



PETER OLIVER

An ADDRESS to the Soldiers of Massachusetts Bay who are now in Arms against the Laws of their Country

The Massachusetts Gazette & Boston Weekly News-Letter

11 January 1776__Selections

A Boston-born Loyalist and Supreme Court judge in Massachusetts, Peter Oliver condemned the American rebellion as illegal, unfounded, and utterly self-destructive. For his staunch defense of British imperial authority, Oliver was harassed by Sons of Liberty and forced from his judgeship in 1774. In January 1776, he published this address urging Continental soldiers to stop, think, and abandon the Patriot cause. Two months later, he left Boston with the British as they evacuated the town, and he eventually settled in England. In 1781 he published an irate account of the pre-revolutionary period titled *Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion*. In this address, Oliver responds to a statement issued about

two months earlier by the officers of the Continental Army to its soldiers, urging them to remain in the downsized army and stand resolute despite hardship. What is Oliver's goal in refuting the officers' plea? How does he work to turn the soldiers against their officers? How does he intensify the impact of his address?

MY FELLOW CITIZENS!

You have been addressed by the general officers of the continental army as *fellow soldiers*, and with that insinuating art which was designed to move your passions. I would not draw your attention from it, provided you will devote your cooler moments to a dispassionate consideration of its subject matter.

Suffer [permit] me on my part to address you as *fellow citizens*, for I cannot have such dishonorable thoughts of you as to suppose that when you put on the soldier that you then put off the citizen. Citizens most of you were — you enjoyed the comforts of domestic life, you lately [recently] followed your different occupations and reaped the profits of a quiet and peaceable industry, and I hope in *God* that you may yet do it without any disturbance to your innocent wives and children. But in the late courses of your lives, you must not only have given great uneasinesses to your families, but I dare to say, that all of you were not quite free from uneasiness in your own minds.

I know, my dear countrymen! that many of you have been driven to take up arms against your Sovereign and the laws of the happiest constitution¹ that ever human beings were blest with — some through the necessities incident to human nature, and others by that compulsion which the malevolent and ambitious arts of your leaders have made necessary to deceive you with, in order to screen themselves from that vengeance which the injured laws of society had devoted them to. Many a tear of pity have I dropped for you and for the fate of my country, and many more tears I fear that I shall be forced to shed for that wrath which awaits you from an offended Heaven and an injured government. Many of your associates have already quitted the field of battle to appear before that solemn tribunal² where the plea of the united force of all the colonies will be of no avail to bribe the judgment or avert the sentence of an offended Deity. Some of them, in the agonies of death, sent messages to their friends to forbear proceeding any further, for they now found themselves in the wrong. Others have repeatedly said that an ambition of appearing something considerable and that only led them into rebellion; and the unhappy leader³ in the fatal action at Charlestown (who from ambition only had raised himself from a bare-legged

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¹ English constitution; not a specific document but the acquired laws and customs of government in Britain.

² I.e., judgment after death.

³ General Joseph Warren, revered Patriot leader killed in the Battle of Bunker Hill in Charlestown, near Boston, on June 17, 1775.

milk boy to a major general of an army), although the fatal ball gave him not a moment for reflection, yet had said in his lifetime that *he was determined to mount over the heads of his coadjutors and get to the last round of the ladder or die in the attempt*. Unhappy man! His fate arrested him in his career, and he can now tell whether pride and ambition are pillars strong enough to support the tottering fabric of rebellion.

But not to divert you from an attention to the *address of your officers*. I would rather wish you to weigh it with exactness, and after you have so done, if you then should think that it is better to trample upon the laws of the mildest government upon earth and throw off your allegiance to the most humane Sovereign that ever swayed a sceptre, and submit to a tyranny uncontrolled either by the laws of *God* or man, then blame none but yourselves if the consequences should be fatally bad to you and to your families.

Your officers, my countrymen! have taken great pains to sooth and flatter you, that you may not quit your posts and forsake *them* until they have accomplished their ambitious and desperate schemes. Your leaders know that they have plunged themselves into the bowels of the most wanton and unnatural rebellion that ever existed. They think that by engaging numbers to partake in their guilt that they shall appear formidable, and that by so numerous an appearance the hand of justice will not dare to arrest [stop] them. Some of you know that this argument hath been frequently urged, but you must know that much superior powers than this continent can boast of have been conquered by that government which you are now at war with.

