The Beginnings of National Politics

Rakove, Jack N.

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The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress.
MANY of the problems that incessantly oppressed Congress were rooted in the circumstances of the war itself, and are best explained in terms of the inherent difficulty of collecting taxes, regulating prices, enlisting troops, and obtaining supplies. But if inattendance and a continuing turnover of delegates provided important additional sources of inefficiency, one must also ask why Congress found it so difficult to recruit a diligent and stable membership. The malaise that usually afflicted the delegates might be attributed to the limited authority Congress enjoyed under the Articles of Confederation. A government that met frustration at every turn could hardly prove attractive to ambitious politicians or even to those who accepted election from motives of civic responsibility. Such an explanation may perhaps be applied to the mid-1780's, when the embarrassment Congress suffered simply in maintaining a quorum was one obvious mark of its "imbecility." But this argument is less persuasive for the period before 1783, when Congress still actively supervised the conduct of war and foreign policy. Its wartime duties remained formidable, and if Revolutionary leaders were desirous of power, responsibility, or administrative experience, few more promising opportunities existed than those it provided. Yet to judge from their own personal writings, few of these men enjoyed politics or government. Their continuing com-
plaints about the burdens of office cannot be regarded simply as the sort of ritual griping any group of workers ordinarily makes, nor was it merely a natural response to the recurring frustrations Congress encountered. The delegates' grumblings deserve serious examination for other reasons. They make it possible to reconstruct the attitudes and expectations that these men brought to their involvement in politics, and to appreciate as well the novelty of the demands the Revolution made on American leaders.

To ask why the delegates found service at Congress so unsatisfactory calls into question familiar assumptions about the behavior of politicians. James S. Young faced a similar problem when he sought to analyze the attitudes and careers of those who served in the federal government during the early nineteenth century. "Ambivalence about power among men in power jars one's expectations," Young writes:

a Machiavellian image of those who rule is, after all, much more congenial to the democratic mind. And an uneasy conscience among powerful men is an idea so very alien to the modern understanding of why politicians in government behave the way they do that to suggest it at all is to appear naive or at best Shakespearean in one's approach toward men in power.

And yet, Young continues, modern scholars have rarely sought "to view politics and power through the eyes of the rulers themselves," or "to grasp what it meant to hold power, to comprehend the human experience involved."

Although there were important differences between the Revolutionary and Jeffersonian phases of early national politics, the similarities between the attitudes of the members of the Continental Congress and Young's "Washington community" are equally striking. In the late eighteenth even more than the early nineteenth century, politics was still far more of an avocation than a career. Because the delegates were forced to assume burdens more staggering than any that government had previously required, the adjustment they had to make proved uncomfortable, inconvenient, and a source of frequent resentment. Any explanation of the inefficiency that regularly beset Congress must, therefore, examine the interplay between the frustrations inherent in the office and the character of the delegates' political ambitions and private aspirations.
ARTICLE 5 of the confederation stipulated that “no person shall be capable of being a delegate for more than three years in any term of six years.” This prohibition clearly reflected the Americans’ early commitment to the republican principle of rotation in office, and in that sense may also have been a mark of the naïveté with which they initially weighed the merits of experience in government against the dangers of entrenched power. Because the Articles went unratified until 1781, this provision did not actually take effect until 1784, when a handful of members became ineligible for reelection. But in practical terms Article 5 would have been largely irrelevant to the actual composition of Congress even had the Articles been promptly completed. Of the 235 delegates who attended Congress for a minimal period of four weeks during any one calendar year between 1774 and 1783, 56 appeared in Congress during one year only, another 65 were present during each of two years, while 53 attended during each of three. Thus fully three-quarters of the active wartime membership of Congress were present during each of three years or less. On the other hand, only 31 delegates, or one-eighth of our total, served in Congress during each of five calendar years or more. By the end of 1776, more than half of those who had attended Congress prior to the Declaration of Independence had left its chambers for good.2 “The members of Congress are so perpetually changing,” R. H. Lee wrote his brother Arthur in May 1778, “that it is of little use to give you their Names.”

The continuing turnover in Congress can be attributed to several causes. Some are immediately obvious. Those who resisted the movement toward independence left Congress as quickly as possible. The creation of new governments in the states, the organization of the army, and a handful of diplomatic appointments diverted others away from Congress during the early years of the war. Washington, Schuyler, George Clinton, and Thomas Mifflin left Congress to assume major military commands. Patrick Henry, Thomas Johnson, Caesar Rodney, and William Livingston quickly became the chief executive officials in their states. Franklin, Jay, John Adams, Henry Laurens, and William Carmichael entered the much-troubled diplomatic corps. But if it can be assumed that only military commands, major state offices, and ambassadorial posts were as important
positions as membership in Congress itself, the number of dele-
gates who left Congress to assume higher responsibilities was
hardly significant. It was not the appeal of more powerful posi-
tions that lured men away.

Nor is there much evidence to suggest that legislative dis-
pleasure or competition to gain election to Congress were major
causes of rotation, though here, too, there are some prominent
examples that may be cited. Elbridge Gerry displaced Thomas
Cushing when the former Massachusetts speaker lost the confi-
dence of the Adamses. Silas Deane lost his seat when political
rivals in Connecticut capitalized on his absence. Benjamin Rush
was turned out because of his opposition to the new Pennsylvania
constitution (though Robert Morris was not). Other legislatures
occasionally punished delegates whom they felt had not repre-
sented their interests correctly. The Massachusetts assembly
refused to reelect several members who reluctantly voted for the
commutation of military pensions in 1783. On the other hand,
several delegates who unexpectedly lost their seats treated their
involuntary retirement as affairs of honor and successfully
secured reappointment as an act of vindication, among them
Benjamin Harrison, R. H. Lee, and Francis Lee in Virginia, and
Joseph Hewes and Thomas Burke in North Carolina.

