

Edmund Burke

Speech to Parliament on Reconciliation with the American Colonies

22 March 1775, selections

An Irish-born British statesman and prolific writer in history and politics, Edmund Burke was one of the few members of Parliament who not only sympathized with American grievances but also tried to convince his fellows of their legitimacy. As hostilities drove toward war, Burke strove toward reconciliation, and in a dramatic speech to the House of Commons presented a plan to “conciliate and concede” to America without making Britain appear spineless and defeated. Unfortunately, he delivered the speech one month before the Battle of Lexington and Concord of 19 April 1775, after which little prospect of reconciliation survived. So why read the speech? Because transitional moments in history reveal much of adversaries’ ultimate motivations—what, in the end, they will or will not compromise to maintain peace. We pick up mid-point in the lengthy and meticulously argued speech, as Burke concludes his prefatory arguments and proceeds to his plan (which was rejected). If acted upon earlier, might it have achieved peace?



The proposition is peace. Not peace through the medium of war, not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of intricate and endless negotiations, not peace to arise out of universal discord . . . It is simple peace, sought in its natural course and in its ordinary haunts. It is peace sought in the spirit of peace, and laid in principles purely pacific. I propose, by removing the ground of the difference [between Britain and America] and by restoring the *former unsuspecting confidence of the colonies in the mother country*, to give permanent satisfaction to your people — and (far from a scheme of ruling by discord) to reconcile them to each other in the same act and by the bond of the very same interest which reconciles them to British government.

Burke states that Britain must govern America on the basis of reality and not on “our own imaginations” or “abstract ideas of right” or “mere general theories of government.” He reminds Parliament of the colonies’ population (about 2,500,000) which forms a major part of the “strength and opulence of the empire. He then gives an itemized comparison of Britain’s exports to its colonies (including the African slave trade) in 1704 and 1772 — £569,930 and £6,024,171 [£–English pound], most of which were to its colonies in North America and the West Indies.

From five hundred and odd thousand, it has grown to six millions. It has increased no less than twelve-fold. This is the state of the colony trade, as compared with itself at these two periods within this century — and this is a matter for meditation. Examine my second account. See how the export trade to the colonies alone in 1772 stood in the other point of view, that is, as compared to the whole trade of England in 1704.

The whole export trade of England, including that to the colonies, in 1704	£6,509,000
Export to the colonies alone, in 1772	6,024,000
Difference	£485,000

The trade with America alone is now within less than £500,000 of being equal to what this great commercial nation, England, carried on at the beginning of this century with the whole world! If I had taken the largest year of those on your table, it would rather have exceeded. But, it will be said, is not this American trade an unnatural protuberance that has drawn the juices from the rest of the body? The reverse. It is the very food that has nourished every other part into its present magnitude. Our general trade has been greatly augmented, and augmented more or less in almost every part to which it ever

extended, but with this material difference — that of the six millions which in the beginning of the century constituted the whole mass of our export commerce the colony trade was but one twelfth part, it is now (as a part of sixteen millions) considerably more than a third of the whole. . . .

Burke surveys two other American contributions to British wealth — the products of farms and fisheries. He then proceeds to argue against the use of force in responding to the colonies' resistance.

First, Sir, permit me to observe, that the use of force alone is but *temporary*. It may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again; and a nation is not governed which is perpetually to be conquered.

My next objection is its *uncertainty*. Terror is not always the effect of force, and an armament is not a victory. If you do not succeed, you are without resource: for, conciliation failing, force remains; but, force failing, no further hope of reconciliation is left. Power and authority are sometimes bought by kindness, but they can never be begged as alms by an impoverished and defeated violence.

A further objection to force is that you *impair the object* by your very endeavors to preserve it. The thing you fought for is not the thing which you recover, but depreciated, sunk, wasted, and consumed in the contest.

Let me add that I do not choose wholly to break the American spirit, because it is the spirit that has made the country.

Nothing less will content me than *whole America*. I do not choose to consume its strength along with our own, because in all parts it is the British strength that I consume. I do not choose to be caught by a foreign enemy at the end of this exhausting conflict, and still less in the midst of it. I may escape, but I can make no insurance against such an event. Let me add that I do not choose wholly to break the American spirit, because it is the spirit that has made the country.