Your officers tell you that they have reduced the regiments from *thirty-eight* to *twenty-six*, and assign as a reason that *many officers from a puny habit of body found themselves incapable of fulfilling the duty of their station, have been obliged to absent themselves from their posts, and consequently the duty has fallen very heavily upon those who remained*. Whether this is a true reason or not, some of you can tell. Be it so or not, why then not appoint others? Are none of you fit for officers but those *who absented themselves from their posts*? You generally took up arms about the same time, and I dare to say that many of you were as well qualified for commissions [as officers] as those who left their posts.

ADDRESS

from the General Officers to the
Soldiery of the Grand Continental Army

New England Chronicle, 24 November 1775

[Conclusion of address to which Oliver replies]

[*The Council of General Officers announces the economic necessity of reducing the number of officers and regiments from thirty-eight to twenty-six. It urges soldiers to remain in the Continental Army.*]

We will suppose, for an instance, that a considerable or greater part of you should withdraw yourselves from the service at this crisis, when victory is, as it were, in your hands and only waits for your grasping. We will suppose that the post we at present occupy—fortified and secured by such infinite labor—should be abandoned in consequence of your desertion. Would it sit easy upon your consciences, when your villages are plundered and burnt, your wives and children abused or grossly treated, and your whole Provinces laid waste with fire and sword? Would it sit easy on your consciences, we demand, to reflect that these calamities can be only imputed to your want of constancy and perseverance? But to descend from the greater obligation you stand in towards your Country, it may be said that the ease and affluence of your circumstances, as soldiers, might alone prompt you to remain. Never were soldiers whose duty has been so light, never were soldiers whose pay and provision has been so abundant and ample. In fact, your interest and comfort have been so carefully consulted, even to the lowest article, by the Continental Congress, that there is some reason to dread that the enemies to *New-England's* reputation may hereafter say, it was not principle that saved them, but that they were bribed into the preservation of their liberties.

To conclude, soldiers, concerns of the last importance to you depend on the post you now take. Your reputation and property, your safety, your very existence, is at stake. If you withdraw yourselves from the service, those instruments of ministerial villainy will be at liberty to stalk at large, to satiate and glut their brutality, avarice, and cruelty, and the name of a *New England* man, now so respectable in the world, become equally contemptible and odious, who, with the certain means of defense in their hands, rather than undergo a few fatigues of war, could patiently see themselves robbed of everything that men hold most dear; but if you firmly adhere to the righteous standard under which you are arranged, not only your characters will have the highest rank amongst the nations of the earth, but your rights and liberties will be secured against the attempts of tyranny, to the latest posterity.

Full text, see Archives of the American Revolution: 1774-1776,
Northern Illinois University Libraries.

CAMBRIDGE, 21st August, 1775.

WANTED for the CONTINENTAL ARMY.

One Million of Brick.
 Three Thousand Cords of Fire Wood.
 Two Hundred Thousand Feet of Pine Boards and Scantling.
 Five Hundred Bushels of Charcoal.
 One Hundred and Fifty Tons of *English* Hay.
 Twelve Hundred Bushels of Indian Corn.
 Twelve Hundred Bushels of Oats.
 Three Hundred Shovels.
 Three Hundred Spades.
 Fifty Pick Axes.
 One Hundred and Fifty Hand-Saws.
 Five Thousand Bushels of Lime.
 One Hundred and Fifty Tons of Rye Straw.

Those Persons who are willing to supply the Army with the Articles above-mentioned, may apply to the Quarter-Master-General, in Cambridge.

Appeal for provisions, broadside, 1775

1775

- June 15: Continental Congress establishes the Continental Army; appoints Gen. George Washington as Commander in Chief.
- July 4: Washington issues orders to the soldiers emphasizing that they "are now Troops of the United Provinces of North America."
- Aug. 23: King George III declares all colonies to be in a state of rebellion.
- Sept. 25: Army begins invasion of Canada.
- Oct. 18: British army attacks and burns Falmouth, Mass. (now Portland, Maine).
- Nov. 24: Officers' address to the "Soldiery of the Grand Continental Army" is published.
- Dec. 31: Defeated Continental Army begins retreat from Canada after attack on Quebec fails.

1776

- Jan. 11: Peter Oliver's address to the "Soldiers of Massachusetts Bay" is published.

