

You Gotta Fight For Your Right to Party

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The year of 1773 represents the most important turn of direction in American history. At the time, thirteen British colonies existed in the east coast territory of what eventually becomes the United States. At the south the British settlers competed with Spanish colonizers, and at the north the French had an important presence. In fact, only ten years before, in 1763, the small British colonies ended the French and Indian war over the inland territories of the west. The peace was signed in Paris and the future for the colonies looked bright as they felt that such a feat earned them the respect of the British King and Empire. However, only one year later, the British Empire started to impose a series of taxes over the colonies as a way of getting payment for all the protection and law enforcement roles that it performed for the protection of its citizens. The year 1764 saw the proclamation of the Sugar Act, which took revenue from the importation of refined sugar to the colonies. Sugar was a basic product that had to be mostly imported as the cold weather in the American colonies constituted an impediment to the growing of sugar cane. In 1765 a new tax on all commercial and legal transactions, the Stamp Act, paved the way for new regulations, such as the 1766 Quartering Act and the Townshend Act of 1767. Such measures against the colonies were taken by the Parliament in England without any consideration for the opinion, sentiment or point of view from local assemblies or citizens of the American colonies. For colonists, the taxes imposed created a surge of resentment against British control. It was during May of 1773 that a new economic measure was implemented on another basic product of common importation: Tea.

As part of one of the original colonies of the United States, the city of New York played an important role in the movement of opposition against the proclamation of tax acts over British

citizens of the new continent. As early as 1764, right after the proclamation of the Sugar Act, the New York assembly authorized a committee to correspond and interact with their counterparts in the rest of the colonies; the goal was to fight back, counteract, or resist the imposition of economic measures that slowed down the development of the local merchants and manufacturers. In 1765, a Stamp Act congress for all the committees in the colonies took place in New York City putting it at the vanguard of the rebellious movement in the colonies.¹ The nature of this movement, the influence that it has in the evolution of the U.S. as a country and its power over the identity of the same as a nation, is the main point of interest of this article. The year 1773 marks the beginning of the American struggle for independence, a struggle of peasants, merchants and farmers against one of the most powerful empires of the era.

One of the important characteristics of the rebel movement, its high level of organization despite the lack of resources, opened the door to the creation of small organizations in important cities like NYC, Boston and Philadelphia. The use of printed ephemera constituted a relatively easy medium of propaganda and correspondence in the colonies and a way to share political views among the members of the resistance before the birth of mass communication. It was during that same year, 1773, that a pre-revolutionary text saw its origin in the city of New York. "The Alarm" was a pamphlet, published during the month of October 1773. It was printed in five volumes that were released during that period, which circulated apparently among all the colonies. It was signed with the pseudonym "HAMPDEN"[sic], the meaning of which is unknown, and the pamphlet seems to be addressed to the general population. It is also unknown how many copies were printed of each issue, the means of distribution used in its delivery, and if

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, 1973 ed., s.v. "New York."

more issues were made available before or after October 1773.² The contents of the pamphlet are highly relevant because of the events depicted and the ideas expressed in it. It gives a view of the colonies and New York City as vibrant communities strongly influenced by a sense of rebellion; the very same ideas that shape our country today. Among them are: the right of individuals to resist and fight back against government, the concept of life and liberty being unalienable rights for all human beings, and the vision of all men created equal under God. These new ideas and developments surrounding the publishing of the pamphlet sealed the identity of United States as a country, as well as the personality of its citizens.

The Alarm reveals and praises ideas of equality contained in the U.S. constitution,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The Familiar and powerful statements that open the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence revealed a revolution in political and social thinking, such claims were revolutionary because the congregation of individuals recognizing and giving respect to each other regardless of their economic or social status was “new” for the members of old European monarchies. The Alarm demonstrates that these beliefs were already present in the British citizens of the American colonies prior to the publication of the Alarm Volume One, and such awareness seemed to drive their attempts to fight for their economic and social development and the eventual movement toward independence. Many references to these natural rights are made in the pages of “The Alarm.” Volume Three states:

It is confessed by all, that a Man’s life is an unalienable Gift of God.” Later in the same paragraph we read “...no Man can dispose of his own Life; so neither can

² “The Alarm.” Vol. I, II, III, IV, V. [On line] The Library of Congress American Memory. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>. Digital ID: rbpe10500900. 10 April 2009. There are five numbers preserved and those are the only released as far as we know.

dispose of his Liberty; this being essential to the Preservation of that: So that life and Liberty are alike, the unalienable Gift of God.³

