

1775, shortly before he left England, Franklin heard a British army officer who had once served in America boast that "with a thousand British grenadiers he would undertake to go from one end of America to the other, and geld all the males, partly by force and partly by a little coaxing." . . .

Large numbers of Americans and Englishmen came together for the first time during the Great War for Empire. They emerged from this experience thinking less of one another than they had before the war. To be sure, the images Americans had of themselves and of the Englishmen they encountered were not wholly accurate. On the one hand, when Americans thought of British soldiers they thought of Braddock's defeat, of Loudoun's ineptness, and, in general, of the redcoats' inability to fight in the American environment. On the other hand, as a result of their wartime experiences, Americans thought of themselves as men of the highest character, motivated to fight by the highest ideals, and especially able to fight in the wilderness. Although these myths did not determine the events that led to the breakup of the British Empire, they did make Americans less fearful of British threats after 1763.

The Preconditions of the American Revolution

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I

To a question about "the temper of America towards Great-Britain before the year 1763," Benjamin Franklin, in his famous "examination" before the House of Commons during the debates over the repeal of the Stamp Act in early 1766, replied that it was the "best in the world." The colonies, he said,

submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament. Numerous as the people are in the several old provinces, they cost you nothing in forts, citadels, garrisons or armies, to keep them in subjection. They were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink, and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce. Natives of Britain were always treated with particular regard; to be an Old-England man was, of itself, a character of some respect, and gave a kind of rank among us.

That Franklin was correct in this assessment was widely seconded by his contemporaries and has been the . . . judgment of the most sophisticated students of the problem. . . .

So persuaded have modern historians been that the relationship between

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Britain and the colonies prior to the Stamp Act crisis was basically satisfactory to both parties that they have . . . organized their continuing search for an adequate explanation of the American Revolution around a single, overriding question: why in less than a dozen years after 1763 the colonists became so estranged from Britain as to take up arms against her and, a little more than a year later, to declare for independence. The focus of their inquiries has thus been primarily upon the colonial response to the pre-Revolutionary controversy and upon the many medium-range issues and conditions that contributed to the creation of a revolutionary situation in the colonies between 1764 and 1774 and the short-run developments that touched off armed conflict in 1775 and led to the colonial decision to seek independence in 1776.

A result of this preoccupation with the immediate origins of the Revolution has been the neglect of two other, interrelated questions also raised by Franklin's remarks: first, whether the relationship between Britain and the colonies actually was so satisfactory prior to 1763, and, second, if the existing imperial system worked as well for Britain as Franklin contended, why the British government would ever undertake—much less persist in—measures that would . . . impair such a . . . beneficial arrangement. . . . Neither of these questions is new. They were widely canvassed . . . on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1760s and 1770s, and they provided a focus for most of the early students of the causes of the Revolution. . . . But no recent historian has dealt with both of these questions systematically. . . . This essay seeks . . . to provide a comprehensive discussion of the preconditions—the long-term, underlying causes—of the Revolution. . . .

II

When one looks closely at the relationship between Britain and the colonies during the century from 1660 to 1760, one discovers . . . that it was in many respects an uneasy connection . . . through the middle decades of the eighteenth century as a result of several important structural changes taking place in both the colonies and Britain. Throughout these decades, contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic conventionally described the imperial-colonial relationship in terms of the familiar parent-child metaphor with Britain as the mother country and the colonies as its infant offspring. The clear implication of this usage was, of course, that the colonies had by no means yet reached a state of competency. . . . However, by the middle of the eighteenth century in most of the colonies, the colonists themselves were already handling a substantial portion of their internal affairs with an impressive . . . efficiency; to an extraordinary degree, the several colonies had become . . . "pockets of approximate independence" within the transatlantic imperial polity. In all save the newest colonies of Georgia and Nova Scotia, they possessed by 1750 virtually all of the conditions necessary for self-governing states.

The first of these conditions was the emergence of stable, coherent, effective, and acknowledged local political and social elites. . . . By the

middle of the century, there existed in virtually every colony authoritative ruling groups with great social and economic power, extensive political experience, confidence in their capacity to govern, and broad public support. Indeed, the direction of colonial political life throughout the middle of the eighteenth century was probably toward more and more public deference to these ruling elites; certainly, their willingness to mobilize various groups of marginal members of political society in the protests against the Stamp Act as well as at later stages of the pre-Revolutionary conflict strongly suggests not a fear of such groups but a confidence in their ability to control them. . . .

A second and complementary condition was the development of . . . centers and institutions in which authority was concentrated and from which it was dispersed outward through a settled network of local urban administrative centers and institutions to the outermost perimeters of colonial society. Whether merely small administrative centers such as Annapolis or Williamsburg or large, central trading places such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Charleston, the colonial capitals supplied the colonists with internal foci to which they customarily looked for political leadership and models for social behavior.

Perhaps even more important was the emergence of a set of viable governing institutions . . . in the towns and the counties and, especially significant, at the colony level in the form of the elected lower houses of assembly. More than any other political institution . . . the lower houses were endowed with charismatic authority both because, as the representatives of the colonists, they were thought to hold in trusteeship all of the sacred rights and privileges of the public and to be the sole giver of internal public law and because of their presumed—and actively cultivated—equivalence to the British Parliament, that emporium of British freedom and embodiment of all that was most sacred to Englishmen everywhere. As powerful, independent, self-confident institutions . . . the lower houses were potentially effective mechanisms for crystallizing and expressing grievances against Great Britain. Together with the elites who spoke through them, the local centers and institutions, particularly the lower houses, . . . provided authoritative symbols for the colony at large and thereby served as a preexisting local alternative to imperial authority.

A third and closely related condition was the development of remarkably elastic political systems. . . . First, they were inclusivist rather than exclusivist. For analytic purposes, one may divide the potential participants in the political process, that is, the free adult male population, into three categories: the elite, including both colony-wide and local officeholders; a broader "politically relevant strata or mobilized population" that participated with some regularity in the political process; and a passive or underlying population that took little part in the political system, in some cases because they were legally excluded by racial or property qualifications and in others because they had no interest in doing so. . . . The first two groups were relatively large and the third group relatively small. The elite seems . . . to have taken in as much as 3 percent to 5 percent of the free adult males,

while the second category may have included as many as 60 percent to 90 percent of the same group. This wide diffusion of offices and extensive participation in the political process meant that colonial Americans—leaders and followers alike—had very wide training in politics and self-government and were thoroughly socialized to a . . . tested political system.

