Primary Sources: Ben Franklin Speaks About the Stamp Act in Britain, 1766

By Benjamin Franklin, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.02.17

Word Count 1,505

Editor’s Note: In 1765, the English Parliament passed The Stamp Act. It placed a tax on all important papers written and printed in the American colonies. The tax was to pay one-third of the costs of the English army. The colonists paid taxes approved by their own assemblies and also paid duty taxes on goods shipped into the country. But they were against this tax from England that was passed by a Parliament in which they had no votes. Benjamin Franklin was in London as representative of the colony. Members of the House of Commons in Parliament wanted to know about the colonists’ feelings toward the Stamp Act.

"There Is Not Gold Or Silver To Pay This Tax"

Parliament: What is your name, and place of your home?

Ben Franklin: Franklin, of Philadelphia.
Parliament: Do the Americans pay their own American taxes?
Franklin: Yes. Many are very heavy taxes.

Parliament: What taxes are paid in Pennsylvania?
Franklin: There are taxes on real estate property and on the number of adults in the family. There is a tax on how much money a business makes and a tax on all wine, rum and other spirits. Another tax of 10 pounds ($50) per head is on all Negro slaves that are brought into the country.

Parliament: Why do you have these taxes?
Franklin: It pays for the government and military of the country.

Parliament: Do all the people pay those taxes?
Franklin: No. Many live away from the cities in the frontier. They lost much to the enemy, so many are now poor and pay very little tax.

Parliament: Are the Colonies able to pay the Stamp Tax?
Franklin: In my opinion there is not gold and silver to pay this tax for one year.

"The Colonies Raised, Clothed And Paid Nearly 25,000 Men"

Parliament: Do you not know that the money from the stamps was to be used in America?
Franklin: I know it is the plan, but it will be spent in other Colonies, where the soldiers are.

Parliament: Since we protect America, don’t you think you should pay part of the costs?
Franklin: That is not really true. The Colonies raised, clothed and paid nearly 25,000 men during the French and Indian war. We spent many millions.

Parliament: Were you not paid for what you spent by Parliament?
Franklin: It was a very small part of what we spent. For example, Pennsylvania spent about $2.5 million, but was only repaid $300,000.

Parliament: Do you think the people of America would pay the stamp tax if it was lowered?
Franklin: No, never. Unless soldiers forced them.

"Sometimes Your Leaders Would Make Our Lives Difficult"

Parliament: How did America feel about England before the year 1763?
Franklin: They felt England was best. They were willing subjects of the British Crown and accepted the laws of Parliament. Our people were protected and controlled by the forts and armies, but they cost you nothing. We followed your English ways. People from
England were treated with respect and they were even looked up to. Sometimes your leaders would make our lives difficult, but we felt that Parliament would solve the problems. There was a time when a law which would have hurt our colonies would not be passed.

Parliament: And now?

Franklin: Oh, very much changed!

Parliament: What has caused this change?

Franklin: There are many causes. The Colonies have been stopped from bringing gold and silver into the country. They are not allowed to make paper money and now there are these new, heavy stamp taxes. At the same time, trials by juries have been taken away and our protests to Parliament have been ignored.

"It Takes Our Money And Punishes Us If We Do Not Pay It"

Parliament: Do you not think they would accept the Stamp Act if the tax were lower?

Franklin: No.

Parliament: Do Americans think that Parliament has no right to tax them?

Franklin: I know that the people feel that we should not be taxed by a Parliament where we were not members. But they pay duty taxes passed by an act of Parliament for products coming to America.

Parliament: What are the differences between the two taxes?

Franklin: I think the difference is very great. The Stamp Act says we cannot sell things or land, pay debts, marry or make a will unless we pay this tax. It takes our money and punishes us if we do not pay it. This internal tax, that we did not vote for, has been forced on the people. An external tax is a duty put on products coming into the country. That duty is added to the price of goods. If the people do not like it at that price, they refuse to buy it. For example, English cloth is brought into the country, but Americans can make their own cloth, so they don't need English cloth.

Parliament: Can they find enough wool in North America?

Franklin: They have stopped eating lamb, so now there is more wool. They do not need the great English spinning factories because the people will spin the wool themselves in their own houses.

"We Will No Longer Buy English Products"

Parliament: Can our army force them to follow the Stamp Act?

Franklin: No.

Parliament: Why not?
Franklin: Suppose an army is sent to America. They cannot force a man to take stamps.

Parliament: What else will happen?

Franklin: There will be a total loss of the respect and affection for England and we will no longer buy English products.

Parliament: How can they live without English products?

