

The Sons of Liberty and Mob Terror

✻ JEFFREY D. SIMON ✻

The day did not start out well for Andrew Oliver. The recently appointed Stamp Act Distributor for colonial Massachusetts awoke on the morning of August 14, 1765, to learn that his effigy was hanging on an elm tree in Boston by a road that everyone who traveled into town had to pass by. The initials “AO” were written on the right arm so there would be no mistake as to whom the effigy represented. On the left arm was an inscription that read, “What greater Joy did ever New England see Than a Stampman Hanging on a Tree.” A sign on his chest claimed that he had betrayed his country for the sake of money. There was also a sign that warned, “He that takes this down is an enemy to his country.”¹

Oliver’s job, which would not begin for a few more months when the Stamp Act took effect, was to sell the despised stamped paper to the colonists, which would be required for all types of printed material, ranging from licenses and contracts to newspapers and diplomas. Even playing cards and dice had to have the stamps embossed on them.

1. Richard Archer, *As If an Enemy’s Country: The British Occupation of Boston and the Origins of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24; Joshua Fogarty Beatty, *The Fatal Year: Slavery, Violence, and the Stamp Act of 1765* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation), Lyon G. Tyler Department of History, The College of William and Mary, May 2014, 67–68; Alfred F. Young, “Ebenezer Mackintosh: Boston’s Captain General of the Liberty Tree,” in *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of a Nation*, ed. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, Rap Raphael (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 15. There was also a boot hanging next to the effigy with a caricature of the devil peeking out from it. This was to symbolize Lord Bute (John Stuart), whom the colonists believed was responsible for the getting the British Parliament to pass the Stamp Act when he served as first lord of the treasury and prime minister. The sole of the boot was painted green to represent George Greenville, who succeeded Bute and who was actually the main architect of the Stamp Act. (Eighteenth century English grammar and spelling is used throughout this article when quoting original documents, speeches, signs, letters, etc.)

These direct, internal taxes imposed by England were naturally unpopular, and before the day was over, Oliver would feel the brunt of the colonists' anger.

The organizers of the protest managed to mix in some levity with the seriousness of the situation. As farmers coming into town stopped their wagons to view the spectacle, they had to have their goods "stamped" by the effigy.² But as the crowds grew larger at the elm tree, which later would become known as the "Liberty Tree," the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, who was Oliver's brother-in-law, became worried. He wanted to end this demonstration, and with the approval of Governor Francis Bernard, he directed the sheriff to order his men to take down the effigy and record the names of those who interfered so that arrest warrants could be issued. However, by the time the sheriff's officers arrived at the scene, the crowd had grown too large, with some estimates in the thousands. The sheriff told Hutchinson that his men could not take down the effigy without placing their own lives in danger.³

As it turned out, the leaders of the demonstration cut down the effigy themselves at dusk. Rather than ending the protest, though, it signaled the beginning of the violence. After placing the effigy on a bier, the crowd carried it in a mock funeral procession past the Town House where Bernard and other colonial officials were still meeting, trying to decide how to handle the demonstration. The crowd shouted three "huzzahs" triumphantly and chanted, "Liberty, Property, and No Stamps," as they passed by the building.⁴ They then proceeded to another building that was under construction and almost completed. Oliver owned the facility and had intended to rent it out for shops, but the mob believed it was going to be the office where the hated stamped paper would be distributed. It only took five minutes to demolish the building.⁵

It was then just a short distance to Oliver's home, where the man of the hour had not fled but instead decided to stand his ground to protect his dwelling. In a scene that would make some contemporary terrorist groups proud, the leaders of the mob "beheaded" the effigy while others in the crowd threw stones at Oliver's house, breaking the windows. The mob then moved a short distance away, where they pretended to

2. Young, "Ebenezer Mackintosh," 16.

3. Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 129.

4. Young, "Ebenezer Mackintosh," 16; Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 130. "Huzzah" was a cheer used in Colonial America to represent triumph or admiration.

5. Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, 130.

