

Searching for the sources of unity among the rebels and the first bonds of nationhood: Thomas Pownall, a British governor critiques the colonies in 1768; the coming of the American Revolution.

In 1768, Thomas Pownall, a former royal governor of Massachusetts and South Carolina, longtime administrator in British colonial affairs and friend of Benjamin Franklin, offered the British government an appraisal of the state of unity then existing in the North American British colonies. As opposed to other British commentators who wrote with disdain about the colonists, Pownall was a well respected and astute observer of colonial affairs.

As you read this selection from Administration of the Colonies (1768) pay particular attention to:

- 1. The fragmented nature of the colonies; and*
- 2. Flaws in Pownall's argument that point to what the colonies shared.*

No one colony can by itself become [independent] – and no two, under the present state of their constitutions, have any possible communion of power or interest that can unite them in such a measure; they have not the means of forming such; they have neither legislative nor executive powers that are extended to more than one; the laws of one extend not to the other; they have no common magistracy, no common ground, in short, no one principle of association amongst them.¹ On the contrary, as I have said elsewhere, the different manner in which they were settled,² the different modes under which they live,³ the different forms of charters, grants, and frame of government which they possess,⁴ they various principles of repulsion that these create, the different interests which they actuate, the religious interests by which they are actuated, the rivalry and jealousies which arise from hence, and the impracticability, if not impossibility, of reconciling and accommodating these incomparable ideas and claims, will keep

¹ He states that the colonies have “no one principle of association amongst them.” Is this really true or is he overstating his argument that he builds before he makes this statement? If you believe he is overstating his argument, what might be the “principle of association among [the colonies]?” What principles about rights and governments might they have shared? As you think about the answer to this question reflect back on the selection earlier in the reader about the formation of representative governments in New England and Virginia. Also, think back to your American history about the causes that impelled the colonists to leave the Mother Country in the first place.

² Certainly it is true that the colonies were settled and peopled in a variety of ways. The Chesapeake Bay colonies were settled haphazardly and chaotically. The New England colonies were settled relatively systematically and orderly. For additional reading see, Morgan, American Freedom, American Slavery: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia and Morgan, The Puritan Dilemma.

³ The New England colonies were organized around towns that were laid out in an orderly fashion with churches and schools and town lots and fields around the town for subsistence farming and rearing animals. The Chesapeake colonies were organized around plantations. Settlers moved inland up rivers and creeks and claimed what land they could generally based upon whether it might prove profitable for growing cash crops.

⁴ On the eve of the Revolution Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island were charter colonies. The Crown had granted them charters and left them to control their executives. Pennsylvania and Delaware, and Maryland were proprietary colonies. They were nominally under British governance but most directly they were controlled by the families that had been entrusted with the rights to settle and establish them, the Penn and Calvert families. New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, New Jersey, and New Hampshire were royal colonies in which the governors were appointed by the Crown.

the several provinces and colonies perpetually independent of, and unconnected with, each other and dependent on the mother country.”⁵

⁵ Pownall accurately describes the myriad differences between the colonies but he pays no attention to what values they shared—particularly about governance—in 1768. What notions bound the colonies together in 1768 that Pownall fails to mention? What united the colonies together by 1775 in the desire to revolt? Pownall’s argument, for all its worth, is somehow askew. Read it carefully. His argument would be convincing if he were answering the question of whether the colonies would likely fail if they tried to form a united government in the *wake* of a revolution. However, he tries to argue that their differences alone would make a revolution unlikely and on that score he misses an important point. What is it? What role did British policy play in creating a revolutionary spirit in the colonies? Remember this was a dynamic situation in which the actions of both the rebels and the Mother Country shaped what the other did.

