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## The Political Thought of John Dickinson

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# Dickinson Law Review

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## THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF JOHN DICKINSON\*

On June 2, 1787, during the first week of the Federal Convention at Philadelphia, a delegate predicted that there would be a conflict between the large States and the small States over the principle of representation in the National Legislature, that it would be settled by mutual concession, and that in one branch representation would be according to population, while in the other each State would retain an equal voice.<sup>1</sup> There has never been a more striking example of political prescience. Hardly a week later the conflict was joined on the predicted issue, and after two months of the hottest debate during which at times the hope of a united nation hung by the slenderest thread, a solution was found ultimately on precisely the lines indicated and on those lines was reared the solid structure of our Federal Union. The delegate, whose cool foresight and constructive statesmanship suggested the solution so far in advance, was John Dickinson, whose name is perpetuated by this college, who served as the first President of its Board of Trustees, and whose life is more intimately interwoven than that of any other contemporary statesman with each constructive step in the line of development that led finally to the adoption of our Federal Constitution. He was the author of practically all the important state papers in which the Continental Congress presented America's case against Great Britain before the outbreak of the Revolution.

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\*An address by Hon. John Dickinson, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, at the Commencement Exercises of Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on Monday, June 11, 1934.

A.B., Johns Hopkins, 1913; A.M., Princeton, 1915; Ph.D., Princeton, 1919; LL.B., Harvard, 1921; LL.D., Tusculum College, Greeneville, Tenn., 1929; LL.D., Dickinson College, 1934; lecturer on history at Amherst College, 1919; tutor in government and economics, Harvard, 1919-21; assistant professor of politics, Princeton, 1927-29; professor of law at University of Pennsylvania, 1929-33; lecturer on government, Harvard and Radcliff College, 1924-27; visiting professor university of Southern California, summer 1926, Bryn Mawr College, 1927-28, Brookings Graduate School of Economics and Political Science, 1928-29; author and contributor to various periodicals.

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<sup>1</sup>James Madison's Notes on the Debates in the Federal Convention, under date of June 2, 1787. The edition I have used is that edited by Gaillard Hunt and James Brown Scott for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and published in New York by the Oxford University Press, 1920.

He was the draftsman of the Articles of Confederation, our first nation-wide framework of government, which for eight years held the jealous and discordant states together until they were ripe for more perfect union. He was the President of the Annapolis Convention which met to consider the weakness of the Articles and which issued the call for the Federal Convention. Finally, in the Federal Convention it was his statesmanship which suggested the solution for the gravest question that kept the States apart.

In times as stirring as these today, when the Nation is confronting problems which in many respects are wholly new and which, whether new or old, are at all events on a larger and more complex scale than any that we have confronted before, it might seem that history has little to say to us, and that it is futile to look backward when there is so much that beckons toward the future and so much around us in the present which calls for study and analysis. It is true we cannot hope to find in the locker of the past any blueprint which will provide exact solutions of our present problems. If we make such demands on history, of course history will disappoint us. But history is an unbroken stream; we are here today because of where we were yesterday, and the past no less than the present has something to contribute to the morrow. Let me suggest a single illustration.

Many of us today have a sense of uncertainty, a sense of doubt and helplessness in the presence of new and unknown problems, which is unlike anything that we have felt before in our times, and which calls for a degree of courage, faith, and coolness that we are apt to think unprecedented. It is true that our generation has passed through a war in which we participated on a scale of some magnitude and men still living remember periods of serious economic depression. But never within the memory of living men have the issues we are called upon to face reached so deep towards the foundations of our social order and way of life as they do today. One thing that history can do is to assure us that the responsibility of our generation is not unique and that, whatever may have been true of our fathers and grandfathers, there have been other generations for which the present was as insecure, the future as dark, and the necessity for making grave decisions with coolness and courage just as great, and perhaps even greater, than is the case today.