Still, there is little reason to believe that constituent jealousy
or electoral competition had a major impact on overall patterns
of attendance. Within the constraints that eighteenth-century
political etiquette imposed, most delegates who were willing to
retain their places in Congress were not likely to be turned out
of office. The number of members who refused reelection or
simply declined to attend during a given term outnumbered
those who lost their seats involuntarily. Given the recurring diffi-
culties most states experienced in maintaining adequate repre-
sentation at Congress, the assemblies were probably grateful to
find individuals who were willing to serve there repeatedly.
There is no evidence that those delegates who served the longest
terms—a group including Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, James
Lovell, Samuel Holten, Roger Sherman, William Ellery, James
Duane, William Floyd, Abraham Clark, and Thomas McKean—
were ever seriously criticized by their constituents for lusting
after power or turning themselves into federal placemen. When
John F. Mercer asked James Monroe if his political interest would
be better served by attending a session of the Virginia assembly
or remaining at Congress, Monroe justified doing the latter by reminding Mercer of the reputation James Madison had obtained by dint of constant attendance at Congress.

The most plausible explanation for the persistent turnover in Congress is, quite simply, that most members chose not to remain there longer than propriety dictated. Their letters reveal that they left Congress neither because they had been defeated for reelection nor appointed to higher office, but rather because they disliked the burdens Congress imposed and preferred to be at home. Retirement from Congress did not mean withdrawal from politics. Most remained active in state affairs. Conceivably, their departure from Congress represented less an aversion to national politics than a greater absorption in state issues. There is some merit to this hypothesis. Constitution-writing in the states certainly did prove more exciting than the framing of the confederation. Decisions about finance, taxation, and economic regulation may have been guided by congressional recommendations, but the hard questions of how general policies were to be implemented—and at whose expense—could be hammered out only in the assemblies. These considerations clearly influenced some delegates, particularly those representing states where the establishment of new governments and the dislocations generated by the war combined to produce bitter disputes over control of the new regimes.

Yet there was another major difference between congressional and state politics that probably had a greater effect on the delegates’ decisions. The personal costs of attendance at Congress were not comparable to the burdens borne by most state officials. Measured in terms either of the amount of time spent away from family, community, and occupation, or the sheer length of each working day, Congress was far more demanding than the state assemblies. Whereas Congress sat in continuous session, the assemblies met irregularly, and they were often slow to assemble and quick to disperse. Rural legislators were generally inclined to tailor their fulfillment of public commitments to the seasonal demands of agriculture: legislation could be enacted any time, but plowing, planting, and harvesting had to follow a more rigorous schedule. Apologizing to the Virginia governor, Patrick Henry, for the North Carolina assembly’s failure to consider a common problem involving the Cherokees, Richard Caswell could only observe that the legislators had been intent on
“getting home to their plantations at a season in which Planters in general have so very much to attend to.” Lawyers and merchants who served in the assemblies were less severely constrained, but they too were self-employed and had to weigh private obligations and interests against the requirements of office. State politics attracted them because it was less disruptive of personal life and private interests than attendance at Congress. By contrast, effective service at Congress required a willingness to absent oneself from home for some months rather than mere weeks. For, as the North Carolina delegate Cornelius Harnett observed, “it will take a young man of Genius, ability and application, three months at least to make himself well acquainted with the business of Congress,” by which point he was either anxious to return home or likely to be relieved, usually before either Congress or his state could fully capitalize on his acclimation.⁹

So, too, the arduous and tedious character of the congressional working day contrasted sharply with the lesser burdens of the assemblies. Committee appointments, general debates, and the conduct of personal and political correspondence left the delegates some time for food, sleep, and perhaps a little recreation, but until executive departments were organized in 1781, the claims on their energy and time seemed limitless. Much of this was due, to be sure, to the procedural inefficiency of Congress. “I have frequently heard heavy complaints in our Assembly, of the tedious progress of business,” the South Carolina delegate John Mathews noted, “but I will venture to say, you do more business in one day, than we do, in three.”¹⁰ In some ways, as Mathews implied, Congress and the assemblies were exposed to similar criticism. The legislatures were rarely praised for their efficiency. Like Congress, they naturally preferred to avoid choosing among unpalatable alternatives and often failed to act on business requiring timely decision. State governors frequently had to inform Congress that the assemblies had abruptly adjourned without resolving federal matters referred for their action. The legislatures, too, experienced high rates of turnover in membership, which did little to foster improved efficiency.¹¹

Although much has been written about the changing social composition of the assemblies, it is not at all clear how seriously the new men who entered state politics with the Revolution took their responsibilities. The extensive criticism directed against
legislators drawn from the "middling" classes has to be discounted in part—for much of it did emanate from undisguisedly élitist sources—but it can hardly be ignored. Yet however one assesses the "democratization" of the assemblies, there is little in surviving correspondence to suggest that legislative service was particularly strenuous. We know far less about the wartime routines of the assemblies than Congress, but one suspects that much of the actual labor was probably still done, as in the colonial period, by comparatively few members. In any event, even if a particular session did prove demanding, legislators had the consolation of knowing that it would not last long, that their homes were reasonably close, and that if it did grow too tiresome, a critical mass of restless backbenchers would simply move to adjourn. What distinguished attendance at Congress from legislative service, then, were the special inconveniences the former imposed on its members. Congress had larger responsibilities to be divided among fewer men. The delegates had to work more arduous days, travel further, and stay away from home longer. Nor, once arrived, could they be certain how long they would have to stay. Though some members came and went as convenience dictated, others felt obliged to guarantee that their state would be represented in their absence or to remain until some issue of importance to their constituents had been resolved—which might mean indefinitely.

