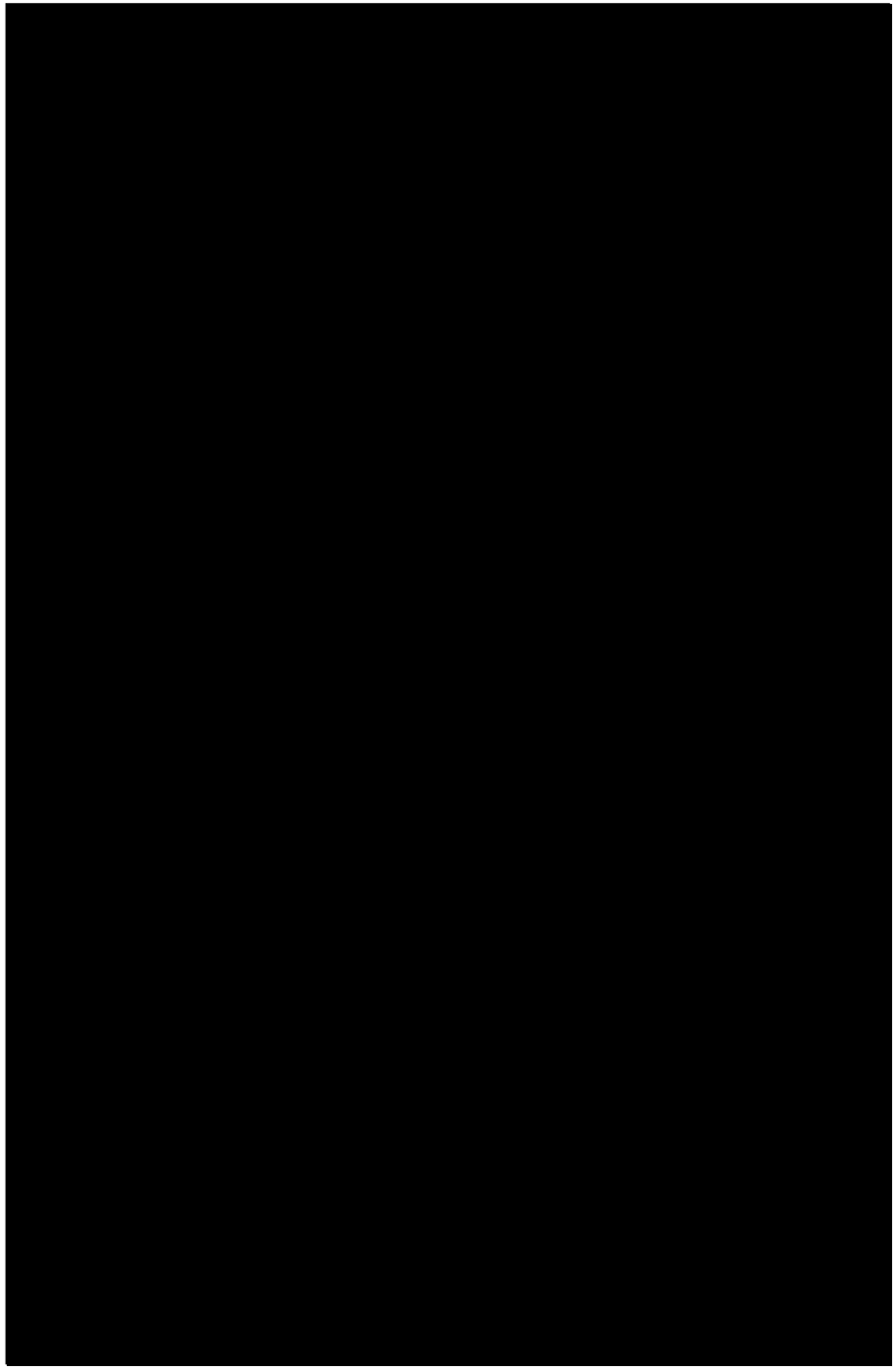


Leaders who think they know better than their own military advisers about conditions on the ground seldom listen to intelligence that suggests the need for a different approach. This was certainly the case during the summer of 1775. However much Gage welcomed promised troop reinforcements, he sensed that the British were in over their heads. The ministry simply did not understand the character of the colonial insurgency. The men who flocked to Massachusetts in defense of their rights and liberty, and justified resistance in the language of the Old Testament, were not likely to be discouraged by ill-coordinated displays of toughness. Writing to Dartmouth soon after the Battle of Bunker Hill, Gage confessed, "The trials we have had [in America] show the rebels are not the despicable rabble too many have supposed them to be, and I find it owing to a military spirit, encouraged among them for a few years past, joined with an uncommon degree of zeal and enthusiasm, that they are otherwise."[28]

The spontaneous rising of the ordinary people in support of other Americans marked the end of an imperial order that the colonists had known for more than a century. We should be clear on this point: popular resistance to Great Britain compelled the members of Congress to accept independence. Without doubt, many were strongly so inclined. After two years of resistance that witnessed the mobilization of tens of thousands of Americans, however, the size, pace, and logic of insurgency meant that they had no other choice. A person writing in a newspaper on December 1, 1775, under the name "A FREEMAN," fully appreciated where the political cart stood in relation to the horse. Addressing "the WORTHY OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS IN THE AMERICAN ARMY," he announced as a matter of fact, "we expect soon to break off all kind of connection with Britain, and form into a GRAND REPUBLIC of the AMERICAN UNITED COLONIES." He offered a wonderful vision. The new nation "will, by the blessing of heaven, soon work out our salvation and perpetuate the liberties, increase the wealth, and the power and the glory of this Western world." A FREEMAN assured the soldiers, stirred originally by outrage but sus-

tained by a commitment to rights, "the farther we enter into the field of independence, our prospect will expand and brighten, and a COMPLETE REPUBLIC will soon complete our happiness."[29]

