

Frederick the Great and the Seven Years' War

The following is a suggestive letter of the crown prince, Frederick, written at the age of sixteen, to his father, Frederick William I.

WUSTERHAUSEN, September n, 1728.

I have not ventured for a long time to present myself before my dear papa, partly because I was advised against it, but chiefly because I anticipated an even worse reception than usual and feared to vex my dear papa still further by the favor I have now to ask; so I have preferred to put it in writing. I beg my dear papa that he will be kindly disposed toward me. I do assure him that after long examination of my conscience I do not find the slightest thing with which to reproach myself; but if, against my wish and will, I have vexed my dear papa, I hereby beg most humbly for forgiveness, and hope that my dear papa will give over the fearful hate which has appeared so plainly in his whole behavior and to which I cannot accustom myself. I have always thought hitherto that I had a kind father, but now I see the contrary. However, I will take courage and hope that my dear papa will think this all over and take me again into his favor. Meantime I assure him that I will never, my life long, willingly fail him, and in spite of his disfavor I am still, with most dutiful and childlike respect, my dear papa's Most obedient and faithful servant and son,

FREDERICK.

Frederick William replied:

A bad, obstinate boy, who does not love his father; for when one does one's best, and especially when one loves one's father, one does what he wishes not only when he is standing by but when he is not there to see. Moreover you know very well that I cannot stand an effeminate fellow who has no manly tastes, who cannot ride or shoot (to his shame be it said!), is untidy about his person, and wears his hair curled like a fool instead of cutting it; and that I have condemned all these things a thousand times, and yet there is no sign of improvement. For the rest, haughty, offish as a country lout, conversing with none but a favored few instead of being affable and popular, grimacing like a fool, and never following my wishes out of love for me but only when forced into it, caring for nothing but to have his own way, and thinking nothing else is of any importance. This is my answer.

FREDERICK WILLIAM.

The French and Indian War, which was the American theatre of the Seven Years' War, cost the British a lot of money which they felt perfectly justified to recoup by raising taxes on their American colonists. This

led first to protests, and finally to the American Revolution. In 1774 the American Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and published a "Declaration of Rights" demanding that the British Crown stop treating its American citizens so unfairly. The great English lexicographer and essayist Samuel Johnson was asked to produce a reply to this forerunner of the Declaration of Independence, and in response he wrote in 1775 his famous essay, "Taxation No Tyranny." Here are a couple of excerpts:

Humanity is very uniform. The Americans have this resemblance to Europeans, that they do not always know when they are well. They soon quit the fortress, that could neither have been mined by sophistry, nor battered by declamation. Their next resolution declares, that "Their ancestors, who first settled the colonies, were, at the time of their emigration from the mother-country, entitled to all the rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural-born subjects within the realm of England."

This, likewise, is true; but when this is granted, their boast of original rights is at an end; they are no longer in a state of nature. These lords of themselves, these kings of ME, these demigods of independence sink down to colonists, governed by a charter. If their ancestors were subjects, they acknowledged a sovereign; if they had a right to English privileges, they were accountable to English laws; and, what must grieve the lover of liberty to discover, had ceded to the king and parliament, whether the right or not, at least, the power of disposing, "without their consent, of their lives, liberties, and properties. "It, therefore, is required of them to prove, that the parliament ever ceded to them a dispensation from that obedience, which they owe as natural-born subjects, or any degree of independence or immunity, not enjoyed by other Englishmen.

They say, that by such emigration, they by no means forfeited, surrendered, or lost any of those rights; but, that "they were, and their descendants now are, entitled to the exercise and enjoyment of all such of them, as their local and other circumstances enable them to exercise and enjoy."

That they who form a settlement by a lawful charter, having committed no crime, forfeit no privileges, will be readily confessed; but what they do not forfeit by any judicial sentence, they may lose by natural effects. As man can be but in one place, at once, he cannot have the advantages of multiplied residence. He that will enjoy the brightness of sunshine, must quit the coolness of the shade. He who goes voluntarily to America, cannot complain of losing what he leaves in Europe. He, perhaps, had a right to vote for a knight or burgess; by crossing the Atlantick, he has not nullified his right; but he has made its exertion no longer possible. By his own choice he has left a country, where he had a vote and little property, for another, where he has great property, but no vote. But as this preference was deliberate and unconstrained, he is still "concerned in the government of himself;" he has reduced himself from a voter, to one of the innumerable multitude that have no vote. He has truly "ceded his right," but he still is governed by his own consent; because he has consented to throw his atom of interest into the general mass of the community. Of the consequences of his own act he has no cause to complain; he has chosen, or intended to choose, the greater good; he is represented, as himself desired, in the general representation...

From force many endeavours have been used, either to dissuade, or to deter us. Sometimes the merit of the Americans is exalted, and sometimes their sufferings are aggravated. We are told of their contributions to the last war; a war incited by their outcries, and continued for their protection; a war by which none but themselves were gainers. All that they can boast is, that they did something for themselves, and did not wholly stand inactive, while the sons of Britain were fighting in their

cause.

If we cannot admire, we are called to pity them; to pity those that show no regard to their mother-country; have obeyed no law, which they could violate; have imparted no good, which they could withhold; have entered into associations of fraud to rob their creditors; and into combinations to distress all who depended on their commerce. We are reproached with the cruelty of shutting one port, where every port is shut against us. We are censured as tyrannical, for hindering those from fishing, who have condemned our merchants to bankruptcy, and our manufacturers to hunger.