The delegates' grievances thus sprang both from their personal dissatisfaction with the pace of congressional business and from a genuine resentment of the personal inconvenience that attendance at Congress required. The complaints that recur so often in their private correspondence represented something more than the mere release of daily frustrations. To sample this litany is to realize not only that few of these men enjoyed politics for its own sake, but also that their discomfort was in large measure a response to the simple novelty and extent of their responsibilities. For virtually nothing in the history of American politics could have prepared them for the range of problems Congress confronted during the war. A political education relevant to these concerns became possible only after 1774, and even these early lessons grew obsolete as the conflict dragged on.

On the eve of the Revolution, it is true, the Americans could draw upon an impressive tradition of self-government. Yet it is naïve to think that men who spent a few days a month mixing
business and pleasure at the county court or occasional intervals
of some weeks attending a provincial assembly were actually
learning how to run a war, or coax supplies from farmers angry
over inflation and expropriation, or maintain the morale of a
war-weary populace. Nor were they acquiring the stamina to
stay at these tasks for months at a time. Before the Revolution,
politics was still essentially an avocation, a secondary activity that
local dignitaries pursued as a function of social status, some sense
of civic responsibility, and certain types of ambition. It was some­
thing one did either in addition to a private calling or after
achieving a measure of financial security. The attainment of pub­
lic office did, of course, bestow practical advantages, and some of
these were substantial: the fees of administrative office, en­
hanced standing at the bar, influence in the disposition of lands,
simple prestige, and the power to transmit higher status to one’s
children—all important commodities in a society where the com­
petition for visible marks of social superiority was intense. Yet
as an activity, officeholding was rarely demanding of time and
energy. Particularly at the colony-wide level of politics, its attrac­
tions were as much social as political. A session of a colonial
assembly created its own social season. Legislators could expect
to attend balls, dinners, and horse races; to renew old acquaint­
antces and make new connections; to sample whatever cosmo­
opolitan diversions the provincial capital offered.

The wartime experience of the Continental Congress did not
conform to the leisurely ambience of colonial politics. It marked
instead a first, though still tentative, step toward an era when the
pursuit of office and the exercise of power would become far
more demanding, and when politics would ultimately become
both an occupation and a career. The delegates’ experience was
transitional to the extent that their wartime responsibilities im­
posed changes in their working habits. Their reluctance to re­
main at Congress any longer than necessary thus embodied the
tension between the novel conditions the Revolution created—
and which perhaps affected Congress more acutely than any
other body—and traditional patterns of political activity. Sharing
the attitudes characteristic of American officials during the late
colonial period, the delegates were ill-prepared, either by experi­
ence or inclination, for their new tasks. Their griping over the
daily tedium of Congress did not anticipate the acceptance of
unending obligations and unrewarding chores that we associate
with the professional politicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their attitudes toward work were still attuned to the daily and seasonal patterns of eighteenth-century agriculture, law, and commerce, when planters could spend at least an hour or two a day on horseback and when lawyers and merchants frequented coffeehouses, clubs, and taverns as a regular part of their business.

In a very simple sense, these men were not used to the indoor confinement Congress required. At the opening of the First Congress, Samuel Ward noted that “The southern Gentlemen have been used to do no Business in the afternoon so that We rise about 2 or 3 o’clock & set no more that Day.” When the Second Congress had been in session less than two weeks and was still meeting only seven hours a day, William Hooper complained that “the little leisure we have is not sufficient for the common functions of life & exercise to keep us in health.” And after William H. Drayton died at Congress in 1779, when he was only thirty-eight, a newspaper obituary merely converted these private complaints into a clinical autopsy. “His health had been almost insensibly impaired by a sedentary life, and incessant attention to business for near two years attendance on Congress, which his constitution, though naturally strong, was unable longer to sustain.” (No wonder John Adams thought he had performed a great patriotic service when he coaxed his namesake Samuel into taking up horseback riding.) The restlessness that infected the first two meetings of Congress after only a few weeks of deliberation was thus a harbinger of greater difficulties to come, once the major questions of policy that were so critical before independence gave way to the tiresome, unheroic, yet vital problems of sustaining the war.

The difficulty with which the delegates adjusted to these conditions resulted not from a lack of political experience per se but rather from the limited character of their previous involvement in affairs of state. In fact, few of the 235 members who served between 1774 and 1783 entered Congress as political novices. Four out of every five had held office at the colony- or statewide level of government prior to their election, mostly in the assemblies or provincial conventions. At least twenty-four had been speakers of assembly, and roughly another forty had been members of the provincial committees of safety that exercised such sweeping powers in the early years of the war. The primary
political experience of another score of delegates had been within the confederation itself, principally in the army. For only a residual group of perhaps two dozen delegates did election to Congress mark the very beginning of their public careers. Almost a hundred had held office at the provincial level of government before the crisis of 1774; the remainder could fairly be called "new men," whose active political participation began only with the creation of the resistance apparatus of 1774–75.18

If the argument is correct that there was a significant disparity between Congress and other offices, such evidence has little explanatory power when it comes to assaying the delegates' attitudes toward politics. Far more important, but also far more difficult to recapture, were the particular motives and ambitions that induced men to enter Congress. As might be expected, these varied widely and cannot be subsumed under any one simple formula; yet in many ways a discussion of divergent careers conveys the real nature of Revolutionary leadership far more accurately than aggregate data about wealth, occupation, status, education, previous experience, and the other indices of collective biography.

