation rationally and dispassionately. While other delegates focused primarily on the first component of the resolution and began to debate the question of independence with greater fervor, Dickinson attempted to draw their attention to the remaining sections calling for foreign alliances and a plan of confederation. Finally, as a nod to his objections, Dickinson was appointed to committees with the job of addressing those issues.³⁵ Still he did not feel this was sufficient and continued to voice his objections to independence.

On July 1, 1776, Dickinson stood to give his final argument against Lee's Resolution on Independence. The vote was to take place the next day; this was his last chance to persuade the delegates of Congress that, "in popular commotions the party of wisdom and of equity is commonly found in the minority."³⁶ Dickinson logically deconstructed every argument in favor of independence, but ultimately concluded that the American Colonies were not prepared for this "leap in the dark"³⁷ and that if the chance were taken, the liberties he held dear would be lost. Thus, while he primarily opposed the timing, Dickinson was also certain that liberty and security could not be found in a bloody revolution. His opposition was twofold -- practical and philosophical.

As a former member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Dickinson had first-hand experience with the lack of unity among the Colonies. As he understood the situation, Great Britain acting as the executive power was the only safeguard against dissolution:

For the dread of the English arms, once removed, provinces would rise up against provinces and cities against cities; and we shall be seen to turn against ourselves the arms we have taken up to combat the common enemy . . . what proof have we given of our ability to walk without a guide? None, and if we judge the future by the past, we must conclude that our concord will continue as long as the danger, and no longer.³⁸

Dickinson reviewed the history of the Colonies and realized that they only acted together when they were compelled by a crisis or common enemy. He had no reason to believe their cooperation would continue after the King's authority had been removed. Without

³⁴Journals of the Continental Congress, 5:425-26, quoted in Flower, 158.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 159.

³⁶ John Dickinson, "Speech Against Independence on July 1, 1776," in *The American Revolution: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, Inc, 1992), 133.

³⁷Ferling, 167.

³⁸ Dickinson, "Speech Against Independence on July 1, 1776," 135.

that unity, Dickinson feared the Colonies would collapse into chaos and anarchy. His unwillingness to take chances with the security of the Colonies is plainly reminiscent of his refusal to gamble with the happiness and liberty of Pennsylvania in 1764.

Great Britain did not just keep the Colonies safe from each other, but provided them with the prominence and protection needed for Americans to trade safely abroad. Dickinson pointed out that if the Colonists managed, though he thought it unlikely, to win their independence, they would be rid of not only Britain's control, but also the respect that the name Great Britain brought. This would be detrimental to the Colonies' welfare:

Under shadow of this respected name [Great Britain], every port was open to us, every way was smooth, every demand was heard with favor. From the moment when our separation shall take place, everything will assume a contrary direction.³⁹

Although other delegates in Congress insisted that European powers would assist the Colonies in their revolution in order to humiliate and weaken Great Britain, Dickinson did not agree. He saw no reason why the monarchs of France or Spain who had colonial empires of their own would cheer a revolution of colonies against their mother country. This was not a precedent that France or Spain would want established. Even if one of these monarchs could be persuaded to help the Colonies, Dickinson asked, ". . . do you think these princes will not make you pay dear for the assistance with which they flatter you?"⁴⁰ Since he believed the Colonies were not capable of standing alone, he saw dominance by one European power or another as the only possibility. Dickinson was highly distrustful of other European nations and was certain that life under British rule was preferable to French or Spanish control.

Besides his concerns over the practical matters of waging war against one of the most powerful nations in the world and setting up a new country, Dickinson's political principles would not allow him to support independence. In his view, the Colonists had sent delegates to Congress to defend the Colonies and reconcile with Britain; therefore, Congress had no power or right to declare independence.⁴¹ Just as in 1764, Dickinson struggled to maintain the people's right to determine their own form of government. Far from a conservative view, Dickinson's insistence that the people decide the fate of the government distributed power far more widely than many delegates, John Adams included, were willing to allow. Also reminiscent of Dickinson's fight in the Pennsylvania Assembly was his demand that independence not be declared except by a clear majority of citizens. Without this consent, he worried that support for the struggle against British oppression would be lost:

Everyone sees the necessity of opposing the extraordinary pretensions of the ministers; but does everyone see also that of fighting for independence? It is to be feared that by changing the object of war, the present harmony will be interrupted,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴¹ Flower, 144.

that the ardor of the people will be chilled by apprehensions for their new situation.⁴²

Dickinson argued that men willing to fight for their rights as Englishmen might not be willing to fight for independence. That was a dangerous step from which there was no going back and Dickinson did not think all Colonists would be willing to take that risk. He failed to realize that a determined minority could create a revolution⁴³ and hoped that as long as the majority of Colonists favored merely a redress of grievances, revolution could still be averted.