The similitude in the sentences between the Declaration of Independence and this text written three years before is evident, making us wonder about the nature of the readers of such pamphlet. The members of the committees of resistance against British taxation come to mind, all the small business owners and merchants, but also the intellectuals and big men of enterprise, characters like the founding fathers, including figures like Thomas Jefferson, the so-called writer of the Declaration of Independence. Regardless of its influence on the revolutionary elites that constituted the vanguard of the independence movement, the Alarm's biggest relevance comes from making these ideas public and sharing them with the common citizen. Across the colonies men and women could recognize and identify with each other as equals because they all fought for the same objective: the opportunity of a better life. Back in Europe and England men did not enjoy of the same ideas of equality. Men were servants or, if fortunate, members of political elites such as monarchies and aristocracies, based in the concept of superiority or even divinity of the leaders. A simple idea such as all men being alike, deserving the same recognition, could be catalogued as widely progressive during this era. The spirit of rebellion and non conformism that appears in the Declaration of Independence is as well portrayed in the Alarm Volume One.

The chief end of all free Government is the protection of property (as comprehending, Life, Liberty and State)...But if this is not secured, it would be more eligible to ...defend themselves than to submit to the Control and Tyranny of others.⁴

Such sentiments were probably considered seditious at the time, but it is important to note that any measures taken against the government in power are supported for the belief in the protection of the basics rights of the individual. In this text, it is possible to read that individuals

³ "The Alarm" III,pg 2.

⁴ "The Alarm" Vol I.pg 1.

have the right to modify their own existence by changing the way communities and societies are lead. The concept of questioning the superior judgment of the leader or leaders did not existed as an open option within the structure of the British Empire, in the text, that possibility is exposed as plausible and even desirable.

The Alarm expresses that the rule of British Empire is considered oppressive by the American colonies. In order to comprehend why these ideas had such a strong influence in the citizenry of the colonies we must realize that the British rule, and the measures taken about public commerce, were considered too oppressive and even harmful to the evolution of the colonies as a self-sufficient territory. England represented a huge empire, with power extending all across the globe. It owned a powerful army that made sure all regulations and laws that came from the central power were enforced. This central power did not accept suggestions nor listen to complaints or points of view from its citizens. While Volume One of the Alarm opens, very similar in form and content to the Declaration of Independence, with a declaration of natural rights for all individuals. Volume Two gives some of the reasons behind the proclamation of such rights, mainly the imposing of tariffs over commercial transaction of unfavorable nature for the colonies. In this number the author depicts such tariffs as means of slavery and injustice.

The Poverty of the Nation...forced venal Ministers to be regardless of the Ways and Means to support their creatures. To support these creatures, the Stamp, and Revenue Acts originated; Acts pregnant with Chains, and the Loss of all that's dear to these Colonies.⁵

The British rule was viewed as a tyranny that enjoyed the fruits of labor from the colonies by taking advantage of its position of power. Not only was government depicted as abusive, but also as cruel and savage, without regard for the well being of its members.

⁵ "The Alarm" Vol II,pg 2.

The profit ...is to support the Tyranny of the East, enslave the West, and prepare us fit Victims for the Exercise of that horrid Inhumanity they have in such dread Abundance, and with more than Savage Cruelty, practiced, in the Face of the Sun, on the helpless Asiaticks.⁶

The authors of the pamphlet perceived themselves, and the members of the colonies, as more than simple slaves of the empire, while acknowledging their rulers' capacity for the exploitation of individuals, as shown for the care given to similar colonies in other parts of the globe.

The Alarm exposes the East India Company as an example of a corrupted corporation. In order to understand the reference to slavery in the Asian continent, we must understand the nature of the struggle in the colonies in 1773. As mentioned previously, the Tea Act of 1773 gave exclusive rights of importation of tea to the East India Company in all British colonies including the American ones. The company started activities in the Persian Gulf, South and East Asia, expanding in the 1800's to America. Its strength was sponsored from the beginning for the British establishment. During its first years the East India Company struggled to survive, but after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, at hands of storms and the forces of Queen Elizabeth, the company finally had the chance of developing by taking over the void left by the Spaniard forces. The Tea Act imposed on the American colonies was directed to raise revenue for England through a high tax on the importation of tea, while giving the East India Company exclusive rights of transportation and importation of the same to and between the colonies. With such a monopoly the company could also set the price of tea at will and convenience.⁷ The East India Company was perceived by the writers of the Alarm — and presumably its readers — as a corrupted corporation that represented an enemy to all the natural liberties of the individual. It