We can speak with some confidence of the motives that led certain delegates to attend Congress, particularly those who served lengthy terms. Samuel Adams's regular attendance at Congress (1774–81) was a logical extension of his longstanding commitment to a united resistance, which he maintained even at the cost of a reduction of influence in his native Massachusetts. Although in his adherence to old whig principles and the faith of his Puritan forebears Adams was avowedly traditional, he was perhaps the most "modern" of Revolutionary leaders in the sense that he lived, quite simply, for politics alone.19 In this respect the delegate who bears closest comparison to Adams may well have been James Madison (1780–83, 1787–88). For while the two men held few positions in common on questions of policy, they shared an untiring absorption in political activity—an absorption that deeply impressed, indeed sometimes astonished their closest colleagues. There were other veteran delegates who served lengthy terms because, like Adams, they had been among the earliest leaders of resistance: Roger Sherman (1774–81, 1784), Eliphalet Dyer (1774–79, 1782–83), Elbridge Gerry (1776–80, 1783–85), William Ellery (1776–85), Thomas McKean (1774–76, 1778–81), and R. H. Lee (1774–79, 1784–87). Politics became a career for these
men in large part because they thought of themselves as the original Revolutionaries.20

Of more interest, perhaps, are those delegates who became politically active not in anticipation of, but rather in response to, the crises immediately preceding independence. Some were moderates who hoped to promote a negotiated reconciliation, like James Duane and his New York colleagues John Jay, Robert Livingston, and Gouverneur Morris. Duane's career was particularly revealing. Although he had been involved in the non-importation campaign of 1768-70, he was hardly a political enthusiast. In 1767 he had passed up an opportunity to become recorder for the city of New York, arguing that "the most I cou'd have derived from it wou'd have been £100 a year; and for this I must have been led into party and dirty politicks which I despise as beneath a man who would wish to be honest & wise." In 1770, when his marital relation Peter R. Livingston publicly supported Alexander McDougall, the notorious Son of Liberty, Duane questioned "the Policy of a great and respected Family becoming Obnoxious to Government." Were "popular Honours" worth seeking, he asked, "at the Expense of Quiet and a Certainty almost of an ungrateful Return for the most faithful Services?" After the First Congress adjourned in 1774, Duane found himself moving reluctantly toward active involvement. "Addicted like you to a close Attention to the Duties of my profession," he wrote Maryland's Thomas Johnson, "I have ever avoided both from the want of Inclination & Leisure an active part in politics. Unhappily for my Repose the alarming state of our publick affairs & the Acts of my Countrymen oblige me at once to plunge into the midst of a Tempest which I find myself unable to direct." There was much about Congress that he never learned to like; yet Duane appeared there every year from 1774 until 1783. Some of his interest may be attributed to his land speculations, particularly his lost investments in Vermont, but in the end his conversion to public life remains impressive. After the war he sought and secured election as mayor of New York, and he was later appointed a federal judge under the new Constitution.21

Had he so desired, Duane could have held office long before 1774; but for others, such as James Lovell, the Revolution provided opportunities that otherwise would not have existed. Lovell, a former Boston schoolteacher, entered Congress in 1777. Though moderately active in resistance in Boston before 1774, he
had not previously held public office. Lovell may well have been the only delegate who was financially dependent on his salary. He remained at Congress for five uninterrupted years without once returning home, in the meantime frequently complaining about the impoverishment of his family and his own difficulty in meeting expenses. In 1781, after the tory printer James Rivington reported that Lovell was so diligent because he was keeping a mistress at Philadelphia, Gerry advised him to return to Boston if only for the sake of propriety. “You speak of my seeing Boston,” Lovell replied;

I own no Horse or I might run away from my Debts and ask Charity on the Road for a Delegate of Mass[achusetts] to enable him to reach Home. But really my Friend are you not in Opinion that it is a ridiculous Way of proving that I did not keep Madam Clymar, to go and spend a Number of Months with my Family without one Shilling of Income the Day after my arrival in Boston, or without the least Hint from any Man that he will employ me in any Way within the Compass of my Abilities . . . ? Is it a Crime to serve here as a Delegate for a Living more than to do it in the Church or in an Academy? I thought not when I undertook it.

Lovell finally left Congress in 1782. Once a vitriolic critic of Silas Deane and his supporters in Congress, Lovell soon accepted an appointment from Robert Morris as receiver of continental taxes in Massachusetts, even though Morris, by then superintendent of finance, had been one of Deane’s intimates. In 1785 Lovell became naval officer for the port of Boston, but was removed from office by the General Court two years later. In February 1789, with the new federal government about to begin operation, he could be found soliciting the patronage of R. H. Lee, just elected to the Senate. What he now desired, Lovell informed his “much esteemed Friend,” was an opportunity to pursue “an honest Livelyhood on the Tenure of good Behavior instead of one upon the tottering Foundations of an annual choice liable to every petty & unfair Art of Electioneering.”* Lovell received the ap-

*Disillusionment with the fickle loyalties of legislators and voters was a recurring theme in the writings of Revolutionary politicians. Near the end of his short life, Thomas Burke dismissed the “enthusiastic public Spirit” which he had once possessed as “a species of madness with which I was long infected, [and] which was too powerful for my reason . . . but to which the ingratitude of republican society [has] applied, I hope, a radical Remedy.” (Burke to an unidentified recipient, draft, n.d., Thomas Burke Papers, microfilm reel 5, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.)
pointment he sought, and died a customs officer—hardly an appropriate ending for an old radical.22

The career of Abraham Clark provides a third variation on this theme of transition. Clark had had some involvement in government before 1774, as a sheriff and as clerk of the New Jersey assembly, but he was probably better known as a surveyor and something of an amateur lawyer. He was already fifty when he was sent to Congress only days before it declared independence. At first the prospect of being a delegate staggered Clark. “I regret my being moved to this Congress,” he wrote after a month’s attendance;

I think I could have been of more service in our own Province than here. I remember what Cesar said in passing the Alps, “That he had rather be the first in a small village in the Alps, than the Second in Rome.” This will not exactly apply to myself, as I did not esteem myself, the first in the Jersey Convention, and I am sure I am far below the second here.