By the summer of 1776, the battle at Bunker Hill had already occurred, so it might have appeared too late to oppose revolution, but at this point the struggle was still only a civil war to protest unjust taxes. Dickinson, although he abhorred violence, supported the civil war, but could not endorse revolution. As a lawyer, Dickinson revered the rule of law and desired to avoid anarchy. He thought if the Colonies fought a limited civil war, Great Britain would respond by answering the Colonists' complaints in a fair and reasonable manner. Revolution was an entirely different matter. Referring to the English Revolution in the mid-seventeenth century, Dickinson reminded the delegates of the excesses caused in the violent overthrow of a government:

Anger produces anger; and differences, that might be accommodated by kind and respectful behaviour, may, by imprudence, be enlarged to an incurable rage . . . When feuds have reached that fatal point, all considerations of reason and equity vanish; and a blind fury governs, or rather confounds all things. A people no longer regards their interest, but the gratification of their wrath.⁴⁴

Dickinson sincerely thought it would be in the Colonists' best interests to confine the struggle against Britain to an assertion of rights. Once independence was declared, Americans would "find themselves engaged in a cause rendered more cruel by such a Declaration."⁴⁵

Without a Declaration of Independence, Dickinson was convinced that "England will always prefer to found her power upon moderation and liberty rather than upon rigor and oppression."⁴⁶ As a part of the British Empire, the American Colonies were valuable to Britain, but as independent states they were worthless. As long as the Colonists desired to remain under the King's mantle, it would be in Britain's best interest not to destroy them. However, faced with the prospect of losing its colonies, Britain would have no reason to act with moderation and would possibly devastate the Colonies in order to set an example for other colonies under British rule.

Despite Dickinson's desire for reconciliation, he was not blind to the oppressions the Colonies suffered in the 1760s and 1770s:

⁴² Dickinson, "Speech Against Independence on July 1, 1776," 137.

⁴³ Flower, 147.

⁴⁴ Dickinson, "Farmer's Letters: Letter III," 171-72.

⁴⁵ Dickinson, quoted in Flower, 163.

⁴⁶ Dickinson, "Speech Against Independence on July 1, 1776," 137.

If I should deny that, for the last twelve years, the English government has given the most fatal direction to the affairs of the colonies, and its measures toward us savor of tyranny, I should deny not only what is the manifest truth but even what I have so often advanced and supported.⁴⁷

His conviction that Britain was trampling the Colonists' rights as Englishmen made it impossible for Dickinson to remain inactive. He organized and held the rank of colonel in the first militia in Philadelphia, "The Associators."⁴⁸ Dickinson saw no contradiction between his willingness to fight and his desire for reconciliation. It was every citizen's duty to fight for his rights and Dickinson declared that because of the repressive nature of Parliament's taxes, "to accept them, would be to deserve them."⁴⁹ Consequently, Dickinson encouraged civil war even as he opposed revolution.

Dickinson argued against revolution, not only because he did not want to see his beloved America destroyed physically, but because he was afraid of the effect anarchy would have on the ideals of liberty he cherished:

I know the name of liberty is dear to each one of us; but have we not enjoyed liberty even under the English monarchy? Shall we this day renounce that to go and seek it in I know not what form of republic, which will soon change into a licentious anarchy and popular tyranny?⁵⁰

It was Dickinson's opinion that the best form of government was a constitutional monarchy. To make this point, Dickinson drew on precedents set by English history:

The English nation, after having tried them both [republic and monarchy], has never found repose except in monarchy. . . . But for us it is to be apprehended that, when the counterpoise of monarchy shall no longer exist, the democratic power may carry all before it and involve the whole state in confusion and ruin. . . . For such is the ordinary career of ill-balanced democracies, they fall into anarchy, and thence under despotism.⁵¹

Dickinson thought a monarch was needed to keep the majority from imposing its will on a powerless minority. It was through a king that governments found stability. Furthermore, he was certain that Britain had the best system of government in the world:

The English constitution seems to be the fruit of the experience of all anterior time, in which monarchy is so tempered that the monarch finds himself checked in his efforts to seize absolute power; and the authority of the people is so regulated that anarchy is not to be feared.⁵²

⁴⁷ Dickinson, "Speech Against Independence on July 1, 1776," 136.