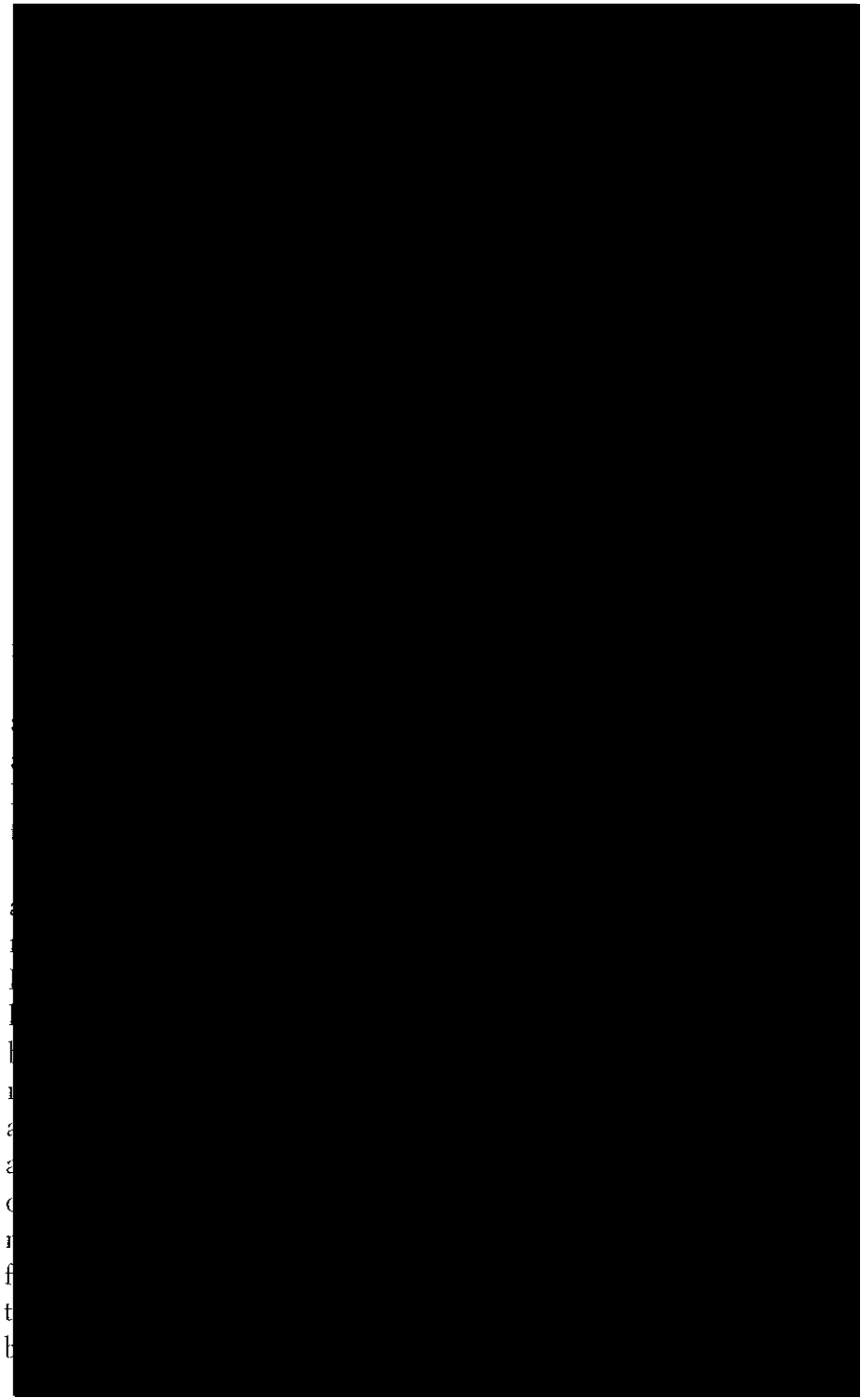
II

There is another way of looking at the insurgency. This story draws upon the painful reflections of the last British officials to abandon their colonial posts. At a moment of crisis, these beleaguered figures offered valuable insights into the character of popular militancy. By viewing the insurgents as British officials did, we discover that the Americans were not unlike so many oppressed people throughout the world who have taken up arms in defense of what they regard as their just rights. In more recent times, we have come to adopt the point of view of the imperial officials—sometimes even as we watch in horror as the representatives of our government flee from the last secure compound—but at such moments we might reflect that once, long ago, at the beginning of our national history, Americans challenged the legitimacy of the occupying regime.

Like the characters one encounters in the writings of V. S. Naipaul, colonial officials dispatched to distant American outposts were able to date the collapse of the British Empire with precision. For them, the experience of large-scale popular resistance was real, very frightening, a phenomenon they had not been trained to handle. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Crown's representatives could pinpoint the moment—often within the span of only a few months—when effective British rule crumbled, a traumatic event in their lives that revealed colonial government in America to be little more than a house of cards. Cabinet members in London may have claimed that they had seen the crisis coming all along or that the final debacle reflected complex factors, commercial and demographic, military and religious. But customs collectors, naval officers, and royal governors—middle-level appointees who actually served the king on the ground—took a different perspective. For them the end came dramatically, often violently, and when confronted with colonial insurgency, these harried bureaucrats bore witness to the birth of a new political culture.

British officials produced a number of accounts of imperial collapse, most of which, as one would expect, were self-serving in character.[30] For our purposes, however, some accounts of the last days of British authority in America are more valuable than others. A case in point are the records of two mediocre royal governors whose fumbling attempts to restore the old order centered on derelict forts—physical expressions of colonial power—to which before the final moment of political crisis no one had paid more than passing attention. The governors served their king in the sleepy backwaters of empire—in North Carolina and New Hampshire—where they believed that however unrewarding their posts may have been in monetary terms, they were secure from the kinds of organized resistance to parliamentary legislation that had plagued port cities such as New York and Boston.