But Clark’s diffidence soon disappeared—a function not only of the experience he accumulated but perhaps also of the declining abilities of his colleagues, a phenomenon much commented on after 1777. Clark attended Congress fairly regularly into the spring of 1778, returned as a reliable member from 1780 to 1783, and again in 1787-88—even though, as he reminded a friend in 1781, “it is well known Attendance in Congress hath long been a painful service to me, and I feel a strong desire to be free from it.” Rather than seek a seat in the assembly, however, Clark chose to remain in Congress, arguing that “The present situation of our publick affairs requires the Assistance of such as have a thorough knowledge in the business before Congress.” Though Clark, an anti-Federalist in 1788, is usually described as a “radical republican,” he believed that continuity of personnel was vital to the stability of Congress, justifying his own career accordingly. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1790, when he was already sixty-four, and served there until shortly before his death in 1794.23

Some delegates, then, were prepared to accept either the obligations Congress imposed or the opportunities it offered. Though they grumbled like other members, their experience testified to an adjustment to politics as a career or occupation. Almost by definition, those who remained active through the war and into the 1780’s and beyond were to become the most famous
of Revolutionary leaders, recognizable either among the select circle of founding fathers or at least—as in the case of Duane, Lovell, and Clark—familiar to historians. Yet most members of the Continental Congress were historically obscure. Who remembers Titus Hosmer, Nathaniel Peabody, James McLene, Jonathan Elmer, John Harvie, Whitmill Hill, and scores of other delegates who scattered some months of attendance across one, two, or three years of membership and then left? Yet they were not cyphers. Individually and collectively, their presence exerted a substantial influence on the character of congressional proceedings and thus on the conduct of the war and national politics. Their ambivalence toward office illustrates both the diverse ambitions that shaped participation in the Revolution and the survival of the more traditional attitudes of the amateur, attitudes embodying cultural norms often shared by such prominent American leaders as John Adams, Robert and Gouverneur Morris, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson.

What considerations governed the behavior of those who sought to retire from Congress as soon as they gracefully could? Sustained attendance at Congress generally proved most troubling to those who had the greatest family responsibilities. In practical terms, these obligations fell most heavily on married men in middle age—that is, in their late thirties and forties—whose children were approaching maturity and thus needed to be settled in an occupation or a marriage. Comparative youth or maturity could therefore enhance (or at least remove obstacles against) a member’s willingness to absent himself from home, as several prominent examples suggest. Among the youthful bachelors who served long terms were Madison (twenty-nine when he entered Congress), Gerry (thirty-two and wealthy), and Samuel Osgood (thirty-three). John Jay was a newlywed of twenty-eight when he was elected to the First Congress, and his friends Robert Livingston and Gouverneur Morris (another bachelor) were respectively twenty-eight and twenty-five when they subsequently joined him in the New York delegation. Thomas Burke (1777–81) was only thirty when he came to Congress, and when he died in 1783, he was survived only by his wife, toward whom he was reputedly indifferent, and a daughter.²⁴

At the other end of this scale were those older delegates who felt less constrained by the need to provide for their children. Joseph Jones (1777, 1780–83), Clark, Samuel Adams, Henry Laur-
ens (1777–79), Dyer, Sherman, and John Witherspoon (1776–82) were all in their early fifties when they entered Congress; Francis Lewis (1775–79) was sixty-two. Family affairs apparently mattered little to Adams. “Occasional letters to his daughter,” Pauline Maier has observed, “resemble nothing so much as replies from the Boston Committee of Correspondence.” The children of Roger Sherman’s first marriage had already reached maturity when he was elected to the First Congress; his second wife, herself descended from a prosperous mercantile family, produced five daughters who helpfully married well and two sons as yet too young to require active concern. Laurens and Lewis were both semiretired merchants who had already made their fortunes well before the Revolution.

But for a larger number of delegates, career and family concerns did indeed seem too pressing to ignore. Prolonged service at Congress created real difficulties for younger men anxious to establish a legal practice or commercial connections or for those in middle age with large families to support. A few members, such as Rhode Island’s William Ellery and David Howell, found the office a satisfactory alternative to careers disrupted by the Revolution, but the more common and sensible reaction was to regard it as a precarious foundation for a family’s security. “How much I wish to be at Congress!” George Walton wrote Robert Morris in 1778. “Yet I dare not give up to the public yet. I am determined to pursue your advice”—presumably to establish his private fortune—“because it leads to permanent ease and happiness.” Election to Congress might greatly enhance a lawyer’s prestige and reputation, but this advantage could be capitalized on only by developing and maintaining one’s practice at home. “This Trade of Patriotism but ill agrees with the profession of a practising Lawyer,” Duane wrote after six weeks attendance at the First Congress. “I have lost my Clients the Benefit of a Circuit and now despair of doing any thing the ensuing Term.” The same nagging concern regularly agitated John Adams as he enviously followed the rise of former colleagues in the Massachusetts bar. Merchants and planters who could rely on some trusted family member to manage their interests and estates might find one or two terms in Congress acceptable but anything longer worrisome. Even Robert Morris found his attendance at Congress an increasingly irritating drain on his time, though its location in or near Philadelphia enabled
him to keep a constant watch on his commercial ventures.