A second sense in which the political systems of the colonies were elastic was in their capacity to permit the resolution of internal conflict. Indeed, they were early forced to develop that capacity. The expansive character of American life prevented any group from obtaining a long-standing monopoly of political power, economic opportunity, or social status; new groups were constantly springing up demanding parity with the old. . . . The capacity of the political systems of the colonies to absorb new and diverse groups was steadily expanding during the middle of the century as a result of severe pressures created by a combination of rapid demographic and economic growth and increasing social, cultural, and religious diversity.

The rising competence of the colonies in nonpolitical or semipolitical spheres during the eighteenth century was a fourth condition that had prepared them for self-government. This competence was made possible by the dramatic enlargement of internal and external trade, travel, and migration; the increasing availability of knowledge through a broad spectrum of educational, cultural, social, economic, and religious institutions and through a rising number of books, magazines, and newspapers of colonial, British, and European origin accessible to the colonists; the development of more efficient means and networks of communication within and among the colonies and between the colonies and Great Britain; and the emergence of relatively large numbers of men with the technical skills, especially in law, trade, and finance, requisite for the successful functioning of an autonomous society. These developments not only provided the colonists with some of the technical wherewithal—for example, lawyers and newspapers—that turned out to be of crucial importance in resisting Britain and creating a new nation; they also helped to free the colonies from total dependence upon Britain for certain kinds of essential skills, to raise levels of literacy and education within the colonies, to liberate them from their former isolation and rusticity, to widen their "range of perception and imagination," and to create a potential for cooperation, for overcoming the "inherent localism" and traditional disunity they had stubbornly . . . manifested. . . .

A fifth and final condition was the tremendous increase in the size and wealth of the colonies in terms of the number of people, the amount of productive land, labor, and skills, and the extent of settled territory. The wealth of the colonies had become sufficient to give them a potential for economic and military resistance, while the sheer vastness of all of the continental colonies, taken together, constituted a formidable obstacle to suppressing any large-scale or broadly diffused movement of resistance. Indeed, this condition may well have been the most important of all, because it is the only one of the five not shared to a large degree by the British West Indian colonies, which did not revolt.

It is thus clear in retrospect that the colonies had achieved a high degree

of competency by the 1750s and 1760s. . . . By 1760 the colonies were thus not only able to meet most of the objective conditions necessary for self-government but even had to a significant degree been governing themselves, maintaining internal civil order, prospering, and building an ever more complex and closely integrated society for at least three-quarters of a century and in some cases much longer. Equally important, such a large measure of *de facto* autonomy at every level and in all sectors of colonial society—with all of the responsibilities it required—had prepared them psychologically for self-government and independence.

The corollary of this impressive increase in colonial competency was the continued weakness of British power in the colonies. The bureaucratic structures organized, for the most part during the Restoration, to . . . control . . . the colonies had never been adequate. . . . There was no central governing agency within Britain with effective authority to deal quickly and efficiently with colonial matters until 1768, on the very eve of the Revolution. The Board of Trade, which had primary responsibility for the colonies after 1696, had only advisory powers, and its history is essentially one of failure to obtain the ministerial and parliamentary support necessary for its many and repeated attempts to establish a more elaborate and effective system of colonial administration. Moreover, its staff was so small and the number of separate colonies . . . so great that it could not possibly keep abreast of the rapidly fluctuating political and economic circumstances of every colony. . . . Finally, like all of the agencies within the British government that had any colonial responsibilities, the Board was invariably more responsive to the demands of powerful interest groups within Britain than it was to those of the colonists. The result, therefore, was an administrative structure in Britain that . . . had insufficient influence or power either to obtain support for its policies at home or to enforce them in the colonies, a structure that was both poorly informed about what was happening in the colonies and only minimally responsive to colonial demands.

Within the colonies the situation was little, if any, better. Imperial administrative machinery was insufficient for the enforcement of imperial policy, and authorities in Britain had no effective controls over the machinery that did exist. The governors, the primary representatives of the imperial government in the colonies, had almost no coercive resources at their command. Prior to the . . . mid-1750s, there was no more than a handful of regular troops in any colony on more than a temporary basis. . . . Of course, most governors did have some utilitarian resources in the form of crown or proprietary lands or . . . other special privileges . . . that could be used to build up a solid base of support for their administration. But few had much patronage—in the Anglo-American political world of the eighteenth century, the most important utilitarian resource of all—at their disposal. Imperial authorities never sought to strengthen the ties between Britain and the colonies by systematically admitting “the leading members of the provincial aristocracies” into the metropolitan political establishment. Increasingly, in fact, they even excluded such men from the few royal offices available in

the colonies, which, especially after 1720, were usually filled by the ministry at home with needy place seekers. After 1740, even the largely honorific seats on the governors' advisory councils, which had in earlier times usually been reserved for wealthy and well-affected colonists, came more and more to be filled in the same way.

With little prospect for solid backing from home, only a rudimentary bureaucracy on which they could count for assistance (and over which they frequently had little control), and little patronage through which they might have gained the support of strategically placed members of local elites, governors frequently allied themselves with the dominant political groups within the colonies and did little more than keep up the appearance of adherence to the policies of the home government. Far from being able to co-opt the provincial elites by binding them to the imperial order in the colonies with strong ties of interest and obligation, the governors were, rather, co-opted by those elites; and the local standing and influence of governors, which in many cases was by no means inconsiderable, came to depend at least as much upon local connections as upon their formal position as representatives of the imperial government. Gubernatorial influence was thus highly personal and did not automatically extend beyond an individual governor to his successor, much less to the imperial government in Britain. . . .