They were wrong. In 1775—many months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence—British authority broke down along the entire Atlantic Coast. Governor Josiah Martin of North Carolina and Governor John Wentworth of New Hampshire tried their best to make sense of a massive insurgent movement, which for them had no precedent, and as the waves of violence rolled over colonial America, they placed their hopes on two crumbling forts—Fort Johnson, which guarded the mouth of the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, and Fort William and Mary, which greeted ships entering Portsmouth harbor in New Hampshire. When tested by American militants, these structures revealed themselves to be hollow shells, physical expressions of an empire that had lost legitimacy.



On December 14, 1774, the people of New Hampshire openly defied the British Empire. In Portsmouth a drumbeat summoned a curious band—local militiamen, armed strangers, committeemen from neighboring towns—for a march on the fort. No one made the slightest effort to maintain secrecy. The entire action took on a festive air. The initial group numbered about 200. Along the way another 150 armed men joined the insurgency. Captain John Cochran, the British officer in charge of the fort, watched the proceedings. He found himself in command of an inadequate force of five invalids, all of whom had been retired from regular military service. The Americans ordered Cochran to surrender. He refused and then foolishly allowed the pensioners to fire. Although they failed to hit a single attacker, the shots enraged the insurgents, who now swarmed over the walls of Fort William and Mary. They briefly took Cochran and his men prisoner, and seized almost a hundred barrels of powder, several small cannons, and an impressive supply of small arms. According to one report, they "triumphantly gave three huzzas and hauled down the King's colors."[44]

The desecration of the royal standard seemed to loyalists in other colonies more worrisome than did the theft of cannons and small arms. "No history," announced James Rivington's journal in New York City, "I believe will furnish us with an instance of a King's Fort being taken and his colors struck by his own subjects in a time of peace, and without any cause or provocation."[45] Some of the New Hampshire men carted the gunpowder to Exeter, a difficult winter trip of fifteen miles. Others returned to Portsmouth. A depressed and frightened Wentworth watched from his home as they celebrated in the streets a victory over their own government. All of this occurred more than six months before the battles of Lexington and Concord.

The governor's ordeal had only just begun. The people of New Hampshire still had unfinished business at Fort William and Mary. During the day following the first attack, December 15, men from throughout the colony arrived in Portsmouth. They represented scattered communities; they had no official commander. One witness reported, "This morning about 60 horsemen accoutred [fully equipped for military duty], came into town, and gave out that 700 more were on

their march to Portsmouth from Exeter, Greenland, Newmarket, &c. and would be in that town by eleven o'clock; their intentions, it is suspected, is to dismantle the Fort."[46] Within a few hours, the number of armed colonists had reached almost two thousand.

This is a truly impressive figure. It indicated that even at this early date in the imperial conflict, about one out of every six adult males in New Hampshire was prepared to halt normal farmwork, travel scores of miles over icy roads, and assault the king's property. Within the context of the experience of these men, the episode was not a lark or a harmless show of force. They marched to the fort a second time, stripping it of small arms and gunpowder that the first insurgents had overlooked. A few large cannons they could not transport to secure hiding places were simply thrown into the water. As had been the case with Fort Johnson in North Carolina, the Americans not only plundered the site, they also tried to erase it from the provincial memory. On the margins of empire, raw anger energized repeated waves of destruction. It was not until the seventeenth that two British warships arrived from Boston, but by then the damage had been done.

On December 20, 1774, Governor Wentworth drafted the most difficult letter of his career. He was obliged to inform Dartmouth of what had happened in New Hampshire. Wentworth opened the report with the kind of explanation that made a lot of sense to those who never understood the wellsprings of insurgency. Wentworth assured Dartmouth that on their own, the ordinary people could never have organized an attack on Fort William and Mary. "Factious leaders in Boston" and troublemakers in Portsmouth had manipulated the common folk, and "though it may appear strange that people of that stamp should succeed in such attempts, yet true it is that a person even below the middling class by setting up a cry about liberty will captivate and bear away with the populace, who carry all before them at present in this country." To compound the difficulties, the "better sort" had remained "inactive through fear of subjecting themselves to the resentment and rage of the ruling multitude."