Another reason they sooth you with for disbanding *twelve* regiments is that *the vast expense of attending the maintenance of so many regiments might have disabled the continent from persevering in its resolution of defending their liberties, if the contest should be of any continuance.* Surely my countrymen! you cannot be deluded with such trifling pleas. Can this continent, which undertakes to carry on a war with the power of Great Britain be alarmed at a few millions of dollars? Their resources are boundless; the issuing of paper money is easily accomplished, and while you can be compelled to take it, the continent can never *be disabled from persevering in its resolutions.* Unhappily for them, they have discovered to you what will be much for your interest to know, viz. [namely] That the vast expense of this civil war will be a burden too heavy for the shoulders of you or your posterity to bear. Consider that already three millions of dollars have been emitted in paper, and that 434,000 dollars, equal to £976,000 O. T.⁴ is assessed on the province of the *Massachusetts Bay* to redeem their part, and how much more must be raised to carry on this unnatural war which was commenced to gratify the pride and desperation of many of your leaders, time alone will discover. You have just entered the [military] lists, but there is much yet to be done. To finish the mighty independent empire, which they have planned for you, demands such resources as it will require one century to spunge away. Most of you have groaned under a tax of about 2[00,000] or 300,000 pounds old tenor, but when millions are thrown into the scale, they will press you down, never to rise more.

Your officers tell you that *men who are possessed of a vivacity of disposition, though brave and in all other respects unexceptionable, are totally unfit for service.* This is a new doctrine advanced to

make good officers and soldiers. It is a mystery, which I leave to that dullness and stupidity which your officers have complimented you with to unravel — the meaning of it *you* are best acquainted with, but it puts *me* in mind of what I have heard from the mouth of an arch traitor, who was disappointed in his expectations of the promotions of his near relation, viz. *That the people were a set of d—d stupid asses and were fit only to be drove.*

You are further told *that the present campaign is far from a hard one.* How hard you have worked and how much duty you have done, you yourselves can tell best. Many who have seen your labors have thought them great, and I am much inclined to believe that you have gone through some difficulty, especially when your officers, having forgot the popularity of this harangue, almost in the next breath tell you that *the post you at present occupy was fortified and secured by infinite labor.* It is an old and just maxim, my countrymen! that *deceivers ought to have good memories.*

⁴ £: English pound. / O.T.: "Old Tenor," prerevolutionary colonial paper money.



You are next addressed, in the invariable style for years past of newspapers and popular harangues, with the abuses of ministers [i.e., British cabinet officials] and generals. This may keep up your spirits for ought I know. Town meeting oratory I know has frequently had this effect, 'till the spirit of it was evaporated, and then it flattened so as to be quite insipid. They boast much of the attachment of *Nova Scotia* and *Canada*, to what they call your interest, as well as of the rest of the continent. I give you one word of advice, and as it is from a book⁵ which it is said you are fighting for, so I suppose that you will not totally disregard it; it is this, *let not him that putteth on the harness boast as he that putteth it off.*⁶ But as to the success of union, which you have met with, the same book says that *rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.*⁷ It is so my countrymen! in a double sense; for in the first place, no person but one who was bewitched would run the risk of engaging in a rebellion; and in the next place, which is the true meaning of the words; as witchcraft is renouncing the authority of *God Almighty* and applying to the devil, so rebellion is withdrawing allegiance from a lawful sovereign, overturning his government and laws, and joining with a power inimical to him.

You are also told, that *as the southern provinces have ever placed the greatest confidence in your zeal and valor, they did not think it necessary to raise any bodies in the other provinces for this particular service.* Do you believe my countrymen! that any of the *Massachusetts* officers were concerned in drawing this address to you? If so, beware of them, before it is too late. I will not believe it. It surely must be drawn by some of your foreign officers, whom you have disgraced yourselves by suffering [permitting] them to command you, when you had men of your own province who were at least equal to them and who would have more naturally cared for you: But you may have felt the ill consequence of it e'er now, and it may be too late for redress. The true English of it runs thus — *The Massachusetts [soldiers] have a different interest from the rest of the continent. They are a set of brave hardy dogs and are always encroaching upon their neighbors, and ought to be humbled; and when we have established our independency, we shall have much to fear from them. Let us therefore make them the mercenaries. They will sacrifice everything for money; we can pay them in paper which they are so fond of. By engaging them for soldiers, they will get knocked in the head, their wives and children will be ruined; and when we have established our empire, we shall have nothing to fear from them. They will become an easy prey to the rest of the provinces, and we can parcel them out among us as we may think proper.*

The remainder of your officers' address to you, I leave to your own remarks. It is so full of compliment and flattery in order to catch your passions that I cannot help blushing for you, and if you are caught by it I shall then pity you, and you will blush for yourselves.