The counterpoint of this continuing weakness of British power in the colonies was the dramatic increase in the importance of the colonies to Britain's economy during the first seven decades of the eighteenth century. The population of the continental colonies soared from 257,060 in 1700 to 635,083 in 1730 and 1,593,625 in 1760. . . . As the population increased, the colonies not only supplied Britain at extremely favorable rates with a growing variety of raw materials, many of which were subsequently re-exported at a considerable profit to British middlemen, but also provided a growing stimulus to British manufacturers by taking an ever-rising amount of British finished products. Indeed, during the eighteenth century, the colonial trade became “the most rapidly growing section”—and accounted for a significant proportion of the total volume—of British overseas trade. Imports from the colonies (including the West Indies) accounted for 20 percent of the total volume of English imports in 1700–1701 and 36 percent in 1772–1773, while exports to the colonies rose from 10 percent of the total volume of English exports during the former year to 37 percent during the latter. . . . The colonial trade thus constituted a large and critical segment of the British economy and was becoming more important every decade. . . . To a considerable degree, the growing awareness of how much the economic well-being of Britain actually did depend upon the colonies . . . accounts for Parliament's willingness to contribute substantial sums toward the expenses of settling Georgia beginning in the 1730s and Nova Scotia starting in 1749 and to make such enormous outlays of money and men in defense of them during the Seven Years' War. Such profitable possessions could never be permitted to fall into the hands of Britain's Continental rivals.

III

In itself, no one of these structural features—not the growing competence of the colonies, the continued weakness of British power in the colonies, or the increasing importance of the colonies to Britain's economy—was productive of sufficient strain to make the possibility of revolution very great; in combination, however, they contributed to the development of two fundamental discrepancies within the imperial-colonial relationship, discrepancies that made the potential for dysfunction within the empire extremely high. The first was the obvious discrepancy between theory and fact, between what imperial authorities thought the colonies should be and what they actually were. The increasing competency of the colonies during the eighteenth century obviously called for some adjustment in imperial behavior and attitudes towards the colonies, and such an adjustment appeared to have been made during the long ministry of Sir Robert Walpole from 1721 to 1742. Under Walpole, an informal accommodation between imperial authorities and the colonies had been achieved that permitted the colonies a generous amount of de facto self-government and economic freedom. . . . This accommodation represented something of a return to the old contractual relationship between mother country and colonies that had obtained during the first half century of English colonization, a relationship that had permitted the colonists the widest possible latitude to pursue their own objectives with a minimum of reciprocal obligations to the imperial government at home. But the accommodation was entirely pragmatic; it required no intellectual adjustment on the part of the authorities in Britain. On the contrary, by helping to forestall any explicit colonial challenges to traditional imperial notions about the colonies, it actually reinforced them. Equally important, by contributing to keep imperial-colonial relations relatively placid, it also helped to foster the dangerous illusion within the British political nation that imperial authorities actually did have the colonies firmly in hand—or at least that they could bring them under strict control if it ever became necessary to do so.

There were, of course, still other foundations for this illusion. The one seemingly substantial basis for it was the remarkable success of the navigation system that had been worked out largely between 1651 and 1705, . . . subsequently designated mercantilism. . . .

By and large, this success was attributable far less to imperial coercion than to colonial compliance. . . . This is not to say, of course, that there were not significant pockets of dissatisfaction with the system . . . within the colonies . . . or that some specific aspects of the system, most notably the Molasses Act of 1733, would not have created major colonial discontent had they been enforced, or that the system was not more profitable for Britain than it was for the colonies. It is to say that the extent of colonial compliance suggests . . . a very high degree of accommodation to the system and that, however voluntary and selective in character that compliance may have been, it provided, along with the concomitant absence of much manifest

colonial opposition to the system as a whole, the principal support for the imperial illusion of control over the colonies.

A far more compelling foundation for this illusion was the overpowering conviction . . . of the inherent superiority of Britain, of its political institutions and its culture. . . . Following the Glorious Revolution, it was widely believed within the British political nation that the British constitution as it had been restored by the Revolutionary Settlement represented the ultimate political achievement of all time, permitting the enjoyment of so many liberties and at the same time preserving a high degree of political order. "Pride in the liberty-preserving constitution of Britain was universal," extending to all groups both in and out of power, and this pride was matched by an almost equally pervasive reverence for the king, Lords, and Commons assembled in Parliament, which was at once the chief guardian of the constitution and its omnipotent interpreter. . . . Parliament seemed to embody all that was most sacred to Englishmen everywhere—in the colonies as well as in Britain. . . . The power of Parliament knew no geographical bounds within the British dominions: it was limited only by its own obligation not to violate the essential principles of the constitution, an obligation that it alone had . . . the authority to judge.

Nor were Britain's superiority and glory limited to the political realm. The prose and poetry of Addison, Defoe, Gay, Pope, Steele, Swift, and a host of lesser writers during the first half of the eighteenth century were widely heralded as evidence that Britain had achieved its "Augustan Age" in literature. And, despite a number of temporary setbacks, the economic picture, especially as measured by a rising volume of foreign trade and a quickening pace in domestic economic activity, seemed to be especially bright, so bright, in fact, that it was thought in Britain and feared on the Continent that Britain would eventually outstrip all of its traditional Continental rivals in wealth and power.

Not everyone, of course, viewed the situation in Hanoverian Britain with approval. Implicit in the comparison of contemporary Britain with Augustan Rome was a "historically derived fatalism," a prediction that, like the Rome of Augustus, the Britain of George I and George II would sooner or later degenerate from its epitome of virtue and freedom into a corrupt state of vice and slavery. . . . Despite the obviously disquieting implications of the parallel between Rome and Britain, Britain's greatest days, the Casandras to the contrary notwithstanding, still seemed—throughout the middle decades of the eighteenth century—to lie in the future rather than in the present.

In the face of such achievements, . . . who could doubt that Britain was in every respect superior to its colonies overseas? . . . As imperial usage of the parent-child metaphor so clearly revealed, the colonies were by definition thought to be subordinate and dependent, bound by their position within the imperial family order to yield obedience to their mother country and unable, like children, either to control their own passions—were they not forever squabbling among themselves?—or to protect themselves from ex-

ternal aggression. . . . Acknowledgment of colonial competency on the part of British authorities was virtually impossible, for competency carried with it the hint of an equivalence between the colonies and Britain. In view of . . . British convictions of superiority, such a hint would have been a . . . violation of the national self-image.

