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VIOLENCE IN THE PACIFISTIC AMBIENCE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract:

*In contradistinction to other revolutions of the world, the American Revolution is discerned by a dominant presence of ideas and by the expression of a filial love for the adversary. An atmosphere replete with the reception and dissemination of ideas inevitably impelled the colonists to deal with their problems in ways other than violent, more so when their adversaries happened to belong to their own race; they were their own kinsmen with whom they not only associated themselves but also about whom they felt proud of. Even a person like Benjamin Franklin, as Wood has argued in *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, expressed his loyalty to the Crown until very long and ardently aspired to play a significant part in the British Empire's power structure. The racial kinship and ancestry of the American colonists with the people of England gave birth to the expression of a filial love for the Imperial kingdom of Great Britain, in their struggle during the Revolution, which was pathetic, almost convulsive in its nature. And hence, while a revolution is usually marked by a feeling of belligerence toward the adversary and witnesses large scale violence and genocide, the dominant presence of these two elements, idea and filial love, made the American Revolution almost a pacifistic movement until the very last phase, and made it both an intellectual and an emotional epic story.*

KEYWORDS:

Violence , Pacifistic Ambience , American Revol , contradistinction.

INTRODUCTION

But the contention about the absence of violence in the American Revolution may not lead to the conclusion that violence was altogether absent in this revolution. It can never be said that the atmosphere of colonial Revolutionary America was entirely tranquil. The Stamp Act was scheduled to go into effect from November 1, 1765. But bands of people were determined to resist it. Associations called "Sons of Liberty" were formed everywhere and its members were determined to die opposing the Act than submitting to it. Native Americans were chosen as stamp distributors by Grenville with the supposition that it would subside the resistance. But stamp distributors, where necessary, were coerced by violence and were forced to resign. The house of a stamp distributor named Andrew Oliver was stoned by a Boston mob in August 1765 which forced him to abandon his office. Such intimidation and mobbing were taken up by other colonies too which prevented the enforcement of the law. This movement, in many places, was directed by the leading political figures and it was alleged that they used it as a means to settle a score with their adversaries. On the night of August 26, 1765 the house of Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the political rival of Otis and suspected of advocating the Stamp Act, was sacked. Such mobbing was used too on the Comptroller of Customs and on an officer of the Admiralty Court. By November 1, 1765 the Stamp Act was nullified in all

the colonies except Georgia, where Governor James Wright could manage to enforce it.

Mobbing was also used on the Customs Commissioners who, following the enforcement of the American Board of Customs Act, June 29, 1767, a part of the Townshend Acts, were stationed in Boston to collect revenue. The colonists resorted to mobbing and the Customs Commissioners wrote to the English treasury office, explaining their helplessness, and sought help from the troops stationed in America for the collection of revenue and for their own safety. Antagonism against the Customs Commissioners grew intense on the issue of the seizure of John Hancock's sloop, "Liberty". On June 10, 1768 Hancock's sloop was seized in the Port of Boston for allegedly having landed a cargo of Madeira wine without payment of duties. Joseph Harrison, the Collector of the Port of Boston; his son; and Benjamin Hallowell, the Comptroller of Customs were assaulted by a Boston populace. Though they could manage to escape without serious injury, they were driven to Castle William, the fort in the Boston Harbor. The Customs Commissioners informed the ministry that Boston was in a state of insurrection and consequently Governor Bernard summoned to Boston General Gage with his troops from Halifax. Further, under orders from Hillisborough, two regiments of troops were on way to Boston by September 1768 and two more were soon to follow. At the invitation of Boston a convention of the representatives from ninety-two towns of Massachusetts met on September 22, 1768 without the approval of Governor Bernard and discussed the possibility of armed resistance. However, the troops landed on October 1, 1768 without opposition.

Though initially the people of Boston maintained discipline, friction between the Bostonians and the British troops became a regular feature. The people of Boston devised various ways to harass the troops. The city magistrates enforced every law of the province and every by-law of the town and, in contrast to the ordinary citizens, the soldiers were prosecuted for every breach of law. Children pelted the soldiers with snow-balls and in the streets they were treated with contempt by the people. This eventually resulted in the incident called the "Boston Massacre" on the evening of March 5, 1770. A scuffle took place between a crowd and the main guard of Twenty-ninth Regiment and snow-balls and rubbish were pelted at the soldiers. Shooting ensued which left three dead and eight wounded, all civilians and no shots were fired at the soldiers. One report tells that the command was given by Captain Thomas Preston, while another says that the shots were fired from the custom house which was located behind the soldiers. Following this incident, the demands of the patriot leaders were heeded and Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson ordered the troops to withdraw from the town and for the next three years only one regiment was stationed at Castle William in the Boston Harbor.

Despite the conciliatory gestures shown by England toward the colonists in January 1770, there was no improvement in the relationship between the colonists and the Customs Commissioners. The Customs Commissioners continued unabated. Even though troops, following the Boston Massacre, retired from the town to Castle William in the harbor, several warships were kept at the disposal of the Customs Commissioners by the British Navy. The British Customs schooner "Gaspee" was stationed in the waters of Rhode Island since March 22, 1772 to facilitate the enforcement of the Navigation Acts. It patrolled the shores of Narragansett and extracted heavy tolls from small vessels that carried wood and provisions along the shores. The Commander Lieutenant William Dudingston allowed his men to steal cattle and cut fruit trees for firewood. On June 9, 1772 the "Gaspee" ran aground a few miles below Providence in pursuit of a suspect. The reaction of the Rhode Islanders was immediate. On that very night several boatloads of men from Providence, under the leadership of John Brown, a leading merchant of Rhode Island, reached the "Gaspee", sent the crew ashore, wounded the commander when he attempted to prevent them and burned the ship to the water's edge.