Yet in the end the delegates' willingness to attend Congress was fully as important as their eagerness to retire. There were no trimmers in Congress after 1776; no one who was not deeply committed to independence was likely to be elected, much less to attend. Almost by definition, the delegates were men whose personal sense of commitment to the Revolution made them susceptible to patriotic appeals to step into the breach. Such appeals worked in different ways: by acting upon the elitist sensibilities of men already distinguished in public life; or by asserting the superior claims that society enjoyed in times of crisis over the private inclinations of individuals, an argument that the new republicanism greatly enhanced. If it is impossible to measure which of these appeals carried greater weight—and apparent that at times neither worked very well—it is certain that both coexisted throughout the war. Although occasional contemporary comments suggest that the elitist strain grew feeble during the late 1770's, it later proved effective in mobilizing the Federalists of 1787–88.28

Cornelius Harnett, the old North Carolina Son of Liberty, was one delegate whose congressional tenure illustrated the convergence of these appeals. When first elected to Congress in 1777, he had already served as president of the provincial congress and the state council. Although still in his mid-fifties, he thought himself "too old to be sent here," and in fact suffered from a case of gout that impaired his ability to attend Congress. There is no question that he detested being away from his plantation. "I heartily desire to be at home," he wrote after four months of attendance, "& whenever I get there I shall with pleasure give up this very disagreeable & troublesome office." It was not only that he was "heartily tired of eating the flesh of four footed animals," a mainstay of the congressional diet when it was mired at York, and longed for his favorite delicacy of pickled oysters or even "a few dried fish of any kind," which "if they even stank, they would be pleasing." Harnett was simply homesick.

If I once more return to my family all the Devils in Hell shall not separate us. The honor of being once a member of Congress is sufficient for me, I acknowledge it is the highest honor a free state can bestow on one of its members. I shall be careful to ask for nothing more, but will sit down under my own vine & my own Fig tree (for I have them both)
at Poplar Grove where none shall make me afraid except the boats of the British Cruisers.

A year later, when he was about to leave Congress after serving four months of a second term, Harnett declared his intention "never more to return in the character my Country has been pleased to honor me with, unless I am forced in to it." But the North Carolina assembly reelected him once more, and so Harnett returned to Congress late in 1779. He departed for home before winter set in, but the retirement he desired was tragically brief. Captured by loyalist troops in 1781, he died from their mistreatment.  

As an early leader of resistance, Harnett may have found it peculiarly difficult to refuse election. Yet there is substantial evidence to suggest that similar considerations governed the conduct of many others who had been less intimately involved in opposition to Britain before 1774. The republican values of the Revolution did not permit conscientious leaders casually to reject an appointment to office merely because it was inconvenient. Republicanism not only glorified the individual who risked private interest for the public weal, it also bestowed on the act of election the sovereign imprint of the popular will. Even if conferred unexpectedly, the act of election was not easily renounced. "I am ordered to the Congress," Henry Laurens wrote shortly after his election; "... many reasons were & more might have been urged in excuse for me but ... the Vote was confirmed, I call it therefore as I feel it, a Command—I go." Thomas Adams was apparently exposed to similar pressures. In the summer of 1777 his brother informed him that many members of the Virginia assembly had asked if Adams would be willing to go to Congress. "I told them you was fond of retirement & that I thought it would be most agreeable to you to stay at home," his brother wrote, "but if your Country called for your assistance I thought it the Duty of every man at this time to accept any appointment his Country should call him to, unsolicited." Whether Thomas Adams thanked his brother for the encouragement he had given the legislators is not known, but later in the year he was elected to Congress. He attended Congress for four months in 1778 and, after reelection, another four months in 1779; then he resigned. "Contrary to my expectation I am appointed a Deputy to Congress," Charles Carroll wrote his fa-
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bition and Responsibility

ther the day after independence, "and much against my inclina-

tion I find myself obliged to set off for Ph[iladelphia] in a week

at farthest." Robert Livingston complained bitterly when he was

reelected to Congress in 1779, after an absence of three years.

"The Legislature have again drawn me from domestick peace, to

bustle in the great world," he wrote. "I am to have the supreme

felicity of making them a second sacrifice of my health, fortune

& enjoyments at Congress: to this I submit, but with the reluct-

tance of the shipwrecked wretch who embarks again after hav-

ing once safely landed."30

Attendance at Congress was thus an obligation to be dis-

charged, not an ambition to be fulfilled. "Ambition had no share

in bringing me forward into Public life," Robert Morris wrote in

September 1778, shortly before he left Congress,

nor has it any charms to keep me there, the time I have spent in it has

been the severest Tax of my life and really I think those who have had

so much, shou'd now be relieved and let some fresh hands take the

Helm, these notions prompt me to get out of Congress at the next

appointment of Delegates, but my namesake [Gouverneur Morris]