Franklin: Cloth, with a little work, they can make at home. They can do without other things, too, until they can learn to make them themselves. They have learned to change some of their ways and do without fashionable English goods.

Parliament: Do you think the Americans will buy their own poor goods when ours are better?

Franklin: Yes, they will pay more, but this will also save their pride.

"They Believe That Their Money Should Not Be Given Away"

Parliament: Then no law for taxes will be accepted?

Franklin: They believe that their money should not be given away unless they can have a vote in Parliament. It supports all their other rights, too.

Parliament: If the Stamp Act should end, would the Americans stop paying the taxes we now have?

Franklin: It is hard to answer because I don't know what people will do in the future.

Parliament: If the Parliament passes a smaller tax, would Americans pay it?

Franklin: If they could not vote for it in Parliament, they would not pay it. The assemblies in America have taken no actions to build a fort or raise an army against England. The mobs in the streets protesting England have no connection with our government assemblies and we punish the ringleaders of the riots. America has been greatly misunderstood here, in newspapers and speeches. For during the French and Indian war the Colonies raised, paid, and clothed near 25,000 men and went deeply into debt.

"We Are Englishmen"

Parliament: But suppose England should go to war in Europe. Would North America help?

Franklin: I do think they would because they think of themselves as a part of England's British Empire. Americans may be looked on here as foreigners, but we are Englishmen. In 1739, America sent 3,000 men to join your army in Colombia. It is in America, but as far away from North America as is Europe. I know the last war with the French began about the borders between Canada and Nova Scotia. It spread to Ohio where your rights to trade in Indian country were challenged. Both the French and Indians had been our friends and the people of America, being mostly farmers and planters, traded with the Indians. But the
English now fought the French and Indians to control the rivers, fur trade and farmland. This was really an English war, but the people of America joined them to bring it to a happy conclusion.

Parliament: If the Stamp Act should end and the Crown should ask the Colonies for a sum of money, would they pay it?
Franklin: I believe they would.

Parliament: Why do you think so?
Franklin: I can speak for the Colony I live in. They always think it their duty to help the Crown when they are able to help.

Parliament: Would they do this for England, even if it was for a war in some part of Europe, that did not affect them?
Franklin: Yes. They consider themselves as part of the whole.

Parliament: If the Stamp Act should be repealed, would the assemblies of America accepts the rights of Parliament to tax them?
Franklin: No, never. Unless armed soldiers force them.

Parliament: What used to make Americans proud?
Franklin: Wearing the fashions and using the products of England.

Parliament: What now makes them proud?
Franklin: To wear their old clothes over again till they can make new ones.
Quiz

1. Which section of the article highlights the idea that the colonies had their own system of taxes in place?
   (A) "There Is Not Gold Or Silver To Pay This Tax"
   (B) "The Colonies Raised, Clothed And Paid Nearly 25,000 Men"
   (C) "Sometimes Your Leaders Would Make Our Lives Difficult"
   (D) "We Will No Longer Buy English Products"

2. Which sentence from the section "They Believe That Their Money Should Not Be Given Away" explains what the colonists wanted in return for paying taxes to England?
   (A) They believe that their money should not be given away unless they can have a vote in Parliament.
   (B) The assemblies in America have taken no actions to build a fort or raise an army against England.
   (C) The mobs in the streets protesting England have no connection with our government assemblies and we punish the ringleaders of the riots.
   (D) For during the French and Indian war the Colonies raised, paid and clothed near 25,000 men and went deeply into debt.

3. Based on the section "It Takes Our Money And Punishes Us If We Do Not Pay It," why were colonists more opposed to the Stamp Tax than the duty taxes?
   (A) The colonists did not vote for the Stamp Tax, but they did vote for the external duty taxes that raised the prices of products coming into the country from England.
   (B) The colonists did not believe that they should have to pay the Stamp Tax on land they already lived on, but they agreed that it was fair to pay duty taxes on foreign products.
   (C) The colonists were forced to pay the Stamp Tax if they wished to do certain things, while they could avoid the duty taxes by not purchasing certain products.
   (D) The colonists disliked the Stamp Tax because it doubled their property taxes, while the duty taxes only had to be paid one time because the taxes were placed on individual products.
What effect did the French and Indian War have on the economy of the colonies?

(A) It supplemented the colonies’ economy because the soldiers spent money in the colonies.

(B) It damaged the colonies’ economy because England took over the rivers, fur trade and farmland.

(C) It strengthened the colonies’ economy because England repaid the costs of the war with interest.

(D) It strained the colonies’ economy because England did not repay the costs of the war in full.
Answer Key

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