That you may not plead ignorance in justification of yourselves in case the fate of war should be against you, I will now let you into the origin and progress of the public disorders which for many years past have sickened the state of the province, and at last hath terminated in a most unnatural and ungrateful rebellion. I am persuaded, my countrymen! that you are ignorant of the true rise of your disorders; the aim of your leaders hath been to keep you in ignorance; they knew that your ignorance was their protection: Had you known their views, you would not only have spurned at the thought of overturning the

⁵ The Bible.

⁶ 1 Kings 20:11.

⁷ 1 Samuel 15:23.

constitution, but I venture to say that some of you would have dragged them to the bar of justice, there to have received that punishment which now awaits *them*, and I wish that you yourselves may not be involved in, as partakers in their crimes. — The history runs thus, and every page of it is capable of ample proof. . . .

Oliver summarizes the pre-revolutionary period in Massachusetts from his perspective as a Loyalist—and as one who had been victimized by Sons of Liberty wrath and mob action. He ascribes self-serving economic motives to the Boston Patriot leaders, especially John Hancock, James Otis, and Samuel Adams (without naming them), who stirred up anti-British fervor, he insists, in order to maintain their profits from smuggling goods into New England (a decades-long practice of merchants and traders to avoid British import taxes). Finally, he concludes, “our violences at last rose to such a height that injured sovereignty and an insulted government have been roused to assert their authority, in order to curb as wanton and wicked a rebellion as ever raged in any government upon earth.”

Thus, my countrymen! I have very shortly stated to you the rise and progress of the present rebellion. I believe that many, if not most of you, were insensible of the ambitious views of your leaders. I do not think that you were so devoid of virtue as to rush into so horrid a crime at one leap; for let me tell you that it is the highest crime that a member of society can be guilty of, and the punishment annexed to it is nothing less than a forfeiture of estate and life. Your leaders have deceived you into what they do not believe themselves. They were desperate themselves, and they have involv'd you in their own just doom.

They tell you your *properties* and *religion* are at stake. Your ministers tell you so too; and I know you are too apt to take all that they say for gospel; but pray, what danger is your religion in? Why, it is said that popery is established in *Canada*⁸ and will be established here. No, my countrymen! Popery is not established in *Canada* — let your teachers and leaders assert it never so roundly, it is only indulged to the Roman Catholics there

I would ask also you my countrymen! how your *properties* are at stake? You will doubtless tell me that acts of Parliament have been made to oblige you to pay duties upon various articles. Be it so; why then do you purchase articles that are to pay duties? Why then do you not petition in a constitutional manner to have these acts repealed? The British parliament never assumed to themselves infallibility, and many a time have they repealed American acts when they have been convinced that the enforcement of them was incompatible with the mutual interest. It is true your leaders did petition, but in such an unconstitutional manner that it was below the dignity and contrary to the system of the English government to hear such petitions; and this your leaders knew must be the fate of them, and this method they planned in order to effect their independence and make themselves of that importance to you which they now appear in. But you can have no just plea for entering so deeply into opposition against the parent state. You may know, if you please, that *King Charles the First* granted to our ancestors a charter. You may call it a compact if you please too, and if it be so, the argument will be much against you, for in that you compacted to pay duties after a short term of years, and you have been fulfilling your compact by paying duties for above an hundred years past, till of late the scandalous *smuggling business* reared its front against the laws and brought the state into its present distraction. — You have been told also that your land was to be taxed and that you were to be brought into lordships;⁹ this I know hath been artfully propagated among you, and I dare assert it to be groundless. There is too much justice and benignity in the English government to advance such a scheme, and supposing that they had it in their idea to do it, so violent an opposition ought to have been suspended at least 'till the scheme had been brought into action. It is like one man's cutting another's throat, lest the other might possibly injure his grandchildren.