swears I shall not depart.31

The urgings of the younger Morris were probably a case of mis-

ery seeking company. He had allowed eight months to elapse

between the time of his election and his first visit to Congress

early in 1778. It took him only another fortnight to conclude: "I

would that I were quit of my congressional Capacity which is in

every Respect irksome. . . . There are no fine Women at York

Town," he informed Livingston. "Judge then of my situation."32

Writing to his mother two months later, Morris admitted that

"The natural Indolence of my Disposition hath unfitted me for

the Paths of Ambition and the early Possession of Power taught

me how little it deserves to be prized." Morris was nevertheless

an active member of Congress, and he criticized Livingston,

among others, for sulking at home. Yet after leaving Congress in

1779, he was anxious to avoid being forced to return. In 1781 he

begged Livingston to "keep me out of Congress if it should ever

be mention'd," reminding him that "from the Beginning I

never asked nor sought the public Confidence. Many are wit-

nesses that when I came to Congress it was by Virtue of a positive

Order." These protests notwithstanding, neither of the Mor-

rises can be described as lukewarm patriots. Robert Morris was
deeply critical of the trimmers who had abandoned politics during the discouraging months after independence, even though he longed to tend strictly to his commercial affairs. When he returned to office in 1781 as superintendent of finance, he did so despite a sincere belief that it was “contrary to my private Interest.” That he was able to enlist Gouverneur Morris as his assistant may well have been a tribute to the force of his example rather than the latter’s eagerness to reenter public life.

If these two men remained as ambivalent about political activity as their personal correspondence indicates, less prominent or influential delegates must have been even more disposed to limit the time and resources they were required to invest in Congress. Having accepted election because refusal would have been impolitic, embarrassing, and unpatriotic, they nevertheless sought to leave office once they thought their obligation had been adequately discharged. Claims of conflicting private interest or simple lack of ability did not always provide a potent justification for declining an initial election, but after a year or two of sacrifice they offered a plausible objection against reappointment.

The North Carolina delegate John Williams provided a model statement of the formula many delegates used to request permission to resign. He had not felt himself qualified to be a delegate when he was elected, Williams wrote, but despite his private doubts, he did not believe he had a right to decline.

To have refused might have been imputed to a Reluctance to have Stepped forth into a Distinguished point of View, least distinction should mark me for the Resentment of our Enemies, or that I wished to reap the fruits of the Active Counsels and Endeavors of Others in peace and Retirement without making any Sacrifice of my own personal Ease or Interest to obtain them.

After less than a year’s attendance at Congress, however, the state of his private affairs and family concerns led him “with Reluctance” to “ask leave to Retire.” The New Jersey delegate Jonathan Elmer had phrased a similar request several months earlier. “A willingness to comply with your requisition, and an earnest desire to serve my country, as far as my slender abilities would enable me, were the sole motives that induced me to accept of the appointment,” he reminded the state assembly. Now the circumstances of his family and private affairs rendered
his continued attendance impracticable. Explaining his decision to decline reelection to Congress, William Hooper informed Robert Morris that “the situation of my own private affairs, the importunity of my wife and little ones, that delicacy which I felt as a friend”—a reference to the North Carolina assembly’s failure to reelect Joseph Hewes—“did not leave me a moment in suspense whether I should decline the honor intended me.” Thomas Stone justified his resignation rather more curtly. “Being convinced that I cannot attend Congress so constantly, as every Delegate ought to do, without giving up the Practice of the Law: I beg Leave to resign the appointment with which I have been honoured.”

Some delegates were convinced that the interests of their constituents would indeed be better served if they were replaced by “men of extensive political Knowledge,” as John Harvie informed Jefferson late in 1777. If his resignation would “not be Imputed to Unworthy Motives,” he would gladly “make room for one of this Character,” Harvie wrote, “for to you who know me so well it is Needless to say I do not possess talents for State Affairs and yet truly I am one of the Board of War without having the Skill in Military affairs of an Orderly Sergeant.” (Yet George Mason, one of the potential replacements Harvie doubtless had in mind, occasionally justified his refusal to accept election to Congress by arguing, as he wrote R. H. Lee in 1779, that “you will hardly blame me for taking care, in time, to keep out of such Company.”)

It was not only good manners but sound tactics for a delegate seeking retirement to recall his own meager talents, since that widened the pool of eligible replacements. The more significant feature of these letters, however, is their candid acknowledgment of the urgency of private concerns and family affairs. That these constituted a legitimate plea for retirement is itself revealing, for such interests are expected to suffer during patriotic wars and republican revolutions. Had it not been for inflation and its attendant consequences, such excuses might have proved less permissible. But inflation was an issue that concerned the delegates in their private as well as public capacities; and because all segments of society had to adjust to its implications, it provided a rationale for rotating delegates that the state assemblies ultimately had to respect. More than simple homesickness or boredom with the male ambience of Congress, anxiety over their
absence from family, property, occupation, and other personal interests was the obsessive concern that ran through their private correspondence. Each had an estate to maintain, and as the inflationary spiral began to accelerate after 1776, any prolonged absence from home increased their disquiet. Not even genuinely wealthy delegates were free from these concerns. "It is extremely unreasonable in my Countrymen to compel me to this useless Service," Henry Laurens complained in September 1777, when he had been in Congress less than seven weeks, "if they had only considered how much of my time had been devoted to theirs & how little to my own affairs, I think common gratitude would have induced them to give me a moment’s respite." The tendency to attribute inflation not merely to an expanding money supply but, more crudely, to the common avarice of the citizenry only aggravated their discomfort. If the rest of American society was indeed intently pursuing private interest to the exclusion of public good, some members must have begun to wonder why they had been singled out for obligations their countrymen disdained.

Living mostly as travelers, the delegates experienced daily reminders of the difficulty of meeting expenses in times of inflation. They were exposed, like all travelers, to extraordinary expenses. In fashionable Philadelphia they felt obliged to maintain a decent appearance; in their more primitive accommodations at Baltimore and York, they were subjected to the boomtown prices of local innkeepers and laundresses. Inflation steadily reduced the purchasing power of their salaries and expenses, which the state legislatures were often slow to adjust, and the press of other demands on state treasuries often prevented the timely forwarding of necessary funds. Those delegates who had substantial independent incomes probably expected only to see their salaries cover their expenses, but those whose attendance impaired their ability to practice their occupations naturally desired an adequate income.