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The New Encyclopedia Britannica. 2002 ed., s.v. "Company."

limited the opportunities of citizens by putting impediments to their right to earn food and shelter, basic and necessary elements of life, not to mention the obstruction to trade and/or produce certain goods. It also limited an individual's will to perform actions that besides beneficial might be pleasant to him. The small importers that supplied tea to the colonies, as well as the black market contractors that made good business smuggling it, and the citizens that enjoyed the new and exotic beverage at a relatively cheap price, saw the potential rise of the price of tea as treat to the their way of life. Volume One of the Alarm narrates a brief account of the turbulent history of bribery and corruption of the company. It also mentions that due to such history the British House of Commons considered once the possibility of dissemble it, because the rights of exclusive trade over products like, tea, cotton and spices were considered public grievance. The Alarm Volume One judges such monopolies harmful not only to the colonies, but also to the individual rights of its citizens. " A Monopoly...is manifestly injurious to the Community, and subversive of the rights of the Individuals"⁸ The rest of Volume One accuses the company of bribery stating: "The Stuart Line, who were always necessitous, and sold the Royal Munificence to them —The Company—for immense and repeated Bribes."⁹ In short, the company is seen as the main element of repression by British control. Citizens of the colonies were exhorted to repel the influence and power of both organisms. The Alarm Volume Three is persuading.

Has it not been proved, that the Company obtained the Monopoly of that Trade (TEA), from the People of England, by the most vile and pernicious Arts? And shall we, because they duped and robbed their Country, be involved in the same Ruin, with the Descendants of those who sold, and those who bought the Commerce of it? Heaven forbid!¹⁰

⁸ "The Alarm" Vol I.pg 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "The Alarm" Vol III.pg 1.

And also:

It hath now been proved to you, That the East India Company, obtained the monopoly of that trade by bribery, and corruption. That the power thus obtained, they have prostituted to extortion, and other the most cruel and horrid purposes, the Sun ever behold.¹¹

The sentiment of outrage and aversion against the company cannot be more obvious: The Company was a corporation set to get the most profit at the lowest cost by selling imported products at high prices. The colonies were vulnerable to British imposition of laws; the British rulers imposed taxes with the excuse of protection and security of its citizen in new territories even though these new territories were in charge of paying the costs of army, food, supplies and quartering of such protection; and the revenue from taxes was sent directly to England without share left for the colonies own spending.

The Alarm's announcement of the possible arrival of tea to the colonies helps to trigger the revolutionary movement. Right at the moment of the publication of the five Volumes of the Alarm, tension between the colonies and the Parliament in England ran high. The colonies resisted ten years of control, and excessive taxation by turning to the black market in the importation of products and relying on the lack of enforcement from British authorities. However, the British decided that it was time to set an example and started enforcing the revenue of taxes over basic products. Merchants, manufacturers, and basically everyone in the colonies feared the rise of prices in all imports, as well as the gradual and partial crippling of local economies as a result of measures against the production of goods and products. It is clear that texts like the Alarm show that the American colonists were a very active group with high expectative of life and strong core ideologies that clashed with the plans of the British. The possible arrival of Tea in the colonies in the last trimester of 1773 ignited the struggle for

¹¹ "The Alarm" Vol V.pg 4.

American independence and finally triggered the activities of open resistance against the British Empire. While the five Volumes of the Alarm enjoy a solid diffusion of ideology, they also have the characteristic of narrative. Volume One started by making the declaration of natural rights for the citizens of the colonies. Volume Two exposed the East India Company as a corrupted corporation with a sense of outrage that compares its business practices with plain slavery. Volume Three expanded the concept and also retook the ideas of life and liberty as gifts of God above all orders and laws of governments and political organizations. Volume Four is a long exercise that made calculations on the possible profits that the company could obtain from the monopoly of tea. Lastly, Volume Five made a last call of action against the immoral monopoly of the company. Volume Three has a very distinctive trait because it is here where we are told of the situation and actual events that go on in the main ports of the colonies: Boston, Philadelphia and New York, where the main transactions between England and the continent were performed. The Alarm explains that right then, in October 1773, three ships arrived from England. The East India Company specifically asked the captains of the ships to take some cargoes in of tea to the colonies, according to the Tea Act. The captains, knowing already of the boycott that colonists had over imported tea, and as a way to avoid any possible conflict and danger of confrontation, refused to transport the cargo. The action is celebrated by the Alarm. At that time, the boycott against the importation of tea by the company advanced without major complications: Committees of Correspondence of each city waited patiently for cargo ships transporting tea and prevented them from landing. Nevertheless, the Alarm describes how colonists discovered another new shipment of tea with specific orders of delivering it to the colonies. The Alarm raised public awareness and advised about negative effects of the tea arrival.