The governor then chronicled the sack of the fort. In the process he undermined his own argument that a few incendiaries had duped the people. The numbers had been too large, the enthusiasm for political violence too widespread. "The country is so much inflamed," he confessed, ". . . that many magistrates and militia officers who ought to have given their aid and assistance in restraining and suppressing this uproar were active to promote and encourage it." Wentworth protested that he had not in fact lost control. After all, he concluded, "Upon the whole, my Lord, I can only say that I have done everything in my power to prevent the military stores from being taken away and to quell this tumult."[47]

The governor did not flee New Hampshire, at least not immediately. Like Martin, Wentworth attempted to mask his own loss of power by issuing fierce proclamations. No doubt General Gage's willingness to post a company of regular troops in a building at Fort William and Mary left undisturbed by the local insurgents restored the governor's hope, if not his courage. Wentworth had been forced to beg British authorities even for this modest military assistance. "The People do not support the Magistrates, who thence are unable to do their duty," he told Gage, who was having problems of his own in Massachusetts. "And if any Person should be taken up, He wou'd be either immediately rescued or the Jail would be broke open directly, as experience proves the Militia will not Act."[48]

In January 1775, despite a widespread belief that no one was listening, Wentworth called for the arrest of the colonists who had allegedly masterminded the December attack. These militants had, in fact, committed serious crimes. They had "in the most daring and rebellious Manner [conspired to] invest, attack, and forcibly enter into His Majesty's Castle William & Mary." These "several Bodies of Men" had not only overpowered the captain and his tiny garrison, they were also responsible for "many treasonable Insults, & Outrages . . . in open Hostility and direct Oppugnation [opposition] of His Majesty's Government."[49] He ordered the colony's attorney general, Samuel Livermore, to bring the guilty parties to justice.

To his credit, Livermore recognized that the political horse was long out of the barn. In a letter addressed to Wentworth that found its way to Dartmouth, the Crown's chief legal officer in New Hampshire explained, "I beg leave to offer to your Excellency my opinion that such a prosecution at this time would be altogether useless both for the impossibility of apprehending and securing the offenders and for the getting them convicted in case they could be brought to a trial." An

investigation into the Fort William and Mary incident had yielded not a single name. The entire population seemed to suffer from amnesia. Any attempt to press the issue, Livermore concluded, might backfire, for as the governor should know, "whenever civil power attempts things hazardous and fails in the execution it becomes a miserable example of its own weakness and lessens its usefulness in other matters."[50]

And finally, unlike Wentworth, Livermore had developed a more realistic appreciation of insurgency. The people did not regard the plundering of the fort as a treasonous breaking and entering. Quite to the contrary, they classified the sack of the castle as a "political" crime, an ideologically acceptable response to the abuse of imperial authority, and so Livermore wondered whether the governor might ask, "is there not the greatest reason to suppose the populace would totally interrupt the administration of justice rather than suffer their champions of liberty to be brought to a trial."[51]

From the British point of view, conditions in New Hampshire swiftly deteriorated. In May 1775 news arrived of the killings at Lexington and Concord. Like so many officials over the centuries who have watched helplessly as the people surged forward in the name of rights and liberty, Wentworth could only whine that without more troops he was unable to do the king's business. "It is difficult," he informed Dartmouth, "to describe how exceedingly this part of the country has been agitated and disturbed since the unhappy affair happened between the troops and country people near Boston." His report mentioned not a single leader. The people had taken over. "I am satisfied," he observed, "if the country people should come in with a determination to do mischief, as is daily threatened, it will not be in the power of the town to restrain them." New Hampshire was experiencing independence some fifteen months before the Declaration of Independence. "This is the dismal situation we are now reduced to," Wentworth concluded, "without any government power of remedy and without any place of strength or security in the province for any person to take shelter in, there being only one frigate near the entrance of the harbor to cover the fort."[52]

Wentworth hung on until August, but the threat of another round of violence persuaded him to take to the waters. On the twenty-third, he and the members of his family sailed from New Hampshire aboard the *Scarborough*. Soon after their departure, insurgents returned to demolish what was left of Fort William and Mary.[53]

[redacted]