

**Volume 20**

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**America's Revolution (33) – Stamp**

**Act Crisis – 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: The author of the Stamp Act (1765) and the Sugar Act (1764) was George Grenville, but his time as chief minister was cut short. Apparently he embarrassed and**

**thus displeased King George III in a Parliamentary dispute over the Queen Mother's membership in a Regency Council set up to conduct royal affairs in the case of the King's death or incapacity. His replacement was Lord Rockingham, ably assisted by his secretary Edmund Burke, member from Bristol whose sympathy for the Americans was well-known. The Rockingham ministry enjoyed weak support in the House of Commons, but perhaps its greatest accomplishment was the repeal of the Stamp and Sugar Acts.**

**The strategy to achieve repeal was not a protracted constitutional debate about the rights of Parliament to tax the colonies, but a response to the increasingly desperate cries of businessmen all over England who were suffering a collapse in their fortunes due to the success of an American boycott of British goods. The howls of pain were soon heard from near and far and Parliament reluctantly responded.**

**However, it was not as if the issue of Parliament's constitutional right to levy taxes on the colonies was not considered. In fact, probably some**

**of the most robust defense of colonial liberty was articulated by members of Parliament. Long before John Adams or Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine achieved immortality with their clarion call for American independence, members of the British Parliament such as Burke and William Pitt the Elder rose to defend the colonists' sole constitutional right to tax themselves and conduct their affairs. Pitt's words were particularly vigorous in the debate that led to repeal of the Stamp Tax. He asserted that Americans by any measure shared the protections of the constitution, particularly the**

**right to be taxed by one's representatives. He said, 'A tax is a free gift of a free people and to maintain that the Commons can command that free gift with no colonial representation in the Commons was absurd and to declare the colonies were virtually represented was contemptible. To Grenville's query, "when were the colonies emancipated?" Pitt thundered, "I desire to know when they were made slaves?"**

**This was a strong argument, brilliantly put, but in the end repeal was not achieved by assaulting Parliament's right to tax. The**

**Stamp Tax fell victim to the widespread rioting in the colonies that attended attempts to collect the tax and the economic argument of the merchants who were being pinched by the American boycott of British goods. Parliament did not surrender its right to tax, but rather came to the conclusion that this was a bad tax, an inexpedient one. In the end, the Stamp Act was repealed less than a year after its passage, but sentiment was so strong in the Commons about Parliament's right to make laws binding the colonies, "in all Cases whatsoever," that along with repeal there was passed the Declaratory Act. This asserted**

**Parliamentary hegemonic supremacy over the colonies. The passage of the Declaratory Act insured that no attempts would be made to reach comity with colonial sentiment that was moving with ever increasing determination in the direction of defiance.**

**At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.**

### **Resources**

**Knollenberg, Bernhard. *Origin of the American Revolution.***

**Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund,  
2002.**

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