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America's Revolution (44) – Stamp Act **Repeal – III**

Lead: In the 1700s the United States broke from England. No colony in history had done that before. This series examines America's Revolution.

Intro: *A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts*

Content: Horace Walpole, son of Britain's First Minister, Robert Walpole, a man of letters and member of Parliament from the rotten borough of Castle Rising, wrote, in his memoirs of the reign of

King George III, that repeal of the Stamp Act before any serious attempt at enforcement and collection, stuck in the throats of a resentful and reluctant Parliamentary majority. “When do princes bend,” he opined, “but after a defeat?” His was a perceptive observation. Parliament did not like it, but First Minister Lord Rockingham who took over after the author of the Stamp Act, George Grenville, was removed by the King, faced a situation in America tantamount to open revolt and demands from a domestic constituency horrified by a severe downturn in commerce caused by a drop in American consumption of British goods. England’s merchants were up in arms and Rockingham recognized that he had a political alliance that could divert the debate from constitutional issues of Parliamentary and colonial rights, and push it the direction of practical economic survival. He used the near irresistible

political pressure from the influential business community to secure repeal.

When Parliament returned from its summer and fall recess in December 1765, the capital was alive with the accounts of mob violence in America. Words like “treason” and “anarchy” and “rebellion” slipped all too easily from the lips of members angry at American resistance to the Stamp Act and jealous of Parliamentary prerogatives. Rockingham’s repeal effort was not going to be easy. Complicating his efforts were almost daily denunciations of the Americans by Grenville who, in the words of the friend of American, Edmund Burke, was “taking care to call whore first.” But the House rejected all of his motions to condemn the colonies and began to listen to a powerful pressure group, namely manufacturers and merchants from all over Britain who were suffering a veritable

depression in their business due to American determination not to buy goods from England. Letters to members of Parliament and petitions calling for repeal turned the day.

There were serious constitutional issues involved here about the power of Parliament to impose taxes, but the businessmen built their case on the dire condition of the economy. And it worked. Stories of bankruptcies and the inability of merchants to collect debts from a hostile colonial population moved Parliament in the direction of repeal. By late January, Rockingham, Burke and their commercial allies had secured the votes necessary for repeal of the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act.

Yet, the path to repeal needed a bit of political lubrication to address wounded sensibilities in the Houses of Parliament. Rockingham commissioned Henry Conway to move, in conjunction with the Repeal Act, a Declaratory Act which asserted that Parliament had the right to pass laws binding the colonies “in all Cases whatsoever.” He explained that while the power to tax was inherent in the Parliamentary power to govern, an issue much in dispute, even in Parliament, this particular tax was ‘inexpedient.’ It was pure political artifice, but while it failed to win over the feelings of Grenville and his more ardent supporters who remained, to the end, implacably hostile to what they saw was American rebellion, it eased the way to tandem passage of the two measures. By March 17, 1766, they had passed both Houses and received the King’s signature.

In reality, the repeal of the Stamp tax did nothing to solve the budget problem. It had, however, also done nothing to assuage American anger aroused by the passage of the tax in the first place. It had opened the Pandora's Box of America's open resistance to Parliamentary revenue schemes, the basis of the colonies' relationship with the mother country and had laid the foundation for colonial unity that eventually led to Revolution.

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