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Forum

“The narrow Path between British & American Passions”:

The Dickinson-Barclay Documents and the Last Attempts to Prevent American Independence

Contributions by Jane E. Calvert, Jonathan Gienapp, Jack N. Rakove,

David Como, and William B. Ewald

This Forum introduces previously unknown documents written by John Dickinson, the leading American revolutionary statesman, in mid-1775 and explores their historical significance. The documents reveal one of the last attempts to prevent American independence and the secret diplomatic back channels used to carry it out. There are four documents: two lengthy letters from Dickinson to David Barclay Jr., a British merchant, and two nearly identical drafts of a legislative act for Parliament to adopt to resolve the imperial crisis and restore harmony in the empire. An introductory essay by Jane E. Calvert and Jonathan Gienapp places these documents in their original context. Five subsequent essays interpret their deeper significance: Calvert shows how Dickinson’s letters undermine John Adams’s later portrayal of the Second Continental Congress; Gienapp traces continuities between Dickinson’s struggle to preserve the British Empire and similar attempts to hold together the new American federal union; David Como situates Dickinson’s peace bid in the context of contemporary British politics and previous failed reconciliation attempts; William B. Ewald explores how Dickinson used ambiguous wording and punctuation in his draft act to navigate the irreconcilable principles of the two sides; finally, Jack N. Rakove argues that Dickinson occupied an increasingly idiosyncratic political position, but his bid for peace ultimately failed because Britain’s leaders would not rethink their inflexible imperial policy.