ASSIGNMENT

JOHN DICKINSON, LETTERS FROM A FARMER IN PENNSYLVANIA
10 POINTS

Read the attached excerpts and answer the following questions

1. John Dickinson was a wealthy and influential lawyer. Why does he call himself a farmer?
2. What are Dickinson’s beliefs about liberty?
3. Does Dickinson believe that one person can make a difference?
4. What Act of Parliament prompted Dickinson to write Letter 1?
5. Does Dickinson believe that Parliament has a right to impose duties on the American colonists? If so, under what circumstances? Does Dickinson’s view on this issue seem to change by the time of Letter 12?
6. How does Dickinson distinguish between acts such as the Sugar Act of 1764 and acts such as the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Duties of 1767?
7. Benjamin Franklin and others in the colonies sought to differentiate between internal and external taxes. How does Dickinson address that distinction?
8. Map out the logic of Dickinson’s arguments contained in Letter 7 and 12. Does it make sense?
John Dickinson, Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania
1767-68
(excerpts)

Letter 1

My dear Countrymen,

I am a Farmer, settled, after a variety of fortunes, near the banks of the river Delaware, in the province of Pennsylvania. I received a liberal education, and have been engaged in the busy scenes of life; but am now convinced, that a man may be as happy without bustle, as with it. My farm is small; my servants are few, and good; I have a little money at interest; I wish for no more; my employment in my own affairs is easy; and with a contented grateful mind, undisturbed by worldly hopes or fears, relating to myself, I am completing the number of days allotted to me by divine goodness.

Being generally master of my time, I spend a good deal of it in a library, which I think the most valuable part of my small estate; and being acquainted with two or three gentlemen of abilities and learning, who honor me with their friendship, I have acquired, I believe, a greater knowledge in history, and the laws and constitution of my country, than is generally attained by men of my class, many of them not being so fortunate as I have been in the opportunities of getting information.

From my infancy I was taught to love humanity and liberty. Enquiry and experience have since confirmed my reverence for the lessons then given me, by convincing me more fully of their truth and excellence. Benevolence toward mankind, excites wishes for their welfare, and such wishes endear the means of fulfilling them. These can be found in liberty only, and therefore her sacred cause ought to be espoused by every man on every occasion, to the utmost of his power. As a charitable, but poor person does not withhold his mite, because he cannot relieve all the distresses of the miserable, so should not any honest man suppress his sentiments concerning freedom, however small their influence is likely to be. Perhaps he “may touch some wheel,”* that will have an effect greater than he could reasonably expect.

These being my sentiments, I am encouraged to offer to you, my countrymen, my thoughts on some late transactions, that appear to me to be of the utmost importance to you. Conscious of my own defects, I have waited some time, in expectation of seeing the subject treated by persons much better qualified for the task; but being therein disappointed, and apprehensive that longer delays will be injurious, I venture at length to request the attention of the public, praying, that these lines may be read with the same zeal for the happiness of British America, with which they were wrote.

Letter 2

There is another late act of parliament, [the Townshend Duties,] which appears to me to be unconstitutional, and as destructive to the liberty of these colonies, as [the Stamp Act]. The parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to regulate the trade of Great-Britain, and all her colonies. Such an authority is essential to the relation between a mother country and her colonies; and necessary for the common good of all. He, who considers these provinces as states distinct from the British Empire, has very slender notions of justice, or of their interests. We are but parts of a whole; and therefore there must exist a power somewhere to preside, and preserve
the connection in due order. This power is lodged in the parliament; and we are as much
dependent on Great-Britain, as a perfectly free people can be on another.

I have looked over every statute relating to these colonies, from their first settlement to this time;
and I find every one of them founded on this principle, till the Stamp-Act administration. All
before, are calculated to regulate and preserve or promote a mutually beneficial intercourse
between several constituent parts of the empire; and though many of them imposed duties on
trade, yet those duties were always imposed with design to restrain the commerce of one part,
that was injurious to another, and thus promote the general welfare. The raising a revenue
thereby was never intended…. Never did the British parliament, till the period above mentioned,
think of imposing duties in America, for the purpose of raising a revenue….

The preamble [of the Townshend Duties reads:] "Whereas it is expedient that a revenue should
be raised in his majesty's dominions in America…."   Here we may observe an authority
expressly claimed and exerted to impose duties on these colonies; not for the regulation of trade;
not for the preservation or promotion of a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several
constituent parts of the empire, heretofore the sole objects of parliamentary institutions; but for
the single purpose of levying money upon us.

This I call an innovation; and a most dangerous innovation. It may perhaps be objected that
Great-Britain has a right to lay what duties she pleases upon her exports, and it makes no
difference to us, whether they are paid here or there.

To this I answer. These colonies require many things for their use, which the laws of Great-
Britain prohibit them from getting any where but from her. Such are paper and glass. That we
may legally be bound to pay any general duties on these commodities relative to the regulation of
trade, is granted; but we being obliged by the laws to take from Great-Britain, any special duties
imposed on exportation to us only, with intention to raise a revenue from us only, are as much
taxes, upon us, as those imposed by the Stamp-Act.

What is the difference in substance and right whether the same sum is raised upon us by the rates
mentioned in the Stamp-Act, on the use of paper, or by these duties, on the importation of it…. Here then, my dear counymen, rouse yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads.
If you once admit, that Great-Britain may lay duties upon, her exportations to us, for the purpose
of levying money on us only, she then will have nothing to do, but to lay those duties on the
articles which she prohibits us to manufacture--and the tragedy of American liberty is finished.