In consequence of the Tea Act passed by Parliament on May 10, 1773, ships brought the first consignment of tea late that year. However, with the stout determination of citizens, captains were urged to go back and by and large the citizens were successful. "Dartmouth" was the first of the three tea ships to reach the Port of Boston on November 27, 1773. While Governor Hutchinson did not allow the ships to leave the harbor without unloading the cargo and paying the tea duty, the patriots of Boston and of the surrounding towns took up the challenge of not permitting the ship to land and sending it back to England without paying the tea duty. This show-down reached the twentieth day on December 16. Since, as per law, the ship would be subject to seizure for non-payment of duties after the twentieth day, it would further lead to landing and the possible sale of tea. To prevent it, about two hundred men, being dressed as Indians, with the cheering and support of about 8,000 people, on the evening of December 16, marched to the ship and dumped into the harbor 342 chests of tea whose worth was estimated to be about £9,000. Through such ways or by preventing this ship's landing, the colonists successfully nullified the tea act in most of the colonies.

The Coercive Acts were passed by the Parliament in March and April of 1774 in retaliation to the Boston Tea Party and the First Continental Congress, on September 5, 1774 endorsed the Suffolk Resolves which, among others, advised the inhabitants of Massachusetts to arm themselves and elect officers of the

militia.

Events took on a violent turn only after the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. The direction of Lord Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the colonies given to Governor Gage on January 27, 1775 to use force for restoring normalcy in Massachusetts reached him on April 14, 1775. On April 18, a British troop of 700 soldiers marched to Concord to seize and destroy powder and guns stored there by Americans. The people were, in advance, warned of this incident by Paul Revere and William Dawes. The preceding days had witnessed several confrontations between American militia and British troops, but they did not cause any bloodshed and casualty. Upon arriving in Lexington at the dawn on April 19 on their way to Concord, the British troops came across seventy minute-men, a part of Massachusetts militia, lined up on the Lexington Green. Eight minute-men were shot dead by the British troops. After having completed their mission in Concord, when they were about to leave, the British soldiers were attacked by minute-men and militia which cost England 250 lives and transformed the intellectual dispute into an armed struggle.

When the delegates from the colonies met in the Second Continental Congress, they, in mid-June 1775, voted to raise a regular army with forces encircling Boston to form the nucleus and named George Washington Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Even before the Coercive Acts were passed, every colony had its militia system to defend against Indians or foreign attack, but with no imminent danger threatening them, military training was only considered as a pastime with no seriousness attached to it. But the Coercive Acts brought forth rigorous military training and alertness against the danger. Even before the arrival of Washington, the militiamen exhibited unbelievable courage and strength on June 17, 1775 in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Though the British Army won at the end, it cost them many lives and made them aware of the might of the Americans whom they earlier ignored and dismissed as raw militia. The ultimate stage was set when the colonists prepared to seek foreign aid and organized themselves to conduct a full - scale war. Daniel P. Murphy aptly writes that the ordinary farmers, landowners and heterogeneous groups in the colonies challenged and defeated the mightiest power of the world and built a new nation.

The story of violence in the American Revolution before the Battle of Lexington and Concord is a narrative of a few houses stoned and pillaged, some stamp distributors and Customs Commissioners mobbed, snow-balls and rubbish pelted, a couple of ships burnt and some tea-chests into the harbor unloaded. A few bloodsheds committed during this period were not the work of the American Revolutionaries but of their British adversaries. When considered in the context of a Revolution, the violence exhibited during the American Revolution, until the Battle of Lexington and Concord, was conspicuously minimal, to the extent of giving the semblance of being almost non-existent. Even some violent actions on the part of the Revolutionaries could be traced back to an intellectual source. One of the perpetrators of the act of violence in sacking the house of Hutchinson during the Stamp Act crisis confessed the following morning of the incident that he was incited to do that after having heard a sermon from Jonathan Mayhew the previous Sunday the text of which reads as follows : "I would they were even cut off which trouble you. For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (quoted in Tyler 138-139). Of course Mayhew was shocked to hear that his preaching had incited to commit that barbarous act and he wrote to Hutchinson : "I had rather lose my right hand, than be an encourager of such outrages as were committed last night" (quoted in Tyler 139 n1). He explained with anguish that far from taking the whole text, his congregation had accepted that part which they liked most. But the incident throws light on the prominence of ideas in the American Revolution. Even such a horrid event as the Boston Massacre found its reaction in the Massachusetts patriots in the form of a painting by Paul Revere and not in the impulsive action of countering force with force. It is this realization of idea as the shaping force and prime mover of the American Revolution and of the existence of this Revolution in a realm other than violence that led John Adams to write to Thomas Jefferson in 1815 :

What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. (Adams X. 172)
Sarah Knott considers the American Revolution as a transformation of self and society and writes that the "American war would be resolved in what we can term culture wars as much as by military arms" (154).

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