

## Module 5: Stretching Limits in the Age of Reason

### Topic 4 Content: *The Crisis, Number One* by Thomas Paine

December 1776

THESE are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain, too cheap, we esteem too lightly:—"Tis dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to set a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as Freedom should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared, that she has a right (not only to TAX) but "to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER," and if being bound in that manner is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious, for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.

Whether the Independence of the Continent was declared too soon, or delayed too long, I will not now enter into as an argument; my own simple opinion in that had it been eight months earlier, it would have been much better. We did not make a proper use of last winter, neither could we while we were in a dependent state. However, the fault, if it were one, was all our own; we have none to blame but ourselves. But no great deal is lost yet; all that Howe has been doing for this month past is rather a ravage than a conquered which the spirit of the Jersies a year ago would have quickly repulsed, and which time and a little resolution with soon recover. . . .

I shall not now attempt to give all the particulars of our retreat [through New Jersey] to the Delaware [River], suffice it for the present to say, that both officers and men, though greatly harassed and fatigued, frequently without self, covering or provision, the inevitable consequences of a long retreat, bore it with a manly and martial spirit. All their wishes were one, which was, that the country would turn out and help them to drive the enemy back. Voltaire has remarked, that king William never appeared to full advantage but in difficulties and in action; the same remark may be made on General Washington for the character fits him. There is a natural fannels in some minds which cannot be unlocked by trifles, but which, when unlocked discovers a cabinet of fortitude, and I reckon it among those kind of public blessing, which we do not immediately see, that God hath blest him with uninterrupted health, and gives him a mind that can even flourish upon care.

I shall conclude this paper with some miscellaneous remarks on the slate of our affairs; and shall begin with asking the following question, Why is it that the enemy hath left the New England provinces, and made those middle once the fear of war? The answer is easy, New England is not infested with Tories, and we are. I have been under in raising the cry against these men, and used numberless arguments to shew them their danger. . . . The period is now arrived, in which either they or we must change our sentiments, or one or both must fall. And what is a Tory? Good GOD! what is he? I should not be afraid to go with a hundred Whigs against a thousand Tories, were they to attempt to get into arms. Every Tory is a coward, for a servile, slavish, self-interested fear is the foundation of Toryism; and a man under such influence, though he may be cruel, never can be brave.

But before the line of irrecoverable separation be drawn between us, let us reason the matter together: Your conduct is an invitation to the enemy, yet not one in a thousand of you has heart enough to join him.

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Howe is as much deceived by you as the American cause is injured by you. He expects you will all take up arms, and flock to his standard with muskets on your shoulders, Your opinions are of no use to him, unless you support him personally; for 'tis soldiers, and not Tories, that he wants. . . .

Quitting this class of men [i.e., Tories], I turn with the warm ardour of a friend to those who have nobly stood yet determined to stand the matter out; I call not upon a few, but upon all; not on THIS state or THAT truth but on EVERY state; up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel; better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, come forth to meet and to repulse it. Say not, that thousands are gone, turn out your tens of thousands; throw not the bur hen of the day upon Providence, but "Shew your faith by your works," that God may bless you. It matters not where you live, or what rank of life you hold, the evil or the blessing will reach you all. The far and the near, the home counties and the back, the rich and the poor, shall suffer or rejoice alike. The heart that feels not now, is dead: The blood of his children shall curse his cowardice, who shrinks back at a time when a little might have saved the whole, and made them happy. I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death. My own line of reasoning is to myself as strait and clear as a ray of light. Not all the treasures of the world, is far as I believe, could have induced me to support an offensive war, for I think it murder; But if a thief break into my house, burn and destroy my property, and kill or threaten to kill me, or those that are in it, and to "bind me in all cases whatsoever," to his absolute will, am I to suffer it? What signifies it to me, whether he who does it, is a king or a common man; my countryman or not my countryman; whether it is done by an individual villain, or an army of them? If we reason to the root of things we shall find no difference; neither can any just cause be assigned why we should punish in the one case, and pardon in the other. Let them call me rebel, and welcome, I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul by swearing allegiance to one, whose character is that of a stupid, stubborn, worthless, brutish man. I conceive likewise a horrid idea in receiving mercy from a being, who as the last day shall be shrieking to the rocks and mountains to cover him, and fleeing with terror from the orphan, the widow and the slain of America. . . .

I thank God that I fear not. I see no real cause for fear. I know one situation well, and can see the way out of it. While our army was collected, Howe dared not risk a battle, and it is not credit to him that he decamped from the White Plains, and waited a mean opportunity to ravage the defenceless Jerseys; but it is great credit to us, that, with an handful of men, we sustained an orderly retreat for near an hundred miles, brought off our ammunition, all our field pieces, the greatest part of our stores, and had four rivers to pass. None can say that our retreat was precipitate, for we were near three weeks in performing it, that the country might have time to come in. Twice we marched back to meet the enemy and remained out till dark. The sign of fear was not seen in our camp, and had not some of the cowardly and disaffected inhabitants spread false alarms through the country, the Jerseys had never been ravaged. Once more we are again collected and collecting; our new army at both ends of the continent recruiting fast, and we shall be able to open the next campaign with sixty thousand men; well armed & cloathed. This is our situation, and who will may know it. By perseverance and fortitude have the prospect of a glorious issue, by cowardice and the sad choice of a variety of evils—a ravaged country—a depopulated city—habituations

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without safety, and slavery without hope—our homes turned into barracks, and a future race to provide for whose fathers with all doubt of. Look on this picture, and weep over it and if there yet remains one thoughtless which who believes it not, let be if unlamented.