⁴⁸ U.S. Army Center of Military History,.

⁴⁹ John Dickinson, "The Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America," in *The Political Writings of John Dickinson, vol.2*, 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 138.

The perfect balance of government was to be found in the English Constitution and Dickinson did not understand why men such as Adams and Jefferson wished to throw that away.

Dickinson believed the Colonies would be freest under British rule; after all, “two hundred years of happiness furnish the proof of it . . . It is not as independent, but as subjects; not as a republic, but as monarchy, that we have arrived at this degree of power and greatness.”⁵³ He viewed the current troubles with Parliament as only temporary and was certain that once the Colonists’ grievances were addressed, the Colonies would resume their peaceful relationship with Britain.

Dickinson added one caveat, “The first wish of my soul is for the Liberty of America. The next is for constitutional reconciliation with Great Britain. If we cannot obtain the first without the second, let us seek a new establishment.”⁵⁴ Significantly, Dickinson only wanted reconciliation if the Colonists’ rights were maintained and if this was not possible, then he would consider independence. This stance lent credence to Dickinson’s argument that he merely opposed the haste with which Congress was deciding independence.

Finally, it was July 2, 1776, the day votes for the Resolution on Independence were cast. Dickinson knew his conscience would not allow him to vote for independence and yet he also realized the importance of unity and even unanimity at this crucial junction. Nearly ten years earlier Dickinson had avowed:

This opposition can never be effectual, unless it is the united effort of these provinces [therefore] . . . UNANIMITY of counsels, are essential to the welfare of the whole--and . . . for this reason, every man amongst us, who in any manner would encourage either dissention, diffidence, or indifference, between these colonies, is an enemy to himself, and to his country. . . . They form one political body, of which each colony is a member.⁵⁵

For Dickinson to now cast a dissenting vote would be to betray his own principles. He solved his quandary by riding out to take command of The Associators instead of attending Congress for the vote.⁵⁶ John Dickinson was one of only two Congressional delegates to take up arms.⁵⁷ He was willing to fight for an independence he believed would be ruinous, while the majority of men who advocated separation remained civilians.

Conclusion

John Dickinson opposed independence because he wished to protect Americans from the horrors that accompany revolution and was willing to risk his own life in order

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

⁵⁴ Dickinson, quoted in Flower, 143.

⁵⁵ Dickinson, “Farmer’s Letters: Letter XII,” 275-76.

⁵⁶ Lengyel, 72.

⁵⁷ U.S. Army Center of Military History.

to guarantee that his country remained safe. This is hardly the action of someone who maintained a cowardly loyalty to Britain or acted only out of selfish motives.

Dickinson was an influential figure in the founding of the nation, but is often overlooked or passed over as a man out of touch with the times. Dickinson's contemporaries accused him of treason and cowardice and historians have furthered that sentiment, dismissing his resistance to independence as innate conservatism or the self-interest of a wealthy landowner. Both parties have misjudged Dickinson and in doing so have lost a valuable piece of American Revolutionary history.

Dickinson was not a radical who was willing to charge headlong into revolution with little thought about the outcome nor was he a conservative who wished to establish direct royal control over America. The philosophy Dickinson defended throughout his political career was motivated by genuine love and concern for America's safety and liberty. Yes, he was cautious and perhaps overly so, but not out of cowardice. He acted out of a belief that it was better to move with discretion and not leap blindly into the unknown.

He consistently and courageously acted to defend and strengthen the liberty of the American Colonies without regard for his own interests or reputation. By refusing to give in to popular pressure and adhering steadfastly to his principles, Dickinson exercised the liberties America was founded upon. Consequently, John Dickinson deserves to be remembered as an American patriot.

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