Lastly, we have no sort of *experience* in favor of force as an instrument in the rule of our colonies. Their growth and their utility has been owing to methods altogether different. Our ancient indulgence has been said to be pursued to a fault. It may be so; but we know, if feeling is evidence, that our fault was more tolerable than our attempt to mend it, and our sin far more salutary than our penitence.

Burke proceeds to a third consideration — the “temper and character” of America.

In this character of the Americans, a love of freedom is the predominating feature which marks and distinguishes the whole; and as an ardent is always a jealous affection, your colonies become suspicious, restive, and untractable whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle from them by chicanery, what they think the only advantage worth living for. This fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies, probably, than in any other people of the earth, and this from a great variety of powerful causes; which, to understand the true temper of their minds and the direction which this spirit takes, it will not be amiss to lay open somewhat more largely.

Americans' love of freedom (and “disobedient spirit”) must be considered in their management. Americans are:

- #1: *descendents of Englishmen, proud of their representative legislatures*
- #2: *Protestant Christians, proud of independent thought and opinion; including*
 - northern non-Anglican dissenters
 - southern slaveholders, who value freedom as “a kind of rank and privilege”
- #3: *students of the law, able to think logically and argue forcefully*
- #4: *colonists separated by an ocean from the mother country*

First, the people of the colonies are descendents of Englishmen. England, Sir, is a nation which still, I hope, respects, and formerly adored, her freedom. The colonists emigrated from you when this part of your character was most predominant, and they took this bias and direction the moment they parted from your hands. They are therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas and on English principles. . . . Their love of liberty, as with you, fixed and attached on this specific point of taxing. Liberty might be safe or might be endangered in twenty other particulars without their being much pleased or alarmed. Here they felt its pulse, and as they found that beat they thought themselves sick or sound. . . .

If anything were wanting [lacking] to this necessary operation of the form of government, religion would have given it a complete effect. Religion, always a principle of energy, in this new people is no way worn out or impaired; and their mode of professing it is also one main cause of this free spirit. The people are Protestants, and of that kind which is the most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion. This is a persuasion not only favorable to liberty, but built upon it. . . .

Permit me, Sir, to add another circumstance in our colonies which contributes no mean part towards the growth and effect of this untractable spirit: I mean their education. In no country, perhaps, in the world is the law so general a study. The profession itself is numerous and powerful, and in most provinces it takes the lead. The greater number of the deputies sent to the Congress were lawyers. But all who read, and most do read, endeavor to obtain some smattering in that science. . . . This study renders men acute, inquisitive, dexterous, prompt in attack, ready in defense, full of resources. . . .

The last cause of this disobedient spirit in the colonies is hardly less powerful than the rest, as it is not merely moral, ***Three thousand miles of ocean lie between you and them.*** but laid deep in the natural constitution of things. Three thousand miles of ocean lie between you and them. No contrivance can prevent the effect of this distance in weakening government. Seas roll and months pass between the order and the execution;¹ and the want of a speedy explanation of a single point is enough to defeat a whole system. . . .

Burke surveys “three ways of proceeding relative to this stubborn spirit which prevails in your colonies”: (1) to “change the spirit, by removing the causes”; to “prosecute it as criminal; or (3) to “comply with it, as necessary.” He argues against the first two options and presents his plan for the third option.

Sir, I shall open the whole plan to you together, with such observations on the motions as may tend to illustrate them, where they may want explanation.²

The first is a resolution: “That the colonies and plantations of Great Britain in North America, consisting of fourteen separate governments, and containing two millions and upwards of free inhabitants, have not had the liberty and privilege of electing and sending any knights and burgesses, or others, to represent them in the high court of Parliament.”

This is a plain matter of fact, necessary to be laid down, and (excepting the description) it is laid down in the language of the Constitution; it is taken nearly *verbatim* from acts of Parliament.

The second is like unto the first: “That the said colonies and plantations have been made liable to, and bounden by, several subsidies, payments, rates, and taxes, given and granted by Parliament, though the said colonies and plantations have not their knights and burgesses in the said high court of Parliament, of their own election, to represent the condition of their country; by lack whereof they have been oftentimes touched and grieved by subsidies, given, granted, and assented to, in the said court, in a manner prejudicial to the common wealth, quietness, rest, and peace of the subjects inhabiting within the same.”

