

George III on Empire, 1783

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NO politician was more convinced of the need to prevent the breakup of the first British empire than King George III. Loss of the American colonies, he was sure, would be a political and economic disaster that would consign Britain to “a very low class among the European states.”¹ Nor did anyone in 1782 concede the inevitability of American Independence with more reluctance or greater bitterness. The king could barely bring himself to accept Lord North’s resignation, and his aversion to what he characterized as a baseless rebellion continued unabated. How strongly and stubbornly he clung to these attitudes was so well known that in March 1782 he suffered the indignity of being compelled to promise the marquis of Rockingham that he would not veto a treaty recognizing the United States of America.² For these reasons, his contemporaries would have been astonished to read a brief aide memoire he composed in January or February 1783 on British alternatives after the loss of the thirteen colonies. This untitled paper, which is in the king’s distinctive handwriting, is in the Royal Archives at Windsor, filed among a miscellaneous collection of essays, notes, and exercises done by George from the mid-1750s to

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¹ King George to Lord North, Mar. 7, 1780, in Sir John Fortescue, ed., *The Correspondence of King George the Third from 1760 to December 1783*, 6 vols. (London, 1927–1928), V, 30.

² See Lord North to King George, [Mar. 18, 1782], and the king’s reply, Mar. 19, 1782, *ibid.*, V, 394–397. Rockingham’s requirements may be found in the marquis of Rockingham, “Chronology of conversations with Lord Chancellor Thurlow,” Mar. 11–14, 1782, Thurlow to Rockingham, [Mar. 14, 1782], Rockingham to Thurlow, Mar. 15, 1782, Thurlow to Rockingham, Mar. 15, 1782, Rockingham to Thurlow, Mar. 16, 1782, Thurlow to Rockingham, [Mar. 16, 1782], and Rockingham to Thurlow, [Mar. 18, 1782], all in Rockingham Papers, R. 1/1992–1998, Wentworth Wodehouse Muniments, Sheffield Central Library, Sheffield, Eng. Cautiously but unmistakably, Rockingham was pressing for the king’s concession on American Independence in writing. George III managed to evade a written pledge but not tacit agreement. See King George to Thurlow, [Mar. 18, 1782], and the king to the earl of Shelburne, Apr. 5, 1782, Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of George III*, V, 392–393, 445.

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the mid-1780s.³ The document is reproduced below, with the king's spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraph divisions as they are in the original.

America is lost! Must we fall beneath the blow? Or have we resources that may repair the mischief? What are those resources? Should they be sought in distant Regions held by precarious Tenure, or shall we seek them at home in the exertions of a new policy? The situation of the Kingdom is novel, the policy that is to govern it must be novel likewise, or neither adapted to the real evils of the present moment, or the dreaded ones of the future.

For a Century past the Colonial Scheme has been the system that has guided the Administration of the British Government. It was thoroughly known that from every Country there always exists an active emigration of unsettled, discontented, or unfortunate People, who failing in their endeavours to live at home, hope to succeed better where there is more employment suitable to their poverty. The establishment of Colonies in America might probably increase the number of this class but did not create it; in times anterior to that great speculation, Poland contained near 10,000 Scotch Pedlars; within the last thirty years not above 100, occasioned by America offering a more advantageous asylum for them.

A people spread over an immense tract of fertile land, industrious because free, and rich because industrious, presently became a market for the Manufactures and Commerce of the Mother Country. An importance was soon generated, which from its origin to the late conflict was mischievous to Britain, because it created an expence of blood and treasure worth more at this instant, if it could be at our command, than all we ever received from America. The wars of 1744, of 1756, and 1775, were all entered into from the encouragements given to the speculation of settling the wilds of North America. It is to be hoped that by degrees it will be admitted that the Northern Colonies, that is those North of Tobacco were in reality our very successful rivals in two Articles the carrying freight trade, and the Newfoundland fishery. While the Sugar Colonies added above three millions a year to the wealth of Britain, the Rice Colonies near a million, and the Tobacco ones almost as much; those more to the north, so far from adding anything to our wealth as Colonies, were trading, fishing, farming Countries, that rivalled us in many branches of our industry, and had actually deprived us of no inconsiderable share of the wealth we reaped by means of the others.

³ The king, untitled paper on the consequences of American Independence, [Jan.–Feb. 1783], Royal Archives, Additional Georgian Papers, Add. MSS 32/2010/11. The paper was almost certainly written during these months because it contradicts the king's views in Dec. 1782 on the importance of India and the West Indies. King George to Shelburne, Dec. 11, 1782, and King George to the earl of Grantham, Dec. 19, 1782, in Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of George III*, VI, 183, 192. Moreover, George remarked in it that "time must tell what share we shall reserve" of the Newfoundland fishery. In early 1783, this was still a subject of negotiation.

This comparative view of our former territories in America is not stated with any idea of lessening the consequence of a future friendship and connection with them; on the contrary it is to be hoped we shall reap more advantages from their trade as friends than ever we could derive from them as Colonies; for there is reason to suppose we actually gained more by them while in actual rebellion, and the common open connection cut off, than when they were in obedience to the Crown; the Newfoundland fishery taken into the Account, there is little doubt of it.

The East and West Indies are conceived to be the great commercial supports of the Empire; as to the Newfoundland fishery time must tell us what share we shall reserve of it. But there is one observation which is applicable to all three; they depend on very distant territorial possessions, which we have little or no hopes of retaining from their internal strength, we can keep them only by means of a superior Navy. If our marine force sinks, or if in consequence of wars, debts, and taxes, we should in future find ourselves so debilitated as to be involved in a new War, without the means of carrying it on with vigour, in these cases, all distant possessions must fall let them be as valuable as their warmest panegyrists contend.

It evidently appears from this slight review of our most important dependencies, that on them we are not to exert that new policy which alone can be the preservation of the British power and consequence. The more important they are already, the less are they fit instruments in that work. No man can be hardy enough to deny that they are insecure, to add therefore to their value by exertions of policy which shall have the effect of directing any stream of capital, industry, or population into those channels, would be to add to a disproportion already an evil. The more we are convinced of the vast importance of those territories, the more we must feel the insecurity of our power; our view therefore ought not to be to increase but preserve them.

Those who are familiar with Adam Smith's arguments against empire will immediately see similar concepts expressed in this paper. One should not assume, however, that the king had suddenly become enamored of free trade or even that he knew Smith's work. Indeed, there is no evidence that he ever read *The Wealth of Nations*, and the language in this paper suggests that the source for his arguments was something else. Throughout his life, George III copied long passages from books he found persuasive and inserted them, usually without attribution, in his own essays. There is nothing here so elegantly phrased as Smith's comments on the folly of empire.⁴ Who, then, inspired the

⁴ For Adam Smith on empire see *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols., ed. Edwin Cannan (New Rochelle, N. Y., 1966), 535–626, 895–900, esp. 581–582, 626, 899–900. For a description of the king's habit of copying without attribution see the account of the Prince of Wales's borrowing of ideas from Josiah Tucker's essays on naturalization during the 1750s in John L. Bullion, "From 'the French and Dutch are more sober, frugal and industrious' to the 'nobler' position: Attitudes of the Prince of Wales toward a General Naturalization and a Popular Monarchy, 1757–1760,"

king? The most likely candidate is the earl of Shelburne, the first lord of the Treasury. As Shelburne struggled to negotiate peace during 1782, he realized that it was crucial to win George's genuine acceptance of the eventual Independence of the United States. Isolated in his own cabinet, widely mistrusted by politicians of all factions, lacking the reliable support of a majority in the House of Commons, the earl had to have the unswerving support of the king in order to remain in power and in control of peace negotiations. To win that support, he was willing to employ any arguments that would be plausible and persuasive to the monarch. Those he found in a memorandum by Benjamin Vaughan, his private agent at the peace negotiations at Paris. Vaughan's "Brief for the Treaty of Peace" argued for the necessity of "Present *reconciliation*, *Future* peace." The points he made in support of his thesis were these:

The Expence of Keeping up what was given away, Hope of profiting by it even in American hands, Desire of assuming merit from what was prudence, Conviction that the surer stake lay at home; & that we had been too long fighting for *colonies*; which have so truly occasioned all our late wars, that not a single trigger has been drawn by either of the four European powers in each others *principal* dominions in Europe. A few insular possessions such as Jersey, Minorca, & Gibraltar, wrested from the neighboring power, & which were the principal inciters to this war [with Spain], are all that have been attacked in Europe. The war was otherwise for the colonies, scarcely *worth* the wars at different times waged for them. Much more mad would it be to wage war for *future* unborn colonies, which cannot now advantage us, & may not hereafter belong to us. Some of these provinces & tracts which make great figuring in maps were as unprofitable to us, as many districts of Siberia to Russia, or America to Spain. Neither Florida nor Canada are possessions that have a long lease (or a profitable lease) for any but America.⁵

Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, XVII (1987), 163–166. It is also instructive to compare George's arguments against slavery and the slave trade in his essay "Laws Relative to Government in General" (1755–1758), Royal Archives, Additional Georgian Manuscripts, Add. MSS 32/873–75, with very similar passages in Montesquieu's *De L'Esprit des Lois* (Paris, 1748).

