

THE DECISION TO BREAK FROM GREAT BRITAIN

Viewpoint 10A
*Parliament Is Abusing the Rights
of Americans (1764)*

Stephen Hopkins (1707–1785)

INTRODUCTION *Between 1763 and 1765 the British*

Parliament passed a series of controversial laws meant to recover costs from the French and Indian War. Among these laws were trade regulations and the Stamp Act, a direct tax colonists had to pay on legal documents, pamphlets, and newspapers. The following viewpoint is excerpted from one of the many pamphlets written at this time protesting these new British policies. The author, Stephen Hopkins, was then the colonial governor of Rhode Island. Unlike the governors of most other colonies, who were appointed by the colony's proprietor or by the king or queen of England, Rhode Island's governor was elected by members of its colonial assembly.

The Rights of Colonists Examined was highly acclaimed and reprinted several times in the colonies and in Great Britain. In it Hopkins argues that Americans share with the citizens of Great Britain the same rights and liberties protected by the British constitution (the fundamental rights and freedoms that had evolved in English common law over the previous centuries). Hopkins asserts that recent British actions such as the Stamp Act jeopardize those rights. Leading colonists organized political protests and economic boycotts against the Stamp Act; Parliament repealed the controversial tax in 1766.

Hopkins did not originally advocate American independence from Great Britain. By 1776, however, he had changed his mind and was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

How does Hopkins define liberty? What is it about taxes that he finds objectionable? What appeal does he make to the British Parliament?

Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of.—This being so, makes it a matter of the utmost importance to men, which of the two shall be their portion.

Absolute liberty is, perhaps, incompatible with any kind of government.—The safety resulting from society, and the advantage of just and equal laws, hath caused men to forego some part of their natural liberty, and submit to government. This appears to be the most rational account of its beginning; although, it must be confessed, mankind have by no means been agreed about it. Some have found its origin in the divine appointment; others have thought it took its rise from power; enthusiasts have dreamed that dominion was founded in grace. Leaving these points to be settled [in the future], we will consider the British constitution, as it at present stands, on revolution principles; and from thence endeavor to find the measure of the magistrate's power and the people's obedience.

This glorious constitution, the best that ever existed among men, will be confessed by all, to be founded by compact, and established by consent of the people. By this most beneficent compact, British subjects are governed only agreeable to laws to which themselves have some way consented; and are not to be compelled to part with their property, but as it is called for by the authority of such laws. The former, is truly liberty; the latter is really to be possessed of property, and to have something that may be called one's own.

THE RIGHTS OF COLONISTS

On the contrary, those who are governed at the will of another, or of others, and whose property may be taken from them by taxes, or otherwise, without their own consent, and against their will, are in the miserable condition of slaves. "For liberty solely consists in an independency upon the will of another; and by the name of slave, we understand a man who can neither dispose of his person or goods, but enjoys all at the will of his master," says [Algernon] Sidney, on government. These things premised, whether the British American colonies, on the continent, are justly entitled to like privileges and freedom as their fellow subjects in Great Britain are, shall be the chief point examined. In discussing this question, we shall make the colonies in New England, with whose rights we are best acquainted, the rule of our reasoning; not in the least doubting but all the others are justly entitled to like rights with them.

New England was first planted by adventurers, who left England, their native country, by permission of King Charles the First; and, at their own expense, transported themselves to America, with great risk and difficulty settled among savages, and in a very surprising manner formed new colonies in the wilderness. Before their departure, the terms of their freedom, and the

From *The Rights of Colonists Examined* by Stephen Hopkins (Providence, RI: 1764). Reprinted in *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations*, vol. 6, edited by John R. Bartlett (Providence, 1861).