Is this description too hot or too cold, too strong or too weak? Does it arrogate too much to the supreme legislature? Does it lean too much to the claims of the people? If it runs into any of these errors, the fault is not mine. It is the language of your own ancient acts of Parliament. . . .

The next proposition is: “That, from the distance of the said colonies, and from other circumstances, no method hath hitherto been devised for procuring a representation in Parliament for the said colonies.”

This is an assertion of a fact. I go no further on the paper; though, in my private judgment, a useful representation is impossible; I am sure it is not desired by them, nor ought it, perhaps, by us: but I abstain from opinions.

¹ I.e., between a governmental order in Britain and its implementation in America, since it could be conveyed only by sailing ship across the Atlantic.
² Formatting and emboldening added for clarity.

The fourth resolution is: “That each of the said colonies hath within itself a body, chosen in part or in the whole by the freemen, freeholders, or other free inhabitants thereof, commonly called the General Assembly or General Court, with powers legally to raise, levy, and assess, according to the several usages of such colonies, duties and taxes towards defraying all sorts of public services.”

This competence in the colony assemblies is certain. It is proved by the whole tenor of their acts of supply [for taxation] in all the assemblies, in which the constant style of granting is “An aid to his Majesty”; and acts granting to the crown have regularly, for near a century, passed the public offices without dispute. . . .

The fifth resolution is also a resolution of fact: “That the said general assemblies, general courts, or other bodies legally qualified as aforesaid, have at sundry [several/various] times freely granted several large subsidies and public aids for his Majesty’s service, according to their abilities, when required thereto by letter from one of his Majesty’s principal Secretaries of State; and that their right to grant the same, and their cheerfulness and sufficiency in the said grants, have been at sundry times acknowledged by Parliament.”

. . . The people heard, indeed, from the beginning of these disputes [with Britain in 1763], one thing continually dinned in their ears — that reason and justice demanded that the Americans, who paid no taxes, should be compelled to contribute.³ How did that fact, of their paying nothing, stand, when the taxing system began? When Mr. Grenville⁴ began to form his system of American revenue, he stated in this House that the colonies were then in debt two million six hundred thousand pounds sterling money, and was of opinion they would discharge that debt in four years. On this state, those untaxed people were actually subject to the payment of taxes to the amount of six hundred and fifty thousand a year. In fact, however, Mr. Grenville was mistaken. The funds given for sinking the debt did not prove quite so ample as both the colonies and he expected. . . .

We see the sense of the crown, and the sense of Parliament, on the productive nature of a *revenue by grant*. Now search the same journals for the produce of the *revenue by imposition*.⁵ Where is it? — let us know the volume and the page. What is the gross, what is the net produce? To what service is it applied? How have you appropriated its surplus? — What! can none of the many skillful index-makers that we are now employing find any trace of it? — Well, let them and that rest together. — But are the journals, which say nothing of the revenue, as silent on the discontent? — Oh, no! a child may find it. It is the melancholy burden and blot of every page.

I think, then, I am, from those journals, justified in the sixth and last resolution, which is: “That it hath been found by experience, that the manner of granting the said supplies and aids by the said general assemblies hath been more agreeable to the inhabitants of the said colonies, and more beneficial and conducive to the public service, than the mode of giving and granting aids and subsidies in Parliament, to be raised and paid in the said colonies.”

Burke recommends that Parliament repeal many of the laws that led to American resistance and rebellion after 1763, and concludes by refuting, point by point, the reconciliation proposal offered earlier by the prime minister, Lord North, and approved by the House of Commons.

. . . You have heard me with goodness. May you decide with wisdom! For my part, I feel my mind greatly disburdened by what I have done today. I have been the less fearful of trying your patience because on this subject I mean to spare it altogether in future. I have this comfort, that in every stage of the American affairs I have steadily opposed the measures that have produced the confusion and may bring on the destruction of this Empire. . . .

³ I.e., contribute to the replenishment of the British treasury after the French and Indian Wars, and to fund the maintenance of British troops in the American colonies.

⁴ George Grenville, prime minister who formulated the first colonial taxes after the French and Indian War, especially the hated Stamp Act of 1765.

⁵ I.e., Parliament gained funds from the colonies when it requested them (*revenue by grant*), not when it they required them by law (*revenue by imposition*).