

Debate in the House of Commons, held in November 1780, regarding whether the American War should be continued -- as found in *The Annual Register* for 1781, pp. 150-155.

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[p150] “As the old question of supporting or abandoning the American war, necessarily held a principal part in the present debate, we shall only attend to the new matter introduced, or the new ground of argument taken on either side. It was advanced, in support of the address, that our affairs in America were in a much better train, and much more prosperous situation, than they had been at any time since the convention of Saratoga : that the splendid success of Lord Cornwallis in the southern colonies had enhanced the reputation of the British arms, and had in the highest degree intimidated our enemies. That Carolina was entirely reduced to the obedience of our arms, and the numerous friends of Great Britain in that country, were no longer afraid to avow their sentiments. That it was no longer a question of allegiance and independency between us and our colonies; but the question, now was, whether we should relinquish those valuable provinces to the house of Bourbon? No lover of his country could hesitate a moment in opposing to the last such an accession of strength to our natural enemy; and no friend of America could wish that we should resign her to the yoke of an arbitrary sovereign.

“Nothing, they said, could be a greater mistake, or more improperly held out, than the language continually used on the other side, that the war was at present carried on for the purpose of conquering America. The fact was directly otherwise. The war was now carried on to protect our numerous American friends from the tyranny and oppression of the congress. This was a purpose which neither justice, humanity, gratitude, or even a regard to our own interests, would permit us to abandon. It would not now be insisted that America could be recovered by conquest; but it was well to be hoped, that America was still to be regained by this country. The just, and liberal offers made by Great Britain to America, had produced very great and general effects upon the minds of the people ; and it was not to be doubted that more than half the Americans, when freed from their oppressors, would appear to have [p151] been friends to the British government. This then was no season for the language of despondency; our late signal successes, operating upon this disposition of the people, must produce the happiest effects ; and, that as we have now seen and corrected our own errors, so the prevalence of reason over passion will operate equally with the Americans, and prevent their being far behind us; especially as occasion must continually be given, for contrasting the happiness which they enjoyed under our mild government with the tyranny of their present rulers, and of feeling more and more their odious and disgraceful dependence on France.

“They then contended, that our situation precluded every prospect of honourable peace, but through the medium of victory; that the prosecution of the war with the utmost energy, until it might be terminated on better and more honourable grounds than at present, was essential to the political existence of Great Britain ; and, in a word, that we must humble France through the sides of America. That if we even submitted to the humiliating and disgraceful measure of acknowledging the independency of America, still, that fatal concession, which would expose us to the probable loss of all our transmarine possessions and sink the political consequence of this kingdom to nothing in the scale of Europe, would not accelerate the work of peace, however fervently that happy event was to be desired. America was a new state; she must maintain or establish her public character; and she was bound by every tie of policy, as Well as honour, not to desert her allies, or to leave them exposed to our collected efforts, in a war undertaken for her advantage. But if it were otherwise, she was now too closely connected with, and too much dependent on, France, to have it in her power to enter into a separate treaty with Great Britain.

“Our situation was undoubtedly difficult and perilous ; but if our native courage did not do it, we might learn from the example of other wise and powerful nations, never to despond in any circumstances ; but to expect the happy effects of fortitude even in the most adverse situations. Nor, in truth, was the heterogeneous confederacy formed against us, although undoubtedly in a very high degree powerful, by any means so tremendous and alarming as was represented and imagined. Besides the principles of disunion, and many other faults common to all confederacies, this was composed of powers, which, in the nature of things, were the most unlikely, if not utterly incapable of coalescing, for any continuance, with cordiality, that ever were, or that possibly could be brought together. The Spaniards had the strongest

natural aversion, cherished by the accumulated prejudices of all ages, both to the people and country of France. And could it be supposed or believed, that the Protestant republicans of North America, who were more zealously attached to their religious and political principles than perhaps any other civilized people, and who were fighting against their parent country and their own blood for [p152] *liberty*, should enter into a cordial friendship and lasting bands of union with a Roman Catholic and despotic power, which having enslaved its own people, would not afford the word *liberty* a place in its dictionaries. We should then strike at the whole confederacy, and not at this part or that separately, until the vigour of our efforts, operating upon its own principles of dissolution, had shaken the whole fabric to pieces.

“On the other side it was observed, that there was every year a new reason for continuing the American war; first, it was necessary to send troops to deliver the men of property and consequence on that continent from the tyranny of the mob; afterwards to deliver the lower ranks from the oppression of the upper, and particularly of the congress; and now we are called upon to deliver both from the thralldom in which they were held by France. Such were the vain and empty delusions by which, year after year, the nation had been led through all the calamity, loss, danger, and disgrace, of this ruinous war. The infatuation of the ministers was now evidently as strong, for its continuance, as it had been in the beginning; and they seemed to think the parliament and nation to be as blind and as infatuated as they were themselves. The last parliament had, like other the most abandoned sinners, in its dying agonies, confessed the cause of its corruption and profligacy ; this day would afford a demonstration, whether the fatal and corrupt influence then acknowledged, had extended to the present. Whatever effect ministerial arts had heretofore produced on the opinions and disposition of the people, the general cry now was, ‘Peace with America,’ and ‘war, vigorous war, with our ‘natural enemies;’ it remained to be seen, whether the ministers had influence enough in that house, to enable them still to carry on the American war, to the entire ruin, and contrary to the express sense of the nation.