If you receive the Portion designed for this city—New York, Boston, Philadelphia—you will in Future, have an India Warehouse here; and the trade of

all the commodities of that Country, will be lost to your Merchants, and carried on by the company; which will be an immense lost to the Colony...the Company will have it in their Power, to exact what Price they please for their Merchandize; as they will have the Sale in their own hands.¹²

What is interesting in the development of American history is that at the time a trip between England and the colonies took about a month by ship, meaning that since this Volume of the Alarm was signed October 15th 1773, the new ships' arrival happened around the middle of November. Taking in consideration that the Boston Tea Party occurred in December 16th 1773, and that the ships in question spent a few weeks in harbor because of the blocking of the landing of tea by the rebel groups— all the ships left, except the Boston ones that decided to try to land the cargo in American soil— it is easy to imagine that the ships that the Alarm warns against, are the same ships that later suffered the bold actions of rebellion from Boston radicals. Disguised as Indians colonists threw 342 chests of tea into the Boston harbor creating the Boston Tea Party and in the process giving birth to the struggle of resistance and eventual independence of the colonies from the British Empire, a struggle that eventually ended up with the creation of our country— the United States of America.

The libertarian ideas found in the Alarm represented a common sentiment that was the basis to the search for independence. After the Boston Tea Party, the colonies entered a war for independence. One of its most symbolical moments was the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776. While the opening paragraphs of this Declaration became the iconic text about the nature of liberty and the rights of the individuals among modern civilizations of the western hemisphere, it is obvious, by the evidence in the Alarm, that such ideology and sentiment regarding the universality of rights that have appealed to many generations of Americans had been present from the early beginnings of the colonies in this

¹² “The Alarm” Vol III.pg 2.

continent. The credit given to Thomas Jefferson seems a bit overrated since the same ideas were circulated among the merchants in the colonies three years before his famous constitution. The answer to where the ideas came from and who originated them is given in the Alarm Volume One. Right in Volume One when the text takes over the concept of protection of property there is a footnote that reads: “In the large sense in which Mr. Locke uses it, as comprehending Life, Liberty, and State.”¹³ The Mr. Locke that the text refers is John Locke, the English political, and philosopher, who initiated the Age of Enlightenment and Reason in England and France, father of classical liberalism and main influence in the U.S. Constitution.¹⁴ Locke is usually seen as a key thinker of early liberalism; he accepted the idea of all humans born rational, free and equal, a concept that opened the doors to progressive thinking and modern development of political ideologies.¹⁵ Locke was mentioned in two Volumes of the Alarm with a familiarity that made one think that the Alarm was read by a highly intellectual society well familiar with Locke’s work, beyond the well-known group of small businessmen and merchants that formed the ranks of the resistance groups. Other concepts of classical liberal ideology, and obvious Locke references, were the concept of men as “Free Born,” used in part of the text, as well as the concept of “State of Nature.” These concepts are not explained in the text, thus the assumed familiarity that the readers of the material might have had with the subject. Nevertheless, it is really important to explain what these concepts mean. For liberal ideologies man is born free without affiliation to any rule, government or code. If all the men are free, then at the beginning of history or times, individuals were free and lived in nature, each of them taking care of himself alone. The “State of Nature” was this lawless state previous to the creation of any political order

¹³ “The Alarm” Vol I,pg 1.

¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica.

¹⁵ Heywood Andrew. Political Ideologies. (New York. NY. Palgrave Macmillan. 2007), 36-37.

or organization. Locke explains that men established rules and regulations in order to have a most practical and easy way to survive and live together. Instead of working all against each other, men worked as a group or groups because this was an easier way to guarantee protection and security for everybody. Men were then in charge of their own government, they decided their rules, regulations, they decided what was to be done or avoided, they agreed what direction was to be taken and they performed all that by freely contemplating their options and choosing those that seemed more favorable to them. In short, regular citizens have power over themselves; hierarchy or power is not chosen by an elite or given for some kind of divine command. A man has the power to invent himself and modify the world that surrounds him. While these concepts seem to be normal by our modern standards, it is important to remember that the most powerful nations of the world at that time were monarchies dominated by elite groups that claimed some kind of superior condition above the standard citizen. Locke's ideas were shaped and designed under one of these monarchies.¹⁶ It is obvious that Thomas Jefferson was a fervent student of Locke's work, but he was surely not alone as the same concepts enclosed in the Declaration of Independence had humble beginnings in other pre-revolutionary ephemera. The biggest, and most famous, modification that Jefferson made to Locke's ideas was to substitute the unalienable rights of life, liberty and property to: "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." The latter one enclosing a whole spectrum of human desire, dreams and perspective so complex, but at the same time universal that it made it easy to identify with it. For Locke, property gives a man freedom to support himself by ownership of his land and his mean of labor, when a man is free to own the fruits of his work, he then can pursue what he considers best for his own advancement and self-interest. If a man does not depend on government to raise his own food, take care of his