⁵ Benjamin Vaughan, "Brief for Treaty of Peace," [Jan.–Feb. 1783], Shelburne Papers, vol. 87, fol. 212, William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mich. For Shelburne's awareness of Vaughan's "foibles" see Shelburne to the king, Dec. 22, 1782, in Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of George III*, VI, 193. After succinctly summarizing Shelburne's precarious political position in 1782–1783, C. R. Ritcheson cogently argued that the earl had only a superficial grasp of free trade as a system and no concept of how to implement it after the war, but still effectively used those ideas and the prospect of full reconciliation to tempt the Americans and the French into making a better peace for Britain than the circumstances of 1782–1783 warranted. Ritcheson, "The Earl of Shelbourne and Peace with America, 1782–1783: Vision and Reality," *International History Review*, V (1983), 338–345. In much the same way, the earl used a critique of empire and the expectation of a burgeoning trade with the former colonies to persuade

Although Shelburne had no high opinion of the brief's author, he recognized the potential of this paper insofar as winning the king's support was concerned. As Vaughan suggested, these arguments allowed "assuming merit from what was prudence"; they made a virtue of the necessity of accepting American Independence. Shelburne assumed that this would make the loss of the colonies more tolerable to George III. His judgment was correct. The king was sufficiently impressed to summarize the arguments in writing, a step he never took in thirty years of writing essays, papers, notes, and aides memoires unless he agreed with the ideas he expressed.

What is the significance of this document? Certainly, it does not mark a permanent change of heart on George III's part. After Shelburne was forced from office in February 1783, the king became noticeably lukewarm toward efforts to improve commercial relations with the United States.⁶ He also freely indulged his bitterness toward Americans with a series of petty and potentially significant insults during the late summer and fall of 1783.⁷ Still, dismissing the essay as a curiosity and no more would be mistaken.

George III's paper succinctly and clearly reveals why a freer trade and a retreat from empire were the roads not taken by British policy makers during the 1780s. Well before 1783, the king had realized that if Britain lost its North American possessions, it would be in a very different relationship with other European powers. Now that had happened, and, prompted by Shelburne, he asked the appropriate questions: did the nation have resources that could sustain it, and what were they? His initial response was that these resources could not and should not be sought "in distant Regions held by precarious Tenure." Rather, they must be found "at home in the exertions of a new policy." But what that new policy would be remained unexplored by the king in his essay and presumably by Shelburne as well. How could the government direct Britain's capital, industry, and population in such ways as to improve the nation's prosperity and power? Beyond saying that none of these resources should be used either to improve existing colonies or to create new ones, George remained silent. Although he professed optimism about future profits from America and urged preservation of the fishery and the trade from India

George III to accept Independence.

⁶ For correspondence that vividly conveys George III's declining interest in American trade see Charles James Fox to the king, Apr. 10, 1783, the king to Fox, Apr. 10, 1783, the duke of Portland to the king, May 10, 1783, and the king to the duke of Portland, May 11, 1783, in Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of George III*, VI, 349–350, 379–381.

⁷ For instance, the king balked at receiving a minister from, and appointing a British minister to, the United States. Fox to the earl of Manchester, June 14, 1783 (private), in the Manchester Papers, vol. 3, Clements Library, and the king to Fox, Aug. 7, 1783, in Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of George III*, VI, 430. George III also flatly refused to extend the usual courtesy of giving jewelry and portraits to peace negotiators to the American commissioners in Paris. Portland to the king, [Oct.] 12, 1783, and the king's reply, Oct. 12, 1783, *ibid.*, VI, 451–452. The king's attitudes toward Americans in general were bewailed by Fox, who believed they would hamper the development of friendly political and commercial relations between the two countries, in a letter to Manchester, Aug. 21, 1783, Manchester Papers, vol. 3.

and the British West Indies, he did not identify these as cornerstones of the new policy. By process of elimination, Britain's future wealth and security would depend on improvement of its economy "at home." To judge from this essay, neither the king nor his minister had thought at all about what the new domestic policy should be. They had no answers to the questions they posed themselves.⁸

Given this failure to consider either the nature or the details of this new policy, it is not surprising that the earl of Sheffield's confident prediction in 1783 that Britain would again dominate the American trade even while denying the United States access to the British West Indies market was attractive to George III and other politicians. Sheffield did not deny what the king had stated as a truism: "the situation of the Kingdom is novel." Unlike Shelburne, however, he offered the comforting assurance that Britain would flourish in this new world by continuing to practice the time-honored policies of mercantilism.⁹ So presented, the choice between taking a familiar course of action and defining and devising new internal and external policies was easy for the king and his new ministers to make. Moreover, for George III, sticking with the old had the additional benefit of permitting him to vent his spleen on the rebels he detested. The king never bothered to refute the views he held briefly in 1783. Instead, he consigned them to the oblivion of his personal files without further comment.

⁸ For a telling critique of Shelburne's grasp of a policy of free trade and its implications and a judgment that the earl was "mute about speculative and theoretical systems (including free trade) because he did not really think much about them, and hence had little or nothing to say," see Ritcheson, "Shelburne and Peace with America," 341-344.

⁹ The earl of Sheffield's pamphlet, *Observations on the Commerce of the American States With Europe and the West Indies; Including the several Articles of Import and Export; And On the Tendency of a Bill now depending in Parliament* (London, 1783), went through 6 editions between May 1783, when it was first published, and July 1784. Contemporaries and historians agree that the pamphlet was very influential in defeating attempts to permit Americans to participate in the carrying trade to the British West Indies.