“But we are told that our American affairs are now in a much more flourishing and prosperous condition than they have been at any time since the affair at Saratoga ; and that the splendid victory obtained at Camden, is to decide the fate of that continent. This, said they, has been the constant language, at every gleam of success, ever since the commencement of the war. It is indeed true, that our successes in that time have been splendid and numerous, and that our officers and troops have, upon various occasions, obtained great honour; but how far have we, upon the whole, been gainers by these advantages ? Boston was, in the beginning, exchanged for New York. The reduction of that capital, the victory at Long Island, that at the BrandyWine, and the taking of Philadelphia (the seat of congress, and the capital of America), were all, in their respective day, objects of the greatest triumph, and each held out, as leading to successes still more splendid, which must necessarily decide the fate of that continent. There will not be the face of a rebel seen in all North America, was the constant language of those times. It would be unnecessary to particularize the [p153] real consequences of these successes ; or to make any comment upon the abandoning of Philadelphia, or the danger which attended the retreat. Another source of confidence is offered to us in the exchange of Rhode Island, the very best winter harbour in all North America, for Charles Town, the capital of South Carolina. Let those expert in such calculations determine on which side the balance lies. But the glorious victory at Camden is now to make up for every thing, and to revive all our former most sanguine hopes and illusions. But if we found our judgment on analogy or experience, are we not rather to consider it as the forerunner of some fatal disaster ? What could be more splendid or flattering than the success at Ticonderago [Ticonderoga]? Yet that was followed by the loss of the whole army. Have we less reason now, than we had at that time, to expect such a reverse of fortune as then happened ? The consequence of our success at Charles Town, was the laying Lord Cornwallis under a necessity of putting all to the hazard, by encountering a great superiority of force at Camden. The merit and honour of that action lie entirely with the general and his army ; but what are we to say to, or to expect from those conductors of the war, who laid him under that dangerous necessity, which renders his victory a miracle ? or if such consequences are the natural and inevitable result of our successes on that continent, with what hope, or to what end, is the war continued ?

“They observed farther, that a calamitous circumstance attending that action afforded a direct proof, that the majority of the Americans (as had been so frequently and confidently asserted by the ministers) were not friendly to this country ; but, on the contrary, that they were almost universally attached to the cause of congress. For no sooner had General Gates appeared among the Carolinians, than those very

men flocked to his standard, who had taken the oaths to our government, carrying with them the arms that were put into their hands by our general; a circumstance which reduced him to the unhappy necessity of putting such of them as were taken to death. But the very fame necessity which obliged the general, contrary to his disposition, to recur to acts of terror, excludes any reliance in the affection of that people against whom they were necessary.

“It was acknowledged, that great advantages might be derived from the late success obtained by the good conduct and gallantry of Lord Cornwallis and his army. It might be made the foundation of an honourable and happy peace. Let ministers, said the opposition, seize and improve the advantage, and they will deserve and receive the thanks and applause of their country. But have they given us the smallest hopes of such a disposition ? On the contrary, said they, does not the speech itself, and does not the proposed address, which is its echo, prove to the conviction of this house, that they are determined to pursue the war to the utmost ? They dare not give it up. They must at all events carry it on. And its unpopularity, and that only, is the tenure [p154] by which they hold their places. To that object therefore were all others sacrificed. It was upon that account that raw new-raised regiments, under inexperienced officers, were sent to perish, not in detail, but by whole columns, on the West-India service, whilst the veterans, who were proof to all climates and seasons, were kept in America.

“It would seem to have been rather pleasantly than seriously said, on the other side, that Great Britain standing singly, and without an ally, in the war, had great advantages over the powerful confederacy which was formed against her. If the doctrine had been true, this nation must undoubtedly at present be the most flourishing in the universe, for she is probably the only one in that predicament. It seems, however, to have been seriously advanced, by the subsequent allusions to the league of Cambray, and to the confederacy against Lewis XIV neither of which can in any degree apply in the present instance. It was common danger, distress, and a participation of interests, that chiefly endeared nations, as well as individuals, to one another; and this tie, for the present, united the French and Americans in the closest friendship. But if we held out to America a separate interest, and that accompanied with such security, as would remove all ideas of a common danger, it was consistent with experience, and the usual course of things, to expect that we might dissolve the friendship, and have an opportunity of successfully treating with her. Indeed, without ascribing to the Americans any unusual degree either of gratitude or perfidy, and considering them merely as men, whose conduct, like that of all others, would naturally be governed by a mixture of both reason and passion, it was fairly to be presumed, that by such a course, and by abstaining from offensive hostilities against them, they might still be detached from the cause of the house of Bourbon.

“What would be the consequence, they asked, of withdrawing the troops from America ? American independence undoubtedly. Would this be a means of obtaining peace ? -- it cannot be denied. Could the troops subdue America, if they stayed there ? -- it is not even hoped. Can the American war be given up without her being independent ? -- certainly not. Can peace be obtained upon any other terms than American independence? -- the ministers know it cannot. If these things are so (and they cannot be controverted), the ministers are wasting the blood and treasure of this country without an object.

“They totally denied, that our affairs in America were now in a better situation than they had been at any time since the convention of Saratoga; and insisted that we were now, in all respects, in infinitely worse circumstances : but without wasting time, they said, in considering the comparative value of posts, or the relative strength of armies, are we not more than forty millions worse, through the mere expences of the war, than we were at that period ? and has not the failure of our commerce, and the exhausture of our resources, been in a still greater proportion ?

“Every military man, they said, had [p155] known, from the time of the affair of Trenton, that all attempts to subdue America were so many fruitless prostitutions of blood and treasure, for that the matter was altogether impracticable. Is it then wise or prudent, said they, for this house to pledge itself precipitately by an address to the farther support and continuance of that ruinous and impracticable war? Let us on the contrary assure his majesty, and declare to all the world, that though we will not longer pursue a measure of folly and ruin, we shall afford every possible support to his arms, when directed against their proper object, the house of Bourbon. Let that house deservedly feel every exertion of our

force, and every effect of our resentment. So far the amendment went, and no farther ought they to bind themselves...”