"I am by no means desirous of raising my fortune at the expense of the public," William Whipple wrote his colleague Josiah Bartlett in 1778, "but justice to my family requires that I should afford them some support," which the New Hampshire assembly's allowance of twenty-five shillings a day did not provide. The collapse of the continental dollar in 1779 exacerbated their situation. It was bad enough, the New Jersey delegate John
Fell complained, that his colleagues Witherspoon and Frederick Frelinghuysen treated him "with the greatest impoliteness," leaving Congress "when they please" and "without ever saying one word to me on the occasion"; but "not to be able to live in the manner I have ever been used to, without spending my own money as well as time, is rather too unreasonable for the public to desire of any individual." When William Fleming wrote Jefferson to ask that he not be renominated, he noted that besides my own loss of time; and the long separation from my family, my expenses are so enormous that I find my fortune quite insufficient to support them. I am in private lodgings, with only a servant and two horses, which are in the continental stable, and I live as frugal as possible, notwithstanding which it costs me, at least, 25£ a week, over and above my wages. If our assembly do not determine to support their delegates in congress, they will shortly find that none of those of small fortunes will be able to continue here long enough to make themselves acquainted with the business. . . . 37

The only alternative to providing "a more respectable Footing" for the New York delegation, Gouverneur Morris argued in 1778, was to elect men "who possess such Property that they can afford to sacrifice a few Thousand to the general Cause." Four years later, however, the New York delegation reminded Governor Clinton that "tho' they cheerfully submit to the Loss and Inconvenience necessarily arising from their Absence from home and Neglect of their domestic Concerns, [they] cannot possibly maintain themselves in the public Service at their own private Expense." By then, with the presses long since stopped, needy delegates could no longer draw on the continental treasury in a pinch. While waiting to receive an overdue remittance from Virginia in June 1781, Theodorick Bland found himself unable to purchase dinner for himself and oats for his horses. "The anxiety I feel in this situation (new, to me) is insupportable," Bland wrote to Jefferson, "especially as it in some degree incapacitates me from turning my thoughts with that application I would wish to do to those important concerns which I would wish to engross my attention." 38

Samuel Adams might have been oblivious to so trivial an inconvenience as starvation. But Bland's distress, temporary as it was, symbolizes the link between the delegates' complaints and the substantive history of the Congress. Petty and idiosyncratic
as these complaints often were, the diverse anxieties and frustrations they reflected contributed to the troubled mood that usually pervaded Congress. Not only did they act to confirm the delegates’ initial misgivings about jeopardizing private interests for public good; they also worked, ironically, to inhibit sustained efforts to reform congressional procedures. Men who rarely associated their own ambitions with the future of Congress could not seriously commit themselves to remedying its dilatory and inefficient habits. It was far easier to put in one’s required time at Congress and then leave, having learned that the office was a mark of distinction but not a political objective worth pursuing in a serious way or for any length of time. Their reactions probably had little to do with the ideological aversion to the corruptive tendencies of power that was so much a part of Revolutionary political thinking, for the war provided a sufficient justification for the assumption of office. The delegates’ manifest edginess had a more immediate, practical source. The exercise of power was tedious, fatiguing, and damaging to their private interests. So long as most delegates thought their attendance a concession to patriotism rather than the fulfillment of their ambitions, Congress would be condemned to muddling through to independence. Internal reform became possible only after the military and logistical crises of 1780-81 proved it could no longer be avoided. Even then, attendance proved little more attractive than it had been before, and instability of membership continued to trouble Congress through the 1780’s.

And yet those who left Congress gladly sometimes found themselves growing unexpectedly nostalgic for news of its affairs. “I find in spight of all my Philosophy that I have a strange Hankering to know what is going forward in the great Houses in Chestnut Street,” Nathaniel Scudder wrote to Nathaniel Peabody from his home in New Jersey after leaving Congress in 1779. “I pray you therefore to be speedy in administering to me a cardiac Dose.” Some years later, when the former Massachusetts delegate Stephen Higginson renewed his correspondence with Theodorick Bland, he reported that “I have done attending to the motions of the great political wheel,” adding that “my taste for public life was always very inadequate.” But two former colleagues in the delegation, Elbridge Gerry and John Lowell, “are this day to eat with me part of a leg of mutton,” he noted:
when the table shall be cleared, I expect from Gerry the history of the last session, or rather the present session thus far of congress; to hear of all their manoeuvres and little paltry acts to carry points. I wish you could be one of our party; we would scrutinize and characterize every action and all their conduct.39

Perhaps there was something to be said for politics after all. Higginson may have found it less convenient and certainly less profitable than attendance at his countinghouse, but at times it had also been more exciting.

What Higginson seemed to miss, though, was not so much the actual business of government as such social pleasures as Congress had afforded: the congeniality of the boardinghouse and the diversion of political gossip. From a distance, Higginson could permit himself a moment of nostalgia, but nothing more. Yet he had been politicized: in the aftermath of Shays’s Rebellion he would emerge as an active Federalist, plunging into politics in the same way that the earlier crisis of independence had mobilized others who had previously had little interest in public life. The Revolution had not converted all of these men into professional politicians or office-seekers, but it had freed many of them from the prudently bourgeois ambitions that had once limited their horizons to the quiet, respectable routines of late colonial society.