“stamp” what was left of the effigy. Their final goodbye to the effigy was to burn it in a bonfire that they made from the wood of Oliver’s torn-down facility.⁶

If Oliver thought this was the end of his evening of terror, he was mistaken. Friends persuaded him to hide with his family in a neighbor’s house in case the mob returned. A few trusted friends volunteered to remain inside the house to try to ward off any potential theft and/or destruction of the Oliver family’s possessions. The mob did, in fact, return and proceeded to demolish a garden fence and break down the barricaded doors and windows. After gaining entry to the house, they learned that Oliver was not there, causing some of them to shout that they would find the Stamp Distributor and kill him. This caused Oliver’s friends to flee for their own safety.⁷

The mob was preparing to search the neighbors’ homes when a “gentleman”⁸ told them that Oliver had gone to Castle William, the British fortification at Boston Harbor, which they had no hopes of penetrating. Believing the words of this unidentified man, the mob decided to take out their anger and frustration on the inside of Oliver’s home, destroying all they could find, including furniture, mirrors, and even a large part of the inner wooden covering of the walls. Some of Oliver’s possessions that they were careful not to break were his bottles of liquor, which they gladly helped themselves to.⁹

By around eleven o’clock that evening, just as the mob’s activities seemed to be subsiding, Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson showed up at the house with the sheriff. They tried to address the crowd and urged them to disperse, but this only incited them further. The leader of the mob shouted, “The Governor and the Sheriff!” making sure everybody knew who these two men trying to talk to them were. “To your Arms my boys,” he called out, which led to a barrage of stones being hurled at Hutchinson and the sheriff, forcing them to flee. A short time later, the crowd finally went home.¹⁰

The next day, Oliver, still reeling from the previous night’s terror and undoubtedly fearful of more to come, sent letters to several individuals he believed were associated with the mob, informing them that he had not, in fact, taken the position of Stamp Distributor. A

6. Ibid.; Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 50.

7. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, p. 130; Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 50-51.

8. A “gentleman” was “a man of good behavior, well bred, amiable, high-minded, who knows how to act in any society, in the company of any man.” See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 194.

9. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 130; Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 50-51.

10. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 131; Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 50-51.

crowd nevertheless formed again that evening at the town square and was ready to start a bonfire, signaling the beginning of potentially another night of violence. Oliver then sent another message, this time a proclamation, disowning any interest in accepting the Stamp Distributor job. This worked, as most of the crowd dispersed. Some, however, went to Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson's house, intending to have a "talk" with him. When they discovered he wasn't home, they marched around the city triumphantly, stopping at various points to read aloud Oliver's proclamation.¹¹

Oliver would face the wrath of the colonists again in just a few months. When it was learned that he had received the commission from England to be Stamp Distributor, despite his not wanting the job anymore, the leaders of the mob, who were now known as the "Sons of Liberty," demanded that he "resign" again, this time in person at the Liberty Tree at noon on December 17. Trying to avoid the humiliation, Oliver offered instead to resign at the courthouse. This alternative was promptly refused, and on a dreary, rainy day in Boston, 2,000 colonists assembled at the Liberty Tree to hear Oliver, who was perched at an upper window of a house next to the tree, announce his resignation. They gave him three "huzzahs" when he finished.¹²

The Sons of Liberty's treatment of Oliver alarmed Governor Bernard. He wrote that it was "designed as an Insult upon the Kings Authority; as a Terror to the Kings Officers; and to show them that they were nothing in the Eyes or the Hands of the People. I myself must expect to be called to the Tree of Liberty, if I stay much longer in this Town."¹³

Oliver would rebound from this embarrassing day and eventually become lieutenant governor of Massachusetts in 1770. However, private letters that he, along with Hutchinson, had sent to England in the late 1760s denouncing the challenges to authority that were occurring in Massachusetts and calling for tougher measures from England to assert its rule became public in 1773. This elicited the wrath of the Sons of Liberty, among others in the colony. In one letter, Oliver

11. Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 51.

12. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 143-45. Oliver said, "... I never will directly or indirectly, by myself or any under me, make use of the said Deputation or take any measures for enforcing the Stamp Act in America, which is so grievous to the People." See, "420/From Andrew Oliver," *Volume 81: The Papers of Francis Bernard, Volume 2: 1759-1763*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, www.colonial society.org/publications/3111/420-andrew-oliver, accessed November 8, 2019.

13. "421/To Henry Seymour Conway," *Volume 81: The Papers of Francis Bernard, Volume 2: 1759-1763*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts, www.colonial society.org/publications/3111/421-henry-seymour-conway, accessed November 8, 2019.

had sought ways “to take off the original incendiaries,” else “they will continue to instill their poison into the minds of the people.”¹⁴ The Massachusetts House of Representatives unsuccessfully petitioned England to have Oliver removed as lieutenant governor. A broken man in spirits and in poor health, he died on March 3, 1774.¹⁵

Even in death, Oliver could not escape the terror of the Sons of Liberty. They warned potential mourners to stay away from the funeral, or else they would pay the consequences. It was enough to scare away Oliver’s brother, Peter, who was the chief justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts, from attending. The mourners who did attend were subjected to taunts and shouts from the Sons of Liberty, who gave three final, derisive cheers as Oliver’s body was lowered into the ground.¹⁶ Peter Oliver would later write, “Never did Cannibals thirst stronger for human Blood than the Adherents to this Faction. Humanity seemed to be abhorrent to their Nature.”¹⁷

AWAKENING A NATION

The events of August 14, 1765, can be considered the beginning of the American Revolution. Although it would be another decade before actual military engagements commenced with the battles of Lexington and Concord, it was the terror attack on Andrew Oliver that sent shockwaves throughout the colonies and emboldened those who were challenging England’s authority in America. For months preceding the attack, there were speeches and newspaper articles denouncing the Stamp Act. Patrick Henry, the fiery orator from Virginia, was just twenty-two years old when he rose up in the Virginia House of Burgesses in May of 1765 to rail against the Stamp Act, offering resolutions that declared it was the sole right of the Virginia Assembly, not England, to tax Virginians. Henry also implied that those who passed the Stamp Act were destroying American freedom. Many newspapers throughout the colonies reprinted Henry’s resolutions.¹⁸

14. Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., *Patriot-Improvers: Biographical Sketches of Members of the American Philosophical Society, Volume One, 1743-1768* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1997), 517-18. Benjamin Franklin, who was the Massachusetts Assembly’s agent in London, had gained possession of the private letters and sent them to the House of Representatives in Boston, where they were published.

15. *Ibid.*, 518.

16. *Ibid.*, 519; James H. Stark, *The Loyalists of Massachusetts and The Other Side of the American Revolution* (Boston: W.B. Clarke Co., 1907), 168.

17. Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, editors, *Peter Oliver’s Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View*, (San Marino, California: The Henry E. Huntington Library, and Art Gallery, 1961), (Reissued 1967 by Stanford University Press), 112.

18. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 96, 98; Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 39, 43.

Despite the anti-Stamp Act sentiment growing in the colonies, there was still no hint of potential violence. The attack on Andrew Oliver came as a surprise to most people. It was, however, an example of “propaganda by deed,” long before that term would be coined by the anarchists in Russia and other countries in the late nineteenth century. The idea was that just talking or writing about the state of affairs or about an oppressive government was not enough to bring about change or a revolution; you needed to make your point through aggressive actions. While the organizers of the attack on Oliver were not thinking at that point about revolution, they did want to do something to ensure that the Stamp Act would never come into effect. Focusing their anger on a single Stamp Distributor in Massachusetts could send signals throughout the colonies that any designated Stamp Distributor who takes office will do so in peril to his own life.

The Stamp Act originated with its passage by the British Parliament on March 22, 1765. The legislation was the brainchild of George Grenville, first lord of the treasury and prime minister. England had incurred a large debt due to the French and Indian War (1756-1763, also known as the Seven Years’ War) and was also facing escalating costs in maintaining troops and administrative officials in America. A direct tax imposed on the colonies would be one way to lessen these economic and financial burdens.¹⁹

It was the August 14 attack, and Oliver’s announcement the next day that he would not take the position of Stamp Distributor, that resonated throughout the colonies. One night of violence demonstrated what months of writings and speeches against the Stamp Act could not—namely, the power of intimidation and terror. Designated Stamp Distributors in other colonies announced that they, too, would not take office. As historian Pauline Maier points out, “Without distributors the Stamp Act could not go into effect, so the coercions of stampmen seemed rational, even efficient.”²⁰

Samuel Adams, the fiery orator and writer who was a leading radical member of the colonial Massachusetts legislature and who would later be a signer of the Declaration of Independence, would praise those responsible for the attack on Oliver several years later in an article in the *Boston Gazette*:

We cannot surely have forgot the accursed designs of a most detestable set of men, to destroy the Liberties of America with one blow,

19. Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, 4, 7.

20. Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Norton, 1991), 54.

by the Stamp-Act; nor the noble and successful efforts we then made to divert the impending stroke of ruin aimed at ourselves and our posterity. The Sons of Liberty on the 14th of August 1765, a Day which ought to be for ever remembered in America, animated with a zeal for their country then upon the brink of destruction, and resolved, at once to save her, or like Samson, to perish in the ruins, exerted themselves with such distinguished vigor.²¹

Shortly after the violence in Massachusetts, groups formed in the other colonies to protest the Stamp Act. They were encouraged by the success of the Boston attacks, which were publicized by both word of mouth and by newspaper articles.²² Newspapers played a key role in the rise and influence of the Sons of Liberty. Several of their members were the printers of colonial newspapers, which meant they could control the news they wanted the colonists to read. The dangers that the Stamp Act posed to the colonists' basic rights was continually publicized, as were the exploits of the mobs that attacked the Stamp Distributors and all who supported the Stamp Act. "By printing highly colored news of the daring deeds of other colonists, the papers encouraged similar exploits by their own subscribers."²³