¹⁶ Ibid.

cattle or even produce goods, then that man is a free man. Even the writer of the Alarm made note that the word property had a bigger meaning, and three years later Jefferson will adjust the concept to the now famous idea of “The Pursuit of Happiness.” Progressive ideas like this one were common language among the early rebels of U.S. history; these rebels promoted the expansion of this ideology and its presence in the colonies. “The Alarm” was created under a rich and vibrant community of free thinkers. One of them, Isaac Low is cited in Volume Five of the series. Low, born on American soil, more specifically in Brunswick, New Jersey, established himself as a merchant in New York City and quickly became a prominent local figure. Elected chairman of the Committee of Correspondence, consisting of twenty-five members, which searched to repel the Revenue Acts, Low associated himself with the “Friends of Liberty and Trade” and circulated and signed a declaration opposing the landing or storing of British tea in the colonies with the use of force.¹⁷ The Committees of Correspondence created a boycott of British imports while at the same time smuggled the same products through providers from other European trade companies. In the Alarm multiple references to the “Friends of Liberty” are made: “The Friends of Liberty and equal Commerce have always considered any other Monopoly dangerous,”¹⁸ or when talking about the Revenue Acts “The Fensible Friends of Liberty have two reasons for opposing this Act. Its raising money upon the Americans without their consent, and the money being raised being to support a government independent to them.”¹⁹ The Friends of Liberty reference is not only a friendly term for people that offered sympathy to the cause. Organizations like the Friends of Liberty were created in all the colonies and were composed of merchants and small business owners who were politically active in defense of the

¹⁷ Canes, Mark C. and Garraty, John A. ed., American National Biography. (NY. USA. Oxford University Press 1999.) Vol.14.Pg 26.

¹⁸ “The Alarm” Vol I.pg 1.

¹⁹ “The Alarm” Vol 5.pg 3.

economic and political rights of the colonies, such organizations were strongly linked or were the same as the Committees of Correspondence. Isaac Low is believed to have preferred the Friends of Liberty instead of the most reactionary organization “The Sons of Liberty” of Samuel Adams in Boston, Massachusetts,²⁰ members included figures like Paul Revere and whose presence was prominent in events like the Boston Massacre. Thanks to all the information available about the period, and references made in the Alarm, it is not a bold assumption to imagine that the origins of the pamphlet can be linked to the “Friends of Liberty” of New York City, and that thanks to the less reactionary nature of this group, its political activism was fond of the publication of subversive material instead of the most direct confrontational activities of groups like the “Sons of Liberty.” Their presence however, certainly offered an excellent document that depicts a broad spectrum of the zeitgeist that preceded the beginning of the conflict of independence. It is also very likely that both groups constituted a unified force rather than isolated attempts of rebellion as the colonies pulled together against the power of the British Empire. Under such circumstances the idea of the Alarm being read for members of the revolutionary elites and for figures like Washington, Franklin or Jefferson seems plausible. In this way, the Alarm, a small text that circulated two hundred years ago possessed the broad strokes of American identity.

In Conclusion, the liberal ideas that have shaped and defined the identity of the United States of America have been present from the early beginnings of the country, inspiring the first generations of colonizers with a deep sense of independence and equality, planting the basis for the creation of the Constitution and guiding the new concepts of rules, laws and regulations of democracy in our modern societies. A couple hundred years after the conception of the country, citizens recall the same natural rights proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence each and

²⁰ American National Biography.

every time they search to defend and claim their rights regardless of their color, gender, social status, economic means or political affiliation. Topics that are considered controversial in modern times like civil rights, gay marriage, gender equality, gun control, free speech, war, peace, and democracy often are debated under the tenets of the equality and natural rights of individuals. The people of the United States believe that their society is based in freedom and the defense of liberty, they believe in equality between individuals and respect among the same, they believe in their right to demand retribution from their government and they believe that every man and woman in the land has the right to pursuit their own personal happiness, although sometimes we have to fight to get it.