The second discrepancy within the imperial-colonial relationship was between two divergent conceptions of what the relationship actually was. This discrepancy may be discussed in terms of a question raised by much of the previous discussion: if British coercive power over the colonies was so weak and colonial competence so high, what was it that continued to bind the colonies to Britain? Part of the answer, as we have already suggested, is to be found in the very real utilitarian benefits they derived from the connection. Despite the limitations imposed upon them by the navigation system, perhaps in part because of them, the colonies had prospered during the first half of the eighteenth century and had a strong vested interest in maintaining their economic ties with Britain. Far more important than these utilitarian benefits, however, were, as Franklin underscored in his *Examination*, the vital and deeply rooted customary bonds of allegiance and affection that tied the colonies very tightly to their parent state, ties whose strength had increased enormously through the middle decades of the eighteenth century as a result of the growing involvement of the colonies with Britain, the emergence of colonial elites intent upon reproducing in the colonies a society that resembled that of Britain as closely as possible, and the increasing Anglicization of colonial life in both form and substance.

These bonds had powerful symbolic and psychological roots. For the colonists, Britain was the central source of not only political and cultural but moral authority. . . . So much weight did the authority of the metropolis carry in the colonies that, as Franklin also suggested in his *Examination*, those individuals in the colonies who were or were thought to be "closely and positively" connected through institutional or personal ties to Britain automatically enjoyed a "special status." Moreover, as the colonies came more and more into the ambit of British life during the eighteenth century, . . . the extent of their dependence increased because their closer proximity to the center made them feel their . . . position as outsiders far more compellingly than did their forebears.

Britain also served the colonies as a source of pride and self-esteem as well as of moral authority. To have a share, if often largely only a peripheral share, in the achievements of Britain during the eighteenth century . . . was an exhilarating experience that operated to heighten British patriotism in the colonies and to strengthen still further the psychological bonds between them and Britain. Thus, whatever the weaknesses of British coercive power and whatever the objectionable conditions attached to the utilitarian benefits offered the colonies by the connection with Britain, Britain had enormously powerful normative resources with which to bind the colonies to it.

But . . . strong as it was, the colonial attachment to Britain . . . was conditional. If it was true, as John Dickinson later remarked, that the "De-

pendence" of the colonists could not "be retained but by preserving their affections," it was also true, as he so strongly emphasized, that "their affections" could not "be preserved, but by treating them in such a manner, as they think consistent with Freedom and Justice." If to British authorities the parent-child metaphor meant that the colonies were to be dependent and subordinate, to the colonists it meant that Britain was to be nurturant and protective. . . . They expected Britain to provide a favorable political and economic climate in which they could pursue with a minimum amount of anxiety their own, specifically colonial and individual, ends, while it also continued to provide a praiseworthy example by which they could measure their own achievements.

To provide such a standard of measurement British authorities had to behave toward the colonies in accordance with . . . pervasive beliefs about the limits of legitimate political action that had become . . . sacred components of colonial political culture as it had gradually taken shape during the first century and a half of settlement. . . . Perhaps because they were so far removed from the center of power within the empire, the colonists . . . seem to have found the literature of opposition, the writings of those resident Britons who were also on the outside, especially attractive. . . . But there was a hard core of unchallenged beliefs that was common to all major variants of Anglo-American political and social thought and formed the central premises for an emerging colonial perceptual system. . . . Proceeding from the assumptions that all men were by nature imperfect creatures who could not withstand the temptations of power and luxury and that power and luxury were corrupting and aggressive forces whose natural victims were liberty and virtue, this system of ideas stressed the omnipresent dangers to society and the polity from corruption by luxury and power, respectively. It emphasized the necessity for virtue, personal independence, disinterestedness, and devotion to the public welfare by rulers and the importance of a balanced government by which the various constituent components of the polity would keep a constant check upon one another as the only device by which liberty could be preserved. . . . Because all societies were thought to be highly susceptible to internal decay through moral corruption. . . . any . . . sign of increasing luxury or vice was a source of grave concern, a harbinger of certain decline. This system of ideas thus taught people to explain any deviation from the existing political situation, especially those that seemed somehow to be inimical to one's fundamental interests or to the manifest principles of the constitution, as the probable result of a conspiracy of corrupt men in power to subvert liberty in behalf of their own selfish designs.

Plausible enough to people out of power in Britain itself, such an explanation was extraordinarily persuasive to the inhabitants of distant colonies who were not only far removed from the point at which decisions were made but did not participate . . . in the system that made them. The simple fact of distance between Britain and the colonies thus created an underlying propensity towards distortion within the imperial-colonial relationship that

made it absolutely crucial that British authorities always act in accord with the traditional imperatives of Anglo-American political culture in their relations with the colonies. . . .

But the voluntary attachment of the colonies to Britain depended upon something far more fundamental than the careful observation by British authorities of these traditional imperatives: it depended as well upon their willingness not to violate a basic substructure of expectations among the colonists that those imperatives were thought to protect. . . . The most obvious and explicit element in this substructure of expectations was that the imperial government would not . . . violate the sanctity of the elected lower houses of assembly and other institutions and symbols of self-government in each colony, institutions and symbols that, as we remarked earlier, had come to assume such extensive authority within the colonies that they, rather than Parliament, had . . . come to be regarded by the colonists as the . . . primary guardians of their rights and property.

A second . . . component of this substructure of . . . assumptions was the expectation that the imperial government would place as few impediments as possible in the way of the colonists' free pursuit of their own social and economic interests. . . . What the actions of the colonists seemed to assume, in fact, is that political society was a human device not only . . . for the maintenance of orderly relations among the men who composed it . . . but also . . . for the protection of the individual's property in his land, goods, and person, in which one's property in person included the right . . . of pursuing . . . one's interests, of seeking to alter one's place on the scale of economic well-being, social status, or political power. . . .

This is not to suggest that colonial behavior was free from the usual imperatives . . . that placed very heavy emphasis upon the obligations of citizens to put the welfare of the community as a whole before any personal considerations. On the contrary, in the colonies, as in every other contemporary Western society, such imperatives dominated explicit thinking about social and political relations. As was the case in Britain and elsewhere, however, the power of such ideas derived primarily out of men's needs to legitimate their actions—to themselves as well as to others—by conceiving of and presenting them in certain time-honored and publicly sanctioned forms. . . .

In terms of the present discussion, however, the important points are that, however much . . . they disapproved of self-oriented behavior in a specifically colonial context, they found it fully acceptable in the larger arena of imperial affairs. For one thing, of course, what seemed to imperial officials to be patently self-interested behavior by colonists might very well have been in the best general interests of a particular colony and therefore have appeared to the colonists as a selfless example of community-mindedness. But more important, the wide latitude in the pursuit of their own colonial and individual ends enjoyed by the colonists during their first century and a half and especially during and immediately after Walpole's tenure conditioned them to think of their connection with Britain as an instrumentality through which they might profitably seek those ends.

A third, related . . . component of this . . . structure of expectations was the assumption that the imperial government would not interfere with the capacity of the colonists as individuals to maintain their personal autonomy. . . . The implicit expectation of the colonists was thus that the British government would continue to provide a stable external background that would not call into question their accustomed autonomy, their ability—so crucial to their self-esteem and their continuing capacity to function as successful individuals in colonial society—to act in accordance with the mandates of virtue and independence. . . .

The voluntary attachment of the colonists to Britain thus depended . . . upon . . . assumptions that it was the moral obligation of the *mother* country to provide nurturance and protection for the colonies. What nurturance and protection had come to mean for the colonists . . . were: first, that the imperial government would not undermine . . . the colonists' self-esteem as defined by their capacity as individuals to act . . . with a high degree of autonomy . . . in the colonial environment; second, that it would interfere as little as possible with their ability to pursue whatever . . . activity seemed to them to be in their best interests; third, that it would respect the sanctity of the local self-governing institutions on which they depended for the . . . protection of the property, in person as well as in goods, they had acquired; . . . and, fourth, that in its dealings with the colonies it would continue to manifest respect for all of those central imperatives of Anglo-American political culture that were thought by Englishmen everywhere to be essential for the preservation of liberty and property.

This cluster of . . . expectations on the part of the colonists suggested a conception of the imperial-colonial connection that was fundamentally different from that held by imperial authorities. The divergency is most clearly revealed in the different meanings attached to the parent-child metaphor in Britain and in the colonies, in the explicit British emphasis upon the disciplinary implications of the metaphor and the colonial stress upon the nurturant and facilitative. The British emphasis implied a relationship of perpetual dependency of the colonies upon the mother country, while the colonial suggested an eventual equivalence. . . .

The existence of these two related and overlapping discrepancies, the one between imperial theory and colonial reality and the other between imperial and colonial ideas about the nature of the imperial-colonial connection. . . . gave the British Empire a latent potential for revolution through the middle decades of the eighteenth century. I say *latent* potential because these discrepancies had first to be clearly defined and their implications fully explored before they could actually . . . cause the disruption . . . of the empire. So long as they were only dimly perceived and not explicitly confronted, these discrepancies actually functioned as an essential . . . component of stability with the empire, because they permitted the colonists to exercise a considerable amount of autonomy without requiring imperial officials explicitly to abandon their traditional notions about the character of the empire. So long as the imperial government did not attempt to remove these discrepancies by enforcing those notions or acting in a sustained or

systematic way upon them, the potential for any large-scale revolt by the colonies was not extremely high.

This is not to say, of course, that these discrepancies were not in themselves productive of considerable strain and anxiety on both sides of the Atlantic. The intermittent attempts by imperial authorities to establish closer supervision over the colonies . . . had given rise to . . . repeated demands by colonists for some explicit arrangement that would have provided them with considerable autonomy in both the political and economic realms and afforded them full protection against the awesome might of the imperial government. For the British, there was always the fear that these irrepressible . . . little "commonwealths" in America would . . . acquire the wherewithal to become "independent" of their "Mother Kingdom." These fears were fed not merely by the facts of colonial behavior but by the very logic of the parent-child metaphor, for that logic suggested that the colonies, like children, would eventually reach their maturity and become independent. . . .

Given the potential for dysfunction produced by these two discrepancies in the imperial-colonial relationship, there was a strong possibility that some serious . . . transgression of the existing moral order as it was conceived by one party or the other would shatter it beyond repair. But . . . such a transgression was necessary before any of the preconditions we have been describing could become causes of revolution or imperial disintegration. Some structural conditions had pointed the colonists toward equivalence and independence and, in doing so, had undermined the traditional bonds between Britain and the colonies and made the relationship . . . fragile. But these preconditions did no more than make the creation of a dysfunctional situation possible. Whether . . . such a situation would be created would be determined by other kinds of intervening causes.

IV

What began the process by which the old British Empire acquired . . . a marked susceptibility to disintegration or revolution, what, in fact, was the salient precondition of the American Revolution, was the decision by colonial authorities in Britain to abandon Walpole's policy of accommodation and to attempt to bring the colonies under much more rigid controls. This decision was taken, not abruptly in 1763, . . . but gradually in the decade beginning in 1748. Neither this general decision nor the many specific policy decisions of which it was composed constituted any sharp ideological break with the past. On the contrary, they merely represented another attempt to implement the traditional goals of English colonial policy . . . in accord with the guiding assumptions behind the British conception of the meaning of the parent-child metaphor. But the situation differed markedly from the one that had obtained during the Restoration or in the decades immediately following the Glorious Revolution, the two periods during which similarly systematic attempts had been made. The differences arose out of the conjoint facts that the colonies were infinitely more competent and correspondingly less dependent upon Britain . . . and that the attempt followed a long period of

over a quarter of a century during which the imperial government appeared to have abandoned most of the goals it suddenly once again seemed bent upon achieving. . . .

The explanation for this fundamental change in . . . British policy towards the colonies is to be found in three separate conditions, one long-run and two short-run. The long-run condition, which . . . was . . . the most important, was the extraordinary territorial, demographic, and economic growth of the colonies. . . . At least since the 1690s, British officials had intermittently expressed the fear that the colonies might one day seek to throw off their dependency on Britain, set up their own manufactures, and become economic rivals rather than subordinate and complementary partners with Britain, goals, they implied, that were probably the secret ambition of many colonials. . . . The extent to which such anxiety . . . underlay the redirection of British policy towards the colonies may be gauged by a significant rise in the frequency and urgency of explicit expressions of fears of colonial independence within imperial circles during the late 1740s and the 1750s. Much later, during the Stamp Act crisis, an anonymous American writer protested "the jealous and baseless supposition, formed on the other side of the water, that the colonists want only a favorable opportunity of setting up for themselves. This charge against us hath for many years been kept a going in Britain, with such diligence and management," he complained, "that the minds of the people there are almost universally embittered against us." Though this writer did not even sense the deep-seated anxiety that underlay these charges, he was correct in his perception that they were everywhere manifest: in official position papers prepared by the Board of Trade, in correspondence between imperial officials and royal governors, in speeches in the House of Commons, and in a proliferating number of tracts—both published and unpublished—on the state of the colonies and the need for reforms in their administration.

If the rapid growth of the colonies with the consequent increase in their value to Britain was the single most important precondition behind the shift in British policy beginning in the late 1740s, there were two short-run conditions that, in combination, accounted for its timing. The first was the end of the era of internal domestic political instability in Britain that had begun in 1739 and was intensified by the vigorous competition for power through the mid-1740s following the fall of Sir Robert Walpole in 1742. Having already won the confidence of George II and wooed many opposition leaders to the side of the government, Henry Pelham finally managed to restore "peace to the body politic" and establish his regime on "a sound parliamentary basis" as a result of the government's overwhelming victory in the elections of 1747. "For the next seven years . . . the stability characteristic of Walpole's ministry at its zenith was again the salient feature of English government," and this freedom from domestic distractions along with the conclusion of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748 meant that British political leaders were freer than at any time since the mid-1730s to devote significant attention to the colonies.

An even more important short-run condition that helped to determine

the timing of this shift in policy and that itself contributed to intensify the . . . heightened sense of urgency that lay behind it was the simultaneous eruption of . . . severe political and social disturbances in many of the colonies. During the late 1740s and early 1750s, there were so many problems . . . in so many colonies that the empire seemed to authorities . . . in London to be on the verge of disintegration. Violent factional disputes had thrown New Jersey into civil war, put an end to all legislative activity in New Hampshire and North Carolina, and seriously weakened the position of the royal administration in Jamaica, Bermuda, and New York. From New York, South Carolina, New Jersey, Bermuda, Jamaica, North Carolina, and New Hampshire—from all of the royal colonies except Massachusetts, Virginia, Barbados, and the Leeward Islands—governors complained that they were powerless to carry out imperial directions against the opposition of local interests and the exorbitant power of the local lower houses of assembly. From Bermuda there came reports that the status of the king's governor had sunk so low that one member of the assembly had even offered a reward for his assassination. So desperate was the situation throughout all the colonies that it became exceedingly difficult for imperial authorities to maintain their illusion of control over them. . . .

Under the guidance of Halifax, who continued in office until 1761, the Board of Trade systematically set about the task of shoring up imperial authority in the colonies. It presided over a major effort to strengthen the defenses of the British colonies against French Canada by turning Nova Scotia, hitherto only a nominal British colony inhabited almost entirely by neutral and even hostile French, into a full-fledged British colony. Much more important, it prepared a series of long reports on the difficulties in most of the major trouble spots in the colonies, and the recommendations in these reports clearly revealed that, despite the long era of accommodation and easy administration since the advent of Walpole, the members of the Board and other colonial officials had not altered their long-standing conceptions about the proper relationship between the mother country and the colonies and that they were intent upon enforcing the traditional, but hitherto largely unachieved, goals of British colonial policy. Except for the Nova Scotia enterprise, which received strong backing from the administration and large sums of money from Parliament, none of the Board's recommendations received the necessary support from the administration, though colonial affairs did receive far more attention from the Privy Council and administration than they had in the past few decades. However desperate the situation in the colonies might appear to those best informed about it, existing procedures were too cumbersome and the preoccupation with domestic matters too great to permit effective action on most colonial problems. In part to remedy this situation, Halifax pushed very hard to have himself appointed a separate secretary of state with broad jurisdiction and full responsibility for the colonies. Although he failed in this effort . . . he did succeed in securing enlarged powers for the Board of Trade in April 1752.

Armed with its new powers, the Board embarked upon an even more vigorous campaign to bring the colonies under closer imperial control. It

established a packet-boat system to provide more regular communications with the colonies, urged each of the royal governors to secure a comprehensive revival of the laws of his colony and to send home copies of all public papers promptly, revived ancient demands for settling a permanent revenue in those colonies that had not already voted one, insisted upon the inclusion of suspending clauses in an ever-wider variety of colonial laws, vigorously denounced any efforts by the colonial lower houses that seemed in any way to threaten the prerogative of the crown, issued a number of restrictive royal instructions, and enjoined the governors "strictly to adhere to your instructions and not to deviate from them in any point but upon evident necessity justified by the particular Circumstances of the case."

Although the Board of Trade's programs were greeted in many places with enthusiasm by royal officeholders and others who had long been alarmed by the imbalance of the colonial constitutions in favor of the representative assemblies, they were, in general, adamantly opposed by the lower houses and other powerful local interest groups, whose members considered them a violation of the traditional relationship between mother country and colonies . . . and, in many instances, an attack upon the established constitutions of the colonies. Even with its enlarged authority and its new assertiveness, the Board could not effectively meet such opposition. The Board could and did intimidate the governors into a strict observance of their instructions, but that only reduced their room for maneuver when they needed all the latitude possible to accomplish the impossible tasks assigned to them. Thus, the Board succeeded in its objectives only in New Hampshire, where Gov. Benning Wentworth had put together a powerful political combination that monopolized all political power and stifled opposition, and in the new civil governments in Nova Scotia and Georgia, where the Board took extraordinary pains "to check all Irregularities and unnecessary Deviations from the Constitution of the Mother Country in their Infancy." By the time the outbreak of the Seven Years' War forced it to suspend its reform activities in 1756, the Board had realized that its general campaign was a failure. Especially in the older colonies on the continent, imperial control was not much greater in 1756 than it had been eight years earlier. Unable to accomplish its objectives with the prerogative powers at its command, the Board increasingly had been driven to threaten the intervention of Parliament, and in 1757, the House of Commons actually did intervene for the first time in the domestic affairs of a colony when it censured the Jamaica Assembly for making extravagant constitutional claims while resisting instructions from the Board.

Collectively, the efforts of Halifax and his colleagues between 1748 and 1756 represented a major reversal in the tone and quality of imperial behavior toward the colonies. . . . It amounted to a shift on the part of imperial authorities from a posture . . . that was essentially permissive to one that was basically restrictive . . . [and dependent] upon coercion. These years witnessed . . . the attempted imposition of a whole series of . . . policies that . . . threatened . . . the . . . structure of colonial expectations about the nature of the imperial-colonial relationship and the proper modes of

imperial behavior. . . . The vast majority of those policies that colonials found so objectionable between 1759 and 1776 were, in fact, either worked out or proposed in one form or another during these years, and attempts were actually made to implement many of them.

Although the program of reform between 1748 and 1756 engendered among the colonists considerable . . . dissatisfaction, . . . it obviously did not create a general malaise that brought the colonists to the brink of rebellion. . . . The impact of most of its . . . components was too local to invite . . . general . . . opposition, and the program as a whole was sufficiently scattered and contingent as to conceal from those not at or near the center of colonial administration . . . its full depth and general character. The result was that most of the program could be interpreted by the colonists as simply additional episodes in the continuing efforts of the imperial administration, "except in some short and shining Periods, to establish," in John Dickinson's words, "a Prerogative in America quite different from that in Great Britain." Such efforts and the "invidious Distinction" they sought to create between Englishmen in the colonies and those at home had always been a source of "Uneasiness" among the colonists. But they could scarcely be regarded as new. . . .

In terms of the causal significance of this change in . . . policy for the American Revolution, the fact that it yielded only minimal results is . . . as important as the fact that it was undertaken in the first place and much more important than the isolated and transitory pockets of discontent it created among the colonists. For the abject failure of most of . . . this early effort at reform served both to heighten imperial fears that the colonies would sooner or later get completely out of hand and to increase—almost to the point of obsession—imperial determination to secure tighter control over the colonies and to channel the colonists' expansive energies into forms . . . more acceptable to Britain. More specifically, this general lack of success had two results of momentous implications for the future. First, it helped to persuade many powerful figures in the British political nation that the successful exertion of British control over the colonies would require much more than the . . . piecemeal solutions that had been attempted between 1748 and 1756. The . . . sentiment for a more comprehensive and sweeping program of reform was manifest in a number of new proposals by imperial officials and would-be imperial statesmen alike during and just after the war for, in the words of Malachy Postlethwayt in 1757, "a strict and speedy inquiry [by Parliament] . . . to remedy [colonial] disorders before they grow too obstinate, and to put the government and trade of all our colonies into so good and sound a state, that every one may have its due share of nutriment, and thereby be the better fitted and disposed for the uses and benefit of the whole body politic, especially of Great-Britain, their head, mother, and protectress." The second result, as Postlethwayt's statement suggests, was to convince imperial officials that any such reconstruction would have to be undertaken by Parliament, because "no other Authority than that of the British Parliament," as a writer later suggested in 1763, would "be regarded in the colonies or be able to awe them into acquiescence."

V

It is thus primarily because of the conclusions drawn from the experience by the British political nation, rather than because of the many specific local and largely unconnected grievances they created among the colonists, that the reforms of the years 1748 to 1756 and the fundamental redirection of British policy that they represented must be given a central place in the causal pattern of the Revolution. This is not to suggest that a revolution was logically inevitable after 1748 or 1756 or that under different conditions imperial officials might not have subsequently changed their posture and policies toward the colonies. It is to say that the experience of imperial officials with the reform program between 1748 and 1756 made a severe disruption within the empire highly probable and that the empirical conditions that obtained thereafter only served to confirm the conclusions already drawn from the earlier experience and to keep imperial officials firmly on a reformist course.

Although the Seven Years' War forced the temporary abandonment of the reform program, the war experience only intensified the impulses that had lain behind it, as the weakness of British authority over the colonies was more fully exposed than ever before. Throughout the war, aggressive lower houses openly used the government's need for defense funds to pry still more authority away from the governors; many colonial traders flagrantly violated the navigation acts, in many cases with the implicit connivance of the colonial governments and even of imperial customs officials; and many of the colonial legislatures failed to comply with imperial requisitions for men and money for the war effort—even with the promise of reimbursement by Parliament. The war experience thus reinforced . . . imperial fears of loss of control over and potential rivalry from the colonies, deepened their suspicions that the colonists harbored secret desires for independence; and intensified their determination for reform. As soon as the British and colonial armies had defeated the French in Canada in 1759 and 1760 and colonial support for the war effort was no longer vital, imperial authorities . . . undertook a variety of new restrictive measures to bolster imperial authority over the colonies. . . . The new measures of 1759 to 1764 were merely a renewal and an extension of the earlier reform program.

But they were an extension within a significantly different—and far more fragile—context. The war had been a liberating and (psychologically) reinforcing experience for the colonists. That so much of the war was fought on American soil and that the British government made such an enormous effort to defend the colonies contributed to an expanded sense of colonial self-importance. Moreover, . . . the war . . . produced a surge of British patriotism among the colonists and . . . created among them heightened expectations for a larger role within the empire, a role that would raise the status of the colonies . . . to . . . a near equivalence with the mother country. By contrast, the war left many members of the British political nation with feelings of bitterness and resentment towards the colonists and a determination to restore them to a proper state of dependence. Having incurred an

enormous debt and a heavy tax burden in defense of the colonies and having had exaggerated reports of American opulence and the low level of taxation in the colonies, they regarded colonial failures to comply with royal requisitions and . . . violations of imperial regulations as evidences of extreme ingratitude that could not go unremarked, lest such excessive behavior rob Britain of the large investment it had made in protecting and securing the colonies.