Others persuade us to give them more liberty, to take off restraints, and relax authority; and tell us what happy consequences will arise from forbearance; how their affections will be conciliated, and into what diffusions of beneficence their gratitude will luxuriate. They will love their friends. They will reverence their protectors. They will throw themselves into our arms, and lay their property at our feet; they will buy from no other what we can sell them; they will sell to no other what we wish to buy.

That any obligations should overpower their attention to profit, we have known them long enough not to expect. It is not to be expected from a more liberal people. With what kindness they repay benefits, they are now showing us, who, as soon as we have delivered them from France, are defying and proscribing us.

But if we will permit them to tax themselves, they will give us more than we require. If we proclaim them independent, they will, during pleasure, pay us a subsidy. The contest is not now for money, but for power. The question is not, how much we shall collect, but, by what authority the collection shall be made.

Those who find that the Americans cannot be shown, in any form, that may raise love or pity, dress them in habiliments of terrour, and try to make us think them formidable. The Bostonians can call into the field ninety thousand men. While we conquer all before us, new enemies will rise up behind, and our work will be always to begin. If we take possession of the towns, the colonists will retire into the inland regions, and the gain of victory will be only empty houses, and a wide extent of waste and desolation. If we subdue them for the present, they will universally revolt in the next war, and resign us, without pity, to subjection and destruction.

To all this it may be answered, that between losing America, and resigning it, there is no great difference; that it is not very reasonable to jump into the sea, because the ship is leaky. All those evils may befall us, but we need not hasten them.

The dean of Gloucester has proposed, and seems to propose it seriously, that we should, at once, release our claims, declare them masters of themselves, and whistle them down the wind. His opinion is, that our gain from them will be the same, and our expense less. What they can have most cheaply from Britain, they will still buy; what they can sell to us at the highest price, they will still sell.

It is, however, a little hard, that, having so lately fought and conquered for their safety, we should govern them no longer. By letting them loose before the war, how many millions might have been saved. One wild proposal is best answered by another. Let us restore to the French what we have taken from them. We shall see our colonists at our feet, when they have an enemy so near them. Let us give the Indians arms, and teach them discipline, and encourage them, now and then, to plunder a plantation. Security and leisure are the parents of sedition.

While these different opinions are agitated, it seems to be determined, by the legislature, that

force shall be tried. Men of the pen have seldom any great skill in conquering kingdoms, but they have strong inclination to give advice. I cannot forbear to wish, that this commotion may end without bloodshed, and that the rebels may be subdued by terrour rather than by violence; and, therefore, recommend such a force as may take away, not only the power, but the hope of resistance, and, by conquering without a battle, save many from the sword.

If their obstinacy continues, without actual hostilities, it may, perhaps, be mollified, by turning out the soldiers to free quarters, forbidding any personal cruelty or hurt. It has been proposed, that the slaves should be set free, an act, which, surely, the lovers of liberty cannot but commend. If they are furnished with firearms for defence, and utensils for husbandry, and settled in some simple form of government within the country, they may be more grateful and honest than their masters.

Far be it from any Englishman, to thirst for the blood of his fellow-subjects. Those who most deserve our resentment are, unhappily, at less distance. The Americans, when the stamp act was first proposed, undoubtedly disliked it, as every nation dislikes an impost; but they had no thought of resisting it, till they were encouraged and incited by European intelligence, from men whom they thought their friends, but who were friends only to themselves.

On the original contrivers of mischief let an insulted nation pour out its vengeance. With whatever design they have inflamed this pernicious contest, they are, themselves, equally detestable. If they wish success to the colonies, they are traitors to this country; if they wish their defeat, they are traitors, at once, to America and England. To them, and them only, must be imputed the interruption of commerce, and the miseries of war, the sorrow of those that shall be ruined, and the blood of those that shall fall.

Since the Americans have made it necessary to subdue them, may they be subdued with the least injury possible to their persons and their possessions! When they are reduced to obedience, may that obedience be secured by stricter laws and stronger obligations!

Nothing can be more noxious to society, than that erroneous clemency, which, when a rebellion is suppressed, exacts no forfeiture, and establishes no securities, but leaves the rebels in their former state. Who would not try the experiment, which promises advantage without expense? If rebels once obtain a victory, their wishes are accomplished; if they are defeated, they suffer little, perhaps less than their conquerors; however often they play the game, the chance is always in their favour. In the mean time, they are growing rich by victualling the troops that we have sent against them, and, perhaps, gain more by the residence of the army than they lose by the obstruction of their port.

Their charters, being now, I suppose, legally forfeited, may be modelled, as shall appear most commodious to the mother-country. Thus the privileges which are found, by experience, liable to misuse, will be taken away, and those who now bellow as patriots, bluster as soldiers, and domineer as legislators, will sink into sober merchants and silent planters, peaceably diligent, and securely rich.

But there is one writer, and, perhaps, many who do not write, to whom the contraction of these pernicious privileges appears very dangerous, and who startle at the thoughts of "England free, and America in chains." Children fly from their own shadow, and rhetoricians are frightened by their own voices. Chains is, undoubtedly, a dreadful word; but, perhaps, the masters of civil wisdom may discover some gradations between chains and anarchy. Chains need not be put upon those who will be restrained without them. This contest may end in the softer phrase of English superiority and American obedience.

We are told, that the subjection of Americans may tend to the diminution of our own liberties;

an event, which none but very perspicacious politicians are able to foresee. If slavery be thus fatally contagious, how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?