Letter 4

An objection, I hear, has been made against my second letter, which I would willingly clear up
before I proceed. "There is," say the objectors, "a material difference between the Stamp-Act and
the [Townshend Duties] that justifies the conduct of those who opposed the former, and yet are
willing to submit to the latter. The duties imposed by the Stamp-Act were internal taxes; but the
present are external, and therefore the parliament may have a right to impose them." To this I
answer, with a total denial of the power of parliament to lay upon these colonies any "tax"
whatever.
This point, being so important to this, and to succeeding generations, I wish to be clearly
understood. To the word "tax," I annex that meaning which the constitution and history of England require to be annexed to it; that is—that it is an imposition on the subject, for the sole purpose of levying money. . . . A "tax" means an imposition to raise money. Such persons therefore as speak of internal and external "taxes," I pray may pardon me, if I object to that expression, as applied to the privileges and interests of these colonies. There may be internal and external impositions, founded on different principles, and having different tendencies, every "tax" being an imposition, tho' every imposition is not a "tax." But all taxes are founded on the same principles; and have the same tendency.

Letter 7
These duties, which will inevitably be levied upon us…are expressly laid for the sole purpose of taking money. This is the true definition of "taxes." They are therefore taxes. This money is to be taken from us. We are therefore taxed. Those who are taxed without their own consent, expressed by themselves or their representatives, are slaves. We are taxed without our own consent, expressed by ourselves or our representatives. We are therefore--Slaves.

Letter 12
Let these truths be indelibly impressed on our minds--that we cannot be happy without being free--that we cannot be free, without being secure in our property--that we cannot be secure in our property, if, without our consent, others may, as by right, take it away--that taxes imposed on us by parliament, do thus take it away--that duties laid for the sole purpose of raising money, are taxes--that attempts to lay such duties should be Instantly and firmly opposed--that this opposition can never be effectual, unless it is the united effort of these provinces--that therefore benevolence of temper towards each other, and unanimity of councils, are essential to the welfare of the whole--and lastly, that for this reason, every man amongst us, who in any manner would encourage either dissension, diffidence, or indifference, between these colonies, is an enemy to himself, and to his country…

(From Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The Writings of John Dickinson, 1895, pp. 328-406.) Dickinson wrote 13 letters in all and had a significant effect on American political thought.
LETTERS
From a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the inhabitants of the British colonies,
By John Dickinson, Esq.

I am a farmer, settled after a variety
of fortunes, near the banks of the sa-
itual Delaware, in the province of Penn-
sylvania. I received a liberal education,
and have been engaged in the busy scenes
of life: but I now consider, that a man
may be as happy without books, as with
it. My farm is small, my servants are
few, and good; I have a little money at
interest. I have for no more, my em-
ployment in my own affairs is easy;
and with a contented grateful mind, I
am completing the number of days al-
lotted to me by divine goodness.

Being master of my time, I spend a
good deal of it in a library, which I think
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ing information.

From infancy I was taught to love hu-
manity and liberty. Inquiry and experi-
ence have since confirmed my reverence
for the forefathers, which, by con-
vincing me more fully of their truth and
excellence, have only served to make me
more desirous of their perfection, and
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ing them. These can be found in liberty
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ought to be espoused by every man, on
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er. As a charitable but poor person does
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haps he may "touch stone water" that
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These being my sentiments, I am en-
couraged to offer to you, my coun-
trymen, my thoughts on some late transac-
tions, that in my opinion are of the ut-
most importance to us. Considerations of
my delect, I have walked some time, in
expectation of being the subject treated
by perfect much better qualified for the
task but hear New-York either had, or had
not a right to refuse subscriptions to that
act. If they had, and I imagine no A-
merican will deny, they had not, then
the parliament had no right to compel
them to execute it — if they had not that
right, they had no right to punish them
for not executing it; and therefore had
no right to impose those subscriptions,
which is a punishment. In fact, if the
people of New-York cannot be legally
taxed but by their own representatives,
they cannot be legally deprived of the
privileges of making laws, only for failing to do what is not a privilege of taxation. If they may be legally deprived of such a part of the privileges of making laws, why may they not, with equal reason, be de-
prived of every other privilege? Or why
may not only one colony be treated in the
same manner, when any of them shall
demand their right to any impor-
tations that shall be endured? Or what
figures the repeal of the stamp-act, yet
colonies are to lose their privileges, by
not tamely surrendering that of tax-
ation.

There is one consideration nailing from
the suspension, which is not generally
attended to, but bears such importance
very clearly. It was not necessary that the
suspension should be adopted by an a-
t of parliament. The crown might have re-
fered the governance of New-York even
from calling the assembly together, by its
prerogative in the royal government.—
This step, the hauteur, would have been
taken, if the conduct of the assembly of
New-York had been regarded as an act
of disobedience to the crown alone; but
it is regarded as an act of "dissatisfaction
as to the authority of the British legis-
lature." This gives the suspension a
preponderance in the exercise of the
supreme authority of the British legislature
over their colonies in the part of taxation;
and it is intended to compel New-York up-
to a submission to that authority.

Dickinson's Letter 1 as it originally appeared in 1767