In our own history, of no period is this more true than of the generation which passed through the Revolution. Step by step the men of that generation witnessed a train of events unfolding before their eyes which not merely altered the political, economic and social relations of this country to the whole world, with results that no one could foretell, but required also the complete refashioning of our governmental system, local and continental, under the spur of immediate necessity, and in the midst of a war whose issue hung from day to day in the balance. And not only were they thus confronted with the gravest uncertainties of war and politics, but at the same time they witnessed the collapse of their economic system, the extinction of foreign trade, the paralysis of production and the complete destruction of domestic credit. To be sure, their economic system was simpler than ours, and therefore perhaps

easier to restore, but they had no clearer lights to guide them than we have, and their necessity was as urgent.

There is something, therefore, that the history of those days has to say to us, even if it cannot supply the details of legislative reform or of economic reconstruction. What it can tell us is of the spirit and attitude in which to face an insecure present and an uncertain future, of the qualities of mind and character which discharge great responsibilities constructively, and of the fundamental principles of human relations and social order which underlie all solutions of social and human problems from age to age. Indeed, these things are often easier to see at a distance and against the clean-cut outlines of the past than in the confused interactions and circumstances of the present. For this reason it seems to me worth while in the face of our current need for constructive statesmanship to take this opportunity to review briefly the fundamental wisdom and insight, the basic principles, which through times more difficult than our own, guided to successful service one of our great Revolutionary statesmen.

I have chosen to speak to you today of John Dickinson, not merely because of his association with this College, but also because among our statesmen he was perhaps the most philosophical in the broadest sense, certainly the least specialized in the immediate particular controversial ideas of his own time, and the most concerned to probe down to fundamentals which are valid yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Though in some respects the most learned, he was the least pedantic.<sup>2</sup> Master of the history, philosophy, and economics of his time, he dealt with them not as separate disciplines, nor as ends in themselves, but merely as related channels through which to aim at central truth.

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<sup>2</sup>In contrast to the writings of many of our other statesmen, Dickinson's rest on a very broad range of reading, not merely confined to books on law and political science, but covering history, economics and classical literature as well. A cursory inspection of the footnotes of his works discloses, besides references to the statutes and law reports and many references to the Bible, citations to the following authors or works: Hermer, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Plato's *Republic*, Polybius, Arrian, Plutarch's *Lives*, Diodorus Siculus, Cicero, Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Livy, Lucan, Seneca, Tacitus' *Annals*, Statius, Vitruvius, Erasmus' *Complaint of Peace*, Bossuet, Tillotson, Swift, Rowe, Beattie, Shuckford's *Connection of Sacred and Profane History*, Potter's *Archaeologica Graeca*, Mitford's *History of Greece*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Commines' *Memoirs*, Robertson's *History of Charles V*, Strada's *de bello Belgico*, Henry's *History of Britain*, Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, The *Parliamentary History*, Sir William Temple's *Introduction to the History of England and Observations on the United Provinces*, Burnet's *History of his Own Times*, Tindal's *Continuation of Rapin's History of England*, Hume's *History of England*, the *Modern Universal History*, Calonne's *Political State of Europe*, The *Annual Register*, Cox's *Travels*, Keyser's *Switzerland*, Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*, Francis Bacon's *Sermones Fideles*, Grotius, Puffendorf, Locke, Hoadley on *Civil Government*, Montesquieu, Burlamaqui, Beccaria, Frederic the Great, Thomas Paine, Dr. Price, Sir Isaac Newton, Coke's *Institutes*, Blackstone's *Commentaries*, Beawes' *Lex Mercatoria*, Sir Josiah Child's *Discourse on Trade*, Davenant's *Plantation Trade*, Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

Commentators might wish to describe his essential philosophy as one of moderation. But it was not the ordinary kind of moderation which avoids the taking of positions or the making of courageous decisions. It was moderation simply in the sense of looking at all sides of a question and weighing fairly and coolly the merits of all before coming to conclusions. It is this philosophy and some of these conclusions, and the statesmanlike decisions to which they led, that I wish to outline briefly here.

Dickinson expresses the essential quality of his approach to public questions in a passage in the "Farmer's Letters,"<sup>3</sup> where he says:

"We cannot act with too much caution in our disputes. Anger produces anger; and differences, that might be accommodated by kind and respectful behaviour, may, by imprudence, be enlