The Beginnings of National Politics
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ALTHOUGH great revolutions do not spring from transient causes, they are often launched amid conditions of confusion, uncertainty, and surprise. Under these circumstances, even aspiring rebels and seasoned politicians find it difficult to lay careful plans or anticipate events. In 1773, when the idea of an American congress was first proposed, the leaders of colonial resistance to British policies were casting about for ways to end the "political Lethargy" of the preceding three years. Their tentative speculations about reviving intercolonial cooperation scarcely foreshadowed the popular mobilization that would take place in 1774 or the astounding authority the First Continental Congress would acquire. The discussions of 1773 thus reveal as much about the obstacles American leaders faced as the solutions later events would provide. They suggest, too, how barely skeletal a framework for intercolonial politics existed before the Coercive Acts transformed the course of American resistance and simplified the tasks confronting the delegates who assembled at Philadelphia in September 1774. Yet lessons and memories drawn from the seemingly fallow years of the early 1770's lingered. The decisions of the First Congress reflected not only the clarification of issues that took place during the summer of 1774, but also the mood of uncertainty and lassitude that had characterized the earlier years of the decade.
The Fallow Years

EARLY in the spring of 1770, Parliament repealed all the Townshend duties except that on tea. The new ministry of Lord North hoped that colonial opposition could not survive a substantial repeal of the ill-conceived duties levied in 1767. Eager to resume normal commercial operations and suspicious of the rumored duplicity of competitors in other ports, American merchants demanded an end to the non-importation of British goods. By early fall the colonial boycott so laboriously pieced together in 1768 and 1769 had virtually collapsed, leaving in its place an atmosphere of mutual recrimination between town and country, rival cities, and even regions. Local efforts to prevent the drinking of dutied tea continued, with mixed success, but prospects for maintaining a cohesive intercolonial opposition to imperial policy had seemingly evaporated.¹

To the comparatively small number of colonial politicians who consciously continued to identify themselves as leaders of resistance, repeal did little to weaken the darker suspicions of British intentions aroused during the struggles of the 1760's. Indeed the retention of the tea duty, like the Declaratory Act of 1766, signaled the government's refusal to accept American interpretations of the great constitutional questions. So long as Parliament claimed a right to levy taxes and enact laws binding the colonists, future disputes seemed likely. Moreover, other government measures not requiring parliamentary action might still be seen as part of a systematic effort to subvert American liberties. If the ministry planned no frontal assault against the rights of all the colonies, dangerous forays might be launched against individual provinces. Such, for example, was the plan to provide crown salaries for Massachusetts officials. "Here is displayed another part of that pernicious plan of government laid down for America," Francis Dana informed Henry Marchant. "'Tis opening in this Province, but it will be extended thro out the Continent"; and once carried to completion, it would reduce the colonists "to a state too humiliating and abject to be endured by a people whose ideas of Political Freedom are no better than a Hottentot's."²

If their convictions were no less compelling than before, how-
ever, the strategy of resistance that emerged after 1770 was tentative, even passive. American leaders lamented the absence of any obvious bonds of union and cooperation but could at first imagine no effective remedies. The acrimony accompanying the breakdown of non-importation seemed to pose powerful obstacles to new activity, particularly when the problems encountered even in organizing a boycott were recalled. As Arthur Lee observed from London in February 1773, “the late experience of mutual faithlessness, with the disunited state which is the consequence of it, renders the probability of our harmonizing, in any mode of effectual opposition, extremely small.”

The local committees that had been formed to enforce non-importation had disbanded, and in their absence intercolonial political contacts were substantially reduced. Even the character of correspondence seemed to have changed. In the late 1760’s, organized committees of Sons of Liberty, consciously striving to maintain a unified resistance, had created what were in effect quasi-official channels of communication. By contrast the political correspondence of the early 1770’s was essentially a private exchange of mutual exhortations and news of British politics: it did little more than allow men of similar views to share information and speculation as often or infrequently as they liked. Their absorption with British politics reflected a conviction that the next phase of the struggle could be launched only from London, that the initiative lay again with the government “at home.”

The difficulty colonial leaders experienced simply in maintaining regular communication with each other and reliable sources of information in England was one measure of the prevailing political inertia. Convinced that resistance would again be necessary but stymied by the visible decline of popular interest in politics, they groped for ways to revive a modicum of cohesion. As early as January 1771 Arthur Lee began preaching the need to establish a regular network of correspondence. Eight months later Samuel Adams responded to Lee’s hint with a genteel vision of American corresponding societies—modeled after the English Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights—which would appoint deputies to an annual convention and correspond with allies in London. But, Adams abruptly apologized, “This is a sudden thought and drops undigested from my pen. It would be an arduous task for any man to attempt to awaken a sufficient Number in the colonies to so grand an undertaking.” Evidently
he decided the task was too arduous. Another year passed before the creation of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, and that committee, once organized, confined its activities to Massachusetts.4

In 1773, at the suggestion of the Virginia Burgesses, the provincial assemblies established standing committees of correspondence. But in fact those committees conducted little correspondence before the crisis of 1774. Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee did not begin corresponding until 1773, and as late as December of that year Charles Thomson could still suggest that “a correspondence might be opened and kept up between the politicians and principal men in the several governments.”5 Surviving letters suggest that hardly more than a score of men scattered throughout the continent were actively involved in this network. Many of the key actors of the Revolution remained outside its limited range, including such figures as Washington, John Jay, James Duane, Henry Laurens, and Robert Morris.

Ideologically committed as the surviving radical leaders clearly were, it would nevertheless be wrong to think of them as a revolutionary cadre waiting to exploit some new crisis to seize power. Only in Massachusetts, where the administration of Thomas Hutchinson provided a convenient target, did the old issues of the 1760’s still dominate provincial politics. Imperial questions also provoked less serious controversies in South Carolina, Maryland, and New York. But elsewhere other issues were quick to reassert themselves: familiar contests over patronage and place, the allocation of new lands, or the extension of effective government to the frontier.

Nor were most radical leaders intensely committed to political life for its own sake. Only the still-elusive figure of Samuel Adams suggests a recognizable revolutionary “type”; and not because Adams was already bent on American independence—a dubious claim—but rather because his ascetic devotion to the mundane tasks of political organization set him apart even from his closest colleagues. Other former leaders of resistance welcomed the opportunity to lay political concerns aside. John Dickinson “has been lost to the cause of Liberty ever since his Letters were well received,” William Shippen, Jr., complained in 1770; and when Samuel Adams pressed Dickinson to write in support of the Massachusetts General Court’s running debate with Hutchinson, the famous “Pennsylvania Farmer” declined.6
For American radicals as for colonial officeholders in general, politics remained an avocation, not a career: a way for merchants and planters to acquire public prestige to complement private wealth, for lawyers to gain celebrity and thus clients, for village notables to confirm their superior status, or for land speculators to develop useful connections. Most of their time was still spent tending to private affairs, and they preferred it that way. They had yet to be seduced, as Hannah Arendt has shrewdly observed, by the "charms" of "the acts and deeds which liberation demanded from them . . . the speech-making and decision-taking, the oratory and the business, the thinking and the persuading, and the actual doing which proved necessary" to carry the Revolution through "to its logical conclusion: independent government and the foundation of a new body politic."  

Given the character of their own attitude toward politics, they were not surprised that popular interest in the imperial questions of the 1760's had visibly slackened in the absence of palpable threats to colonial liberties. Yet they also sensed that a substantial portion of the general public had not entirely forgotten the concerns vented during the agitation of the 1760's. Writing to Arthur Lee shortly after the collapse of non-importation, John Dickinson struck a curiously sanguine note in describing prospects for future resistance. "My countrymen have been provoked," he remarked,

but not quite enough. Thanks to the excellent spirit of administration, I doubt not but proper measures will be pursued for provoking them still more. Some future oppression will render them more attentive to what is offered to them; and the calm friend of freedom, who faithfully watches and calls out on a new danger, will be more regarded than if he endeavours to repeat the alarm on an attack that is thought to have been in some measure repelled. I do not despair.

In this letter, Dickinson succinctly outlined the model of behavior that other opposition leaders would find most attractive during the years immediately ahead. Sensible that popular opinion could be mobilized only by some new crisis, believing that in 1770 they had reached and exhausted the limits of their ability to alter the course of events, they settled down for a period of watching and waiting—and writing. Because popular indifference or apostasy—drinking dutied tea, for example—could create embarrassing precedents, the principles of resistance had to be kept
alive even when colonial rights were not directly threatened. Celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act, commemorating the Boston Massacre, publishing exhortatory newspaper essays, and observing other rituals could not change the basic political situation, but they were still necessary. The great dilemma, Charles Thomson noted, was that:

An ill timed resistance may ruin the cause, and a supine passive acquiescence damp the spirit of liberty. Experience evinces that unsuccessful attempts strengthen the power, they are meant to controul; and on the other hand, how difficult it is to rouse a people whose spirits are broken with oppression and who are long accustomed to servile obedience. The greater care, therefore, is necessary to keep awake the sense of liberty, and at the same time not to hazard a breach, until proper measures are concerted to insure success.

Arthur Lee's favorite adage—*Fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*—remained the watchword of opposition. But what precisely were radical leaders waiting for? None would challenge Dickinson's belief that the principles of opposition had to be preserved "till Time shall ripen the Period for asserting more successfully the Liberties of these Colonies; that thereby they may be kept on the Watch to seize the happy opportunity, whenever it offers." But the difficulty of foreseeing when and how that opportunity would arise further complicated the task of forming a coherent plan of opposition. Nevertheless, colonial leaders were free to indulge their imaginations by constructing alternative scenarios for the future course of imperial politics. Their speculations reveal something of the uncertainty that continued to cloud their thinking well into 1774. Although it took little foresight to recognize that American independence could prove the eventual result of a progressive deterioration of imperial relations, there is scant direct evidence to suggest that colonial leaders were actively contemplating this possibility. Constitutional reform within the empire remained the only legitimate goal, and each of the scenarios they envisioned was directed toward the establishment of American liberties within that context.

Considerations of demography inspired the most pacific of these lines of development. Balancing their confident visions of

*Which can be loosely translated as "Firm in principles, prudent in means."
an ever-expanding, ever more prosperous America against a Hogarthian image of English corruption and degeneracy, some colonial leaders concluded that, in every measurable index of social progress, the colonies were ultimately destined to overtake the mother country. The reapportionment of political rights would naturally follow America’s growing wealth and, it was implied, Britain’s increasing dependence on colonial resources. Understandably ignorant of the profound transformation of British society that was itself beginning in the late eighteenth century, some colonial politicians readily believed that a strategy of avoiding conflict would not only favor their cause but ultimately prove decisive. Few found this policy more attractive than Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee, the two men whose letters from London provided American whigs with their most important sources of political intelligence, and their Boston correspondent Thomas Cushing, the speaker of the Massachusetts House. “Our natural increase in wealth and population, will in a course of years, effectually settle this dispute in our favor,” Cushing observed in 1773, while continued controversy over the extent of Parliament’s authority might produce “a rupture fatal to both countries.” Like Franklin, Cushing hoped the government would have the wisdom to retract its odious system of colonial regulations, thereby allowing the tired constitutional questions “to fall asleep” and Britain to regain the affection of its colonies.

Other occasions might arise, however, to enable the colonies to exploit their natural advantages more directly. Any grave international situation that led a beleaguered Britain to seek American assistance would allow the colonies to demand formal recognition of their disputed rights. In the early 1770’s, then, colonial leaders followed every rumor of a European crisis, and although no war materialized, the evidence of recent history made it reasonable to suppose that one must eventually occur. The longer one was delayed, of course, the more valuable would American assistance become. And whenever war did finally break out, Charles Thomson noted in 1773, “Then will be the time for the American legislatures, with modesty & firmness, to recapitulate their wrongs, explain their grievances and assert their rights.” But what if, even then, Britain balked at confirming American liberties and adopted coercive measures against the colonies instead? American ends would still be served. For either, as Franklin predicted, “such compulsory attempts will con-
tribute to unite and strengthen us," or, as Arthur Lee observed, British embroilment in Europe would undercut "any military operation against us." Moreover this scenario had a valuable sanction in English constitutional history, which showed, Franklin noted, that "in similar situations of the subjects here, redress would seldom be obtained but by withholding aids when the sovereign was in distress."11

Both of these scenarios—of demographic growth or international crisis—had an indefinite quality about them; neither implied that a resumption of the struggles of the 1760's was imminent. But one other line of development also seemed imaginable. Some overt, blatant act of the British government might suddenly precipitate a radical change in the existing static situation, enraging the people at large and giving radical leaders a new opportunity to regain political influence and mobilize a more cohesive opposition. In 1771 and 1772 this, too, seemed remote, but events in 1773 made such a scenario more plausible.

One common assumption united each of these attempts to foresee the future course of imperial politics: that colonial leaders could themselves do little to alter the state of politics. They had either to react to events abroad or else wait until the passage of time and the development of American society provided new solutions to old problems. What is striking about their speculations, then, is the essential tone of passivity that runs through them. In the early 1770's, the task of organizing an active, viable intercolonial resistance movement posed almost insuperable obstacles. In the absence of a galvanizing crisis on which they could capitalize, effective political organization seemed inconceivable.

**The Idea of a Congress**

Events in the New Year of 1773 gave these speculations a clearer focus and also fostered the first serious discussions of the idea of convening an American congress. On January 5, the royal commission appointed to investigate the burning of the schooner Gaspée off the Rhode Island coast held its first meeting in Newport. On the next day, not far to the north, Governor Thomas Hutchinson opened the new session of the Massachusetts General Court with a closely reasoned defense of the indivisible sovereignty of Parliament. Empowered to return any suspects it
identified to Britain for trial, the Gaspée Commission constituted an apparent encroachment on the civil liberties of individuals—although its failure to discover the culprits partly defused the threat it posed. By contrast, while Hutchinson’s speech itself raised no immediate dangers, its implications were more ominous. Responding to the inflammatory attacks his Boston enemies had launched against his acceptance of a crown salary and a similar proposal for paying the salaries of provincial judges, Hutchinson naively hoped to undermine their influence by a thorough refutation of their constitutional arguments. He was also convinced that his opponents intended to convert their recent activities into a campaign to revive intercolonial opposition to the government, a specter that reinforced the need to demonstrate the absurdity of their position. Ironically, it was Hutchinson’s response to the threat he perceived that gave Samuel Adams and his colleagues the opportunity they had been waiting for.\textsuperscript{12}

Whether the plans of the Boston radicals were initially as ambitious and well laid as Hutchinson assumed is questionable. When a group of Rhode Island politicians wrote to ask how their colony should oppose the Gaspée Commission, the tentative advice Samuel Adams offered was remarkably cautious.\textsuperscript{13} And while Hutchinson’s address sparked an extended public debate with the General Court, Adams and Cushing were careful to inform their correspondents that the assembly had been reluctant to issue any reply. “The Silence of the other Assemblies of late upon every Subject that concerns the joynet Interest of the Colonies,” Adams wrote John Dickinson, “rendered it somewhat difficult to determine what to say with Propriety.” Although such an apology might have been somewhat disingenuous, the Massachusetts leaders did fear that other colonies might accuse them of precipitating a needless, harmful controversy—a legitimate concern that would influence their actions well into 1775.\textsuperscript{14}

Both the circumstances and substance of this debate—a haughty, ambitious governor, disseminating dangerous doctrines—minimized this danger, however, and the Boston leaders were not slow to appreciate its other potential uses. Simple republication of the relevant documents would help awaken public opinion throughout the continent. But more important, the debate might provide an opportunity for erecting new mechanisms of intercolonial cooperation. In its first reply to Hutchinson, the
Massachusetts House dangled a hint that it might be necessary to call a congress to determine where to draw “the line of distinction between the supreme authority of Parliament, and the total independence of the colonies.” In March, responding to news of the Gaspée Commission, the Virginia House of Burgesses called for the appointment of standing provincial committees of correspondence, a proposal that encouraged further consideration of the idea of a congress. And in April, Cushing and Adams respectively raised the question in separate letters to Franklin and Lee.

In the early months of 1773, neither Franklin nor Lee would have favored such a suggestion. Franklin was still attached to the notion of avoiding open conflict, while Lee worried that “The northern colonies are precipitating matters too much.” In June, Lee warned Samuel Adams that “the open measure of a congress” might provoke Britain to retaliate before the colonies had realized their natural strength. Within a fortnight, however, Lee changed his mind, and in early July, Franklin, too, endorsed the idea. Both men argued, in effect, that the government would not voluntarily grant the constitutional concessions American whigs desired. “Some degree of compulsion” was necessary, Lee noted, while Franklin suggested that the government would prove more receptive to proposals issued by a congress held in peacetime than by one called to exploit Britain’s insecurity in the event of war. For the first time, both men seemed willing to support American initiatives that they recognized might well “bring the dispute to a crisis.”

With these endorsements in hand, the Boston leaders apparently gave the idea of a congress renewed consideration. By late August, Hutchinson had been informed that Adams and his collaborators had written to other colonies to suggest the convening of a congress. One month later the case for a congress was carefully explored in an essay published in the Boston Gazette and subsequently reprinted in other colonies. Despite the efforts of statesmen in Britain and America, “Observation” wrote, “no plan of union is yet agreed on between them, the dispute continues, and every thing floats in uncertainty.” Given this state of affairs, the author proposed

That a congress of American states be assembled as soon as possible, draw up a Bill of Rights and publish it to the world; choose an ambassa-
 dor to reside at the British court to act for the united colonies; appoint where the congress shall annually meet, and how it may be summoned upon any extraordinary occasion, what farther steps necessary to be taken, &c.

Hutchinson read this piece and found his year-long suspicions confirmed, though he also suggested that the agitation for a congress—the measure he deemed “most likely to rekindle a general flame in the Colonies”—reflected the dejection he professed to observe in “the leaders of the Party.”

Yet suggestive as these references seem, what ultimately remains more striking is that colonial leaders failed to move toward the creation of a congress even though a promising opportunity for such an innovation soon arose. For during these same autumn weeks Americans were learning of the government’s new plan to grant the East India Company a tea monopoly in the colonies, a decision that logically could have provided the occasion for converting these scattered hints of intercolonial union into a movement for a congress. Yet such a movement did not take place; nor apparently was it even seriously considered. The opposition to the Tea Act of 1773 was effective but not innovative. Its tactics were essentially a reversion to the non-importation movement of 1768–70. Decisions to obstruct the landing and sale of the tea were made autonomously by local meetings and committees. Correspondence among major commercial centers and between seaports and the countryside increased, but the provincial committees of correspondence, so enthusiastically formed during the preceding months, remained empty vessels, neither directing nor coordinating resistance.

Nevertheless, at the turn of the critical year of 1774 radical leaders could view the prospects for resistance with greater optimism than had been possible a year before. Virginia’s response to the Gaspée Commission, the skillful exploitation of the debate between Hutchinson and the General Court, the subsequent clamor over the publication of Hutchinson’s private letters, and the rapid mobilization of opposition to the Tea Act: all of these developments demonstrated that colonial resistance had discovered a new and surprising cohesion. Somewhat ironically, however, these events also served to distract radical leaders from examining the problem of American union more carefully. In the political vocabulary of 1773, union was still largely defined in
terms of reaching fundamental agreement on principles, not of creating new mechanisms or institutions of coordination. Nor could agreement over principles by itself define a program of resistance or eliminate the substantial uncertainty that still colored patriot thinking. Many of the underlying assumptions of the early 1770's remained intact. A constitutional reconciliation with Britain, achieved either through the negotiation of an American “Bill of Rights” or a repeal of the objectionable measures enacted since 1763, was still the only legitimate goal of opposition. But political speculations retained an indefinite and naïve character. A restoration of the harmony of 1771-72 was entirely conceivable. If Thomas Hutchinson could be removed from office, the potentially explosive situation in Massachusetts could be defused—which was what Franklin had intended by transmitting the governor’s letters to the Boston radicals. In many ways, too, colonial leaders were content to let the initiative again pass over to the government. If the ministry acted wisely and gauged colonial popular opinion correctly, it might also avoid new provocations, even in the wake of the Boston Tea Party. Despite the quickened anxieties recent events had evoked, the private political correspondence of this period betrays little sense of imminent crisis.

So, in perhaps the most detailed assessment of American prospects composed during these months, Charles Thomson could still advocate a strategy of moderate protest and delay. The assemblies should again submit well-reasoned petitions, Thomson wrote the Boston Committee, while politicians in each province “opened” a correspondence. Meanwhile the colonial militias should be strengthened, and “young men of fortune” encouraged to “enter into foreign service, to visit foreign courts, and to establish acquaintances and connexions abroad.” Some of the colonies, Thomson concluded, “are in their infancy and can yield no support to the common cause; others are guided by men of doubtful, some by men of timid dispositions; and the greatest part not sufficiently roused or animated.” As late as April 1774 the major interest of radical leaders seemed to center on William Goddard’s scheme for an American post office, a measure not without constitutional implications but scarcely a bridge to revolution.

Even in Massachusetts no one could be sure what the coming months would bring, and a certain degree of caution still seemed
advisable. After preparing a circular letter urging the formation of a common intercolonial front of opposition, the Boston Committee of Correspondence decided to restrict the official distribution of this proposal to Massachusetts. The committee’s provincial counterpart issued a circular letter largely confined to repeating vague exhortations of the need for union. In the early months of 1774 opinions about the government’s response to the Tea Party varied widely. Although the radical physician Thomas Young hinted that “our next attack will be upon the Customs House,” others thought that Hutchinson’s imminent departure for England might usher in a period of relative peace. Elbridge Gerry wrote thoughtfully about the need for military training as a long-term aid to resistance.25 In April, a scant five weeks before news of the Boston Port Act reached the colonies, John Adams could still assess the likely course of Anglo-American politics and find himself of the same opinion that I have been for many Years, that there is not Spirit enough on Either side to bring the Question to a compleat Decision—and that We shall oscillate like a Pendulum and fluctuate like the Ocean, for many Years to come, and never obtain a compleat Redress of American Grievances, nor submit to an absolute Establishment of Parliamentary Authority[,] but be trimming between both as we have been for ten Years past, for more Years to come than you and I shall live. Our Children, may see Revolutions, and be concerned and active in effecting them of which we can form no conception.

Adams had studied imperial politics for a decade, and his skeptical opinion was entirely consistent with the rhythm of the events he had observed.26

Nevertheless, from the events of 1773 the Boston leaders apparently drew one conclusion that would have critical consequences in 1774. The success of spontaneously organized local movements to prevent the sale of East India tea demonstrated that an intercolonial boycott could be effectively mounted whenever a suitable opportunity arose and without prior consultations in a congress. Occasional references to a congress were still made, notably in John Hancock’s commemoration of the Boston Massacre. Yet it is perhaps equally significant that when Samuel Adams sent a copy of this speech to John Dickinson, he failed even to mention, much less endorse, the measure Hancock had described as “the most effectual method of establishing such an
Union as the present posture of our affairs requires."\textsuperscript{27} As their strategy in the weeks immediately following the arrival of the Boston Port Act revealed, Adams and his colleagues were inclined to gamble that rural Massachusetts and the other colonies could be induced to join an immediate commercial boycott without the prior convening of a congress. Thus while in 1773 the idea of calling a congress had been considered a radical, even provocative step, in the crisis of 1774 it could be proposed and accepted as a comparatively restrained response to overt British coercion—a shift in perspective that helps to explain how the First Congress acquired such substantial power so rapidly.

**The Structure of Politics**

To radical leaders in the early 1770's, then, colonial union was preeminent a problem of politics, not of government. Concerned with maintaining popular support, recognizing that the real initiative in imperial affairs rested with Britain, their absorption in tactical problems diverted them from giving sustained consideration to the form and shape some future union might take. They could have had little interest in the various plans for unifying the colonies that periodically circulated through the winding corridors of the imperial bureaucracy. Nothing was wrong with the colonial constitutions, they thought, that could not be cured by curtailing the influence of the ministry in England and the unwarranted powers claimed by Parliament or exercised by imperial lackeys in America. Such a prescription left them unconcerned about longer range problems of intercolonial government.

Thus in fact it was not the leaders of resistance who thought longest and hardest about the inherent problems of unifying and integrating thirteen distinct provinces. Their concerns were political. It was instead imperial officials and latent loyalists who believed that the turbulence of American politics was a function of the weakness of government, and a problem whose solution required subordinating individual provinces and parochial interests to a set of common policies, unifying institutions, and external controls. And little in their experience suggested that the colonists could efficiently govern their own provinces,
much less cooperate in managing the affairs of some continental confederacy.

In retrospect, of course, British policymakers obviously committed one of their gravest errors when they converted this image of colonial political immaturity into an argument for the likely success of a policy of repression. They simply failed to anticipate the extent to which the logic of resistance generated a nationalist impulse sufficiently powerful to carry the Americans through the critical first stages of revolution. Yet in the context of the early 1770's, when the conditions favoring the creation of a viable American union seemed less potent than the obstacles the colonists would have to overcome, their skepticism was certainly justifiable. For what is most striking about the structure of American politics on the eve of independence is the apparent absence of several prerequisites for the establishment of what would become, in effect, a national government.

There were, in the first place, no readily available or immediately appealing models capable of outlining what form an American confederation should take. The theoretical definitions of confederations found in familiar Enlightenment treatises on international law and politics were merely suggestive, not instructive. And the thrust of the previous decade's debate over the authority of Parliament left potentially nagging problems about the extent of provincial autonomy. Although a congress composed of representatives elected by each of the colonies would obviate the principal objection the colonists had levied against Parliament, the apportionment of power between some central agency and its constituencies might well prove troublesome. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that any leader of resistance gave these matters serious thought before 1774. In December 1771, it is true, "American Solon" had announced his intention "to write a system of government, and civil policy, for the united provinces in America," which would be "ready for them whenever necessity shall oblig[e] them to set up a government of their own." But when the fruits of his labors were published, they consisted of two meager proposals, one for establishing "a states general"—not further defined—the other for opening free trade with Europe.28

Visible signs of the basis for serious political conflict both within and between colonies posed a second potential problem.
The same developments that radical leaders pointed to as evidence of the colonies' future strength—expanding areas of settlement, new sources of immigration, favorable demographic conditions, growing commerce—also produced major social dislocations that inevitably had disruptive political consequences. In the Carolinas and Pennsylvania, the failure to extend effective and honest government to newly settled interior areas generated political tensions between the frontier and seaboard. The ethnic and religious diversity of the middle colonies was already creating a social basis for political divisions, anticipating patterns of popular alignment that would become dominant in the mass politics of the next century. Elsewhere the increasing complexity of colonial economies generated a different sort of social foundation for political competition—as in the conflicts between commercializing towns and subsistence farming communities in Massachusetts and Connecticut, or the rivalries between trading ports in Maryland and Rhode Island. And it required little foresight to recognize potential sources of conflict between colonies over various issues: the control and settlement of the vast American interior; disputed provincial boundaries; ethnic, religious, and cultural differences; sectional loyalties already reflecting the presence or absence of slave labor; or the fears the smaller colonies harbored against the purported aggrandizing designs of their larger neighbors.

Although the colonies did share some rough attributes in common, to a remarkable degree they remained distinctive communities, each possessing a special set of demographic, economic, and political characteristics. And, like members of other colonial societies, the cultural identity of the American colonists was defined less by their relations with their neighbors than by their conception of the metropolitan culture. When Americans looked outside their colonial borders, it was still London that drew their attention, not Hartford or Annapolis, Philadelphia or Charlestown—much less Marblehead, a fishing port whose population of five thousand made it the sixth largest town in America at the time of the Stamp Act. And if the decade before independence witnessed the emergence of signs of a new American self-consciousness, this sense of national identity was itself a product of the resistance movement, and thus to a large extent dependent on the stim-
ulus of imperial policy.\textsuperscript{31} The imperatives of opposing Great Britain would naturally encourage the colonists to repudiate the standards of the parent culture and even temporarily suppress many of the problems that jeopardized American unity; but they could not remove the deeper strains and differences that distinguished thirteen provincial societies.

As a social fabric of national integration had yet to be pieced together, so too the informal political mechanisms necessary to allow a confederation to function efficiently remained to be invented. The rudimentary correspondence of the early 1770's provided only the barest foundation for coordinating policymaking and administration among the various levels of politics. The mere apportionment of responsibility among federal, provincial, and local agencies of resistance would not by itself reveal \textit{how} power and influence were to be exercised. Nor was it even clear who would compose a national political elite. The leaders of colonial resistance were, after all, provincial politicians. When Samuel Adams left Boston to attend the First Continental Congress, it was his first trip outside his native province, taken one month short of his fifty-second birthday. Moreover, capable as the "gentlemen freeholders," aspiring lawyers, and leisured merchants who composed the provincial governing classes were, their previous experience could scarcely prepare them for the novel responsibilities and demands the Revolution would impose. In the individual colonies, the displacement of loyalist officials opened up opportunities for politicians who had previously and enviously stood outside the narrow circle of favor. But at the national level of politics, where burdens would prove heavier and rewards less flattering, the problem would be to recruit a pool of officeholders where none had existed before.

During the early 1770's the active leaders of American resistance gave such questions little sustained thought, and only gradually in the years that followed would they become aware of the various theoretical and structural problems that the creation of a continental government entailed. Before 1774 their energies were directed instead simply toward keeping the idea of opposition alive. But in another sense the task of creating an American union was peculiarly a problem of maintaining a cohesive resistance by agreeing upon common goals and tactics. The early
history of the American confederacy can be written only by explaining how common policies were fashioned and carried out, both within and without the chambers of the Continental Congress.