If the experience of the war caused the expectations of men on opposite sides of the Atlantic about the relationship between Britain and the colonies in the postwar world to veer off in such different directions, the war itself altered the very structure of that relationship. . . . The expulsion of the French and Spanish from eastern North America removed the need for the last absolutely essential nurturing element the British had to offer the mainland colonies—protection against the French and Spanish—and thereby presumably removed a major . . . remaining block that had helped to keep whatever fantasies the colonists may have had about equivalence and independence in an unconscious and unarticulated state. . . . More important, . . . by destroying their rivals and thus making it less necessary to pacify the colonies, the British victory left imperial authorities with a much freer hand to go ahead with their program of colonial reform. Moreover, for the first time during and after the war, the British had significant coercive resources in the colonies in the form of a large number of royal troops. By giving them an excessive confidence in their ability to suppress potential colonial opposition, the presence of these troops may well have made imperial officials less cautious in dealing with the colonies than they had been a decade earlier.

In combination, the psychological consequences and structural changes produced by the war made the relationship between Britain and the colonies much more volatile. . . . The colonists now had heightened expectations about their position in the empire and less need for Britain's protection, while British officials were bitter about colonial behavior during the war, more determined than ever to bring the colonies under closer control, persuaded that they would have to use the authority of Parliament to do so, and possessed of an army to back them up if it should be needed. Given this set of . . . conditions, it was highly predictable that British officials in the 1760s would take some action, probably even by bringing parliamentary authority to bear upon the colonies in new, unaccustomed, and hence, for the colonists, illegitimate ways, that could be interpreted . . . as a fundamental violation of the existing relationship between them and Great Britain.

The Grenville program . . . did precisely that. The Sugar Act and the associated reforms in the navigation system immediately followed by the Stamp Act seemed to the colonists to be . . . a sharp and deadly assault upon . . . sacred components of the customary moral order as the colonists had come to perceive it. This program, along with the severe crisis produced by the Stamp Act, did in fact alter the quality and character of imperial-colonial relations profoundly.

The first of the imperial reform measures to affect equally all of the

colonies at once, the Stamp Act forced the colonists to identify more fully than ever before some of the major . . . sources of strain within the imperial-colonial connection and even to restructure their perceptions of that relationship. . . . From the new perspective supplied by the Grenville program, they began to redefine their situation in a way that permitted them to interpret as grievances things that had previously gone unremarked and to regard components of the earlier ad hoc imperial reform program as part of a comprehensive assault upon the existing moral order that had been in progress for some time. This new perspective not only made the colonists hypersensitive to any subsequent violations of that moral order but also . . . created a strong predisposition to distort as violations a variety of imperial behaviors that were not in fact violations with the result that . . . they became grievances anyway because they were regarded as such. Moreover, because the Stamp Act could be interpreted as at least a partial withdrawal of affection by the parent state, it permitted the colonists to raise to the level of consciousness . . . preexisting hostile wishes . . . toward Britain and thereby to legitimate aggressive actions against the imperial government.

For the British political nation, on the other hand, the intensity of colonial opposition during the Stamp Act crisis only confirmed their . . . suspicions that the colonists wanted . . . "to throw off all dependence and subjection." . . . The separation of the colonies would inevitably mean, many people thought, that Britain would "dwindle and decline every day in our trade, whilst they thrive and prosper exceedingly" so that Britons would "run away as fast as they can from this country to that, and Old England" would "become a poor, deserted, deplorable kingdom," reduced to impotence and robbed of its power by children of its own nurture. Clearly, imperial authorities had been right in the impulse that had animated them since 1748: the colonies had to be brought under tighter control.

. . . To dismiss colonial fears of conspiracy as they developed between 1763 and 1776 as simple paranoia arising out of a particular culturally conditioned mind set . . . is seriously deficient. Clearly, the kind of conspiracy many colonists thought existed did not: there was no secret combination of power-hungry ministers seeking to destroy liberty in America. Since 1748, however, there had been [a] . . . continuing effort by imperial authorities to bring the colonies under tighter regulation, an effort to implement—by various forms of coercion, if necessary—an older conception of what the colonies ought to be. . . . Given the colonists' customary expectations about the nature of the imperial-colonial relationship, this effort, and its many specific components, seemed to the colonists—and *was in fact*—a fundamental attack upon the . . . moral order within the empire as they conceived of that order. In view of the "utter neglect paid by the State or nation of Great Britain to these Settlements," of the relative laxity of imperial controls prior to 1748, Britain's subsequent efforts at reform, at the assertion of "an absolute Dominion over the Colonies," could only be interpreted by many colonists as oppressive and self-serving, as . . . evidence that Britain had never had much genuine affection for or interest in the colonies "until they grew into maturity and opulence," whereupon they finally attracted "not

her love, but her avarice, and in consequence the imposition of her Maternal Authority." In this situation, the parent-child metaphor, "so long applied to Great Britain and her Colonys," came to be seen by the colonists in the years after 1765, not as a reference of affection, but as a degrading . . . symbol of subjection.

VI

The assumption behind this essay has been that any satisfactory analysis of the causes of the American Revolution has to consider not only the nature and content of colonial opposition to Britain after 1763 but also the long-term conditions that made the imperial-colonial relationship, however satisfactory it may have seemed on the surface, so fragile; and we must also consider when and why British authorities altered their traditional posture towards the colonies. What I have tried to suggest is that the change in posture began in the late 1740s and that the explanation for it is to be found primarily in the dramatic rise of the economic importance of the colonies to Britain and the attendant fears within the British political nation that the colonies would shake off their dependence and leave Britain to sink slowly back into its former undifferentiated state among the nations of western Europe. Fed by developments in the 1750s and 1760s, these fears underlay British behavior throughout the years of controversy from 1763 to 1776. Ironically, . . . the measures taken by imperial authorities to prevent these fears from coming true helped to bring about the very thing they most wished to prevent.

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