Using the model of mob terror that worked so well in Boston, it became common in other colonies to see Stamp Distributors and other officials hung in effigy, "funeral" processions for "liberty" carried out through the streets, the burning of effigies, and physical attacks on the homes of the officials. More than sixty incidents of mob terror occurred in twenty-five different locations following the Boston attacks.²⁴ In one instance, the Stamp Distributor for Connecticut was put into a coffin by the mob and lowered into a grave after he insisted on keeping his job. As dirt was shoveled onto the coffin, the terrified individual shouted out for his release and promptly resigned his position.²⁵

While many of the groups active in mob violence after the Boston attacks referred to themselves as "Sons of Liberty," there was never a central coordinating body to plot strategy and oversee activity in all of the colonies. The Sons of Liberty were "an informal network of autonomous societies, which flourished largely in the seaport cities in the separate colonies."²⁶ The officers and committee members came

21. Stoll, *Samuel Adams*, 44-45.

22. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 54.

23. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 197.

24. David C. Rapoport, "Before the Bombs There Were the Mobs: American Experiences with Terror," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 20, Number 2, April-June 2008, 171.

25. *Ibid.*, 172.

26. *Ibid.*, 174.

from the middle and upper classes of society.²⁷ While at first most of the Sons of Liberty branches throughout the colonies were comprised of merchants, lawyers, and skilled craftsmen, the groups eventually also encompassed working class people.²⁸ The lower classes comprised most of the mobs that the Sons of Liberty unleashed upon the Stamp Distributors and anybody else who supported the Stamp Act.²⁹

By mid-November, twelve of the colonies' Stamp Distributors had resigned. The distributor for Georgia did not arrive from England until January 1766, and within two weeks, he also resigned his position.³⁰ Still, threats and physical attacks continued on anyone associated with trying to enforce the Stamp Act. Parliament finally repealed the Stamp Act and King George III ratified the legislation on March 18, 1766.³¹

Nobody could have imagined at that time the significance that the successful rebellion against the Stamp Act would have a decade later when full-scale revolt against the British occurred. The Sons of Liberty never talked or wrote about revolution during this period. They always stressed that they were still loyal to the king and were only protesting the actions of the British Parliament in passing the Stamp Act.³² And even in that regard, the protests were usually limited to the imposition of direct, internal taxes on the colonies by a legislative body for which they had no representation.

But the seeds for revolution had been planted. Everything the Sons of Liberty did to unite the colonies to take action against the British, including the calculated use of terror, would come in handy years later as the revolution took shape. "The Sons of Liberty were keenly aware that terror had helped nullify the Stamp Act, and, as long as there were pressing issues surrounding British authority, they would continue to foster the spirit of resistance whenever and wherever they could."³³ Peter Oliver, Andrew's brother, would later write that the success of mob terror in leading to the repeal of the Stamp Act emboldened the colonists "to strike hard against every Man who wished well to the Authority of the british Government, & who dared to avow its Supremacy."³⁴

27. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 86.

28. Steven L. Danver, ed., *Revolts, Protests, Demonstrations, and Rebellions in American History: An Encyclopedia, Volume 1* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 202.

29. Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 194.

30. Standiford, *Desperate Sons*, p. 84; Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 163.

31. Stoll, *Samuel Adams*, 53.

32. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 104.

33. Robert Kumamoto, *The Historical Origins of Terrorism in America: 1644-1880*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 109-10.

34. Adair and Schutz, *Peter Oliver's Origin & Progress*, 57.

CONCLUSION

The terror of the Sons of Liberty was combined with its masterful exploitation of the media. With members of the group controlling several newspapers, the Sons had free reign to influence public opinion. They were also able to, despite their autonomous and decentralized organizational structure, keep members and sympathizers in each of the colonies aware of recent developments and propose the best strategies to use to protect their rights and liberties.

That violence was the key part of those strategies cannot be denied. From its beginnings with the attack on Andrew Oliver in 1765 to the spectacular sabotage of ships during the Boston Tea Party in 1773, the Sons of Liberty proved that the calculated use of terror can indeed change the course of history. Without the Sons of Liberty, there would likely have never been an American Revolution, and without terror, the Sons of Liberty would not have been able to accomplish their astonishing feat of awakening a nation to its potential to win a long struggle for freedom from a much stronger, and more powerful, adversary.