I am loath to detain you any longer, my countrymen! From sober reflection — for *God's* sake, for your own sakes, for your wives and children's sake, pause a moment and weigh the event of this unnatural civil war. You have roused the British Lion. You have incensed that power which hath crushed

⁸ Popery: pejorative term for Roman Catholicism. Protestant Americans were alarmed by Britain's decision in 1774 to allow conquered Quebec (Canada) to maintain French civil law and its official religion of Roman Catholicism. In addition, Britain extended the boundaries of Quebec to include the Ohio River Valley, where many Americans wanted to settle. Some Americans accused the British of purposely surrounding them with a non-democratic Roman Catholic government, and this Oliver refutes.

⁹ I.e., similar to feudal control of land by lords, in which vassals or peasants are tied to their lordship.

much greater powers than you can boast of, and hath done it without your aid too. *Great Britain* is not so distressed for men or money as some would make you believe. Your conduct hath raised the resentment of the greatest powers in *Europe*, and she may, if she pleases, accept of their proffered aid. But your priests and your leaders tell you otherwise; and I will just put the case that supposing Heaven in righteous judgment should suffer [permit] you to conquer. Look forward then to the fatal consequences of your conquest. You will be conquered by an army of your own raising, and then your dreaded slavery is fixed — the ambition and desperation of your leaders will then demand the fruit of all their toils. Turn back a few pages of the English history; read the account of the civil wars of the last century, and view the triumphs and absolute sway of that tyrant [Oliver] *Cromwell*. He, like some of your leaders, began with humoring the enthusiasm of the times and ended the parricide of his country.¹⁰ Let me suppose again, as you vainly imagine, that this will not be the case, and that when you have conquered, you will then beat all your swords into plowshares. How long do you think it will be before you are obliged to change sides and beat your plowshares into swords again? You will then have twelve or fourteen colonies to form into an independent empire. Where then is to be the seat of empire? Surely the *Massachusetts Bay* hath the best title to precedence — they began the rebellion and they have the best title to reward. Do you think that the other colonies cannot furnish as artful demagogues as this province can? Do not imagine that we are the men and that wisdom is to die with us. We shall be cantoned out into petty states; we shall be involved in perpetual wars for an inch or two of ground: our fertile fields will be deluged with blood, our wives & children be involved in the horrid scene; foreign powers will step in and share in the plunder that remains, and those who are left to tell the story will be reduced to a more abject slavery than that which you now dread. The colonies are too jealous [distrusting] of each other to remain long in a state of friendship.

I will now, my fellow citizens! change the scene to a more eligible view for your interest and suppose it possible, tho' you don't think it so, that *Great Britain* can conquer you, and that instead of being victors you may be subjects again. You will then have the mildest government to live under, a government to be envied by the rest of mankind, and whose only unhappiness is, that it is too apt to abuse that liberty which *God* and the constitution hath blessed it with. She hath been loath to call you *conquered*. She hath, like an overfond parent, indulged your peevishness and withheld her resentment until she hath felt the smart of her indulgence. She is now roused, but her resentment is tempered with mildness. He whom you formerly acknowledged for your Sovereign drops the tear of pity for you in his late [recent] speech from the throne, a speech so tempered with paternal pity, royal firmness of mind and sentiment of dignity, as distinguishes the speaker as the father of his country and the ornament of human nature. Clemency he is distinguished for; he is revered for his humanity; but his soul is impressed with too much magnanimity to suffer [permit] his laws and the rights of his subjects to be trampled under the foot of rebellion. He holds out the sceptre of mercy, that bright gem of his royal dignity, for you to embrace; but if you choose to kiss the rod of his justice, be you yourselves witnesses that it is not his choice. Remember, that Heaven punishes but to save. The God of Heaven hath repeatedly checked rebellion, and our own history confirms its defeats. Rebellion is so odious in the eyes of all rational beings that it is for the universal good that it should be suppressed. It saps the foundation of moral virtue, and therefore it is for the general interest that all nature should rise in arms against it; and I have not the least doubt that providence will arrest it in its career. When that time comes, complain not that you were not forewarned, and bear your own punishment without murmuring.

That you may seriously reflect on your own impending fate, and the fate of your wives and innocent children, before you take the deadly plunge, and that you may immediately retire from the precipice of ruin, is the friendly wish of

Your fellow Citizen.

Z. Z.

¹⁰ Oliver Cromwell came to power in England as a virtual dictator from 1653 to 1658 after a civil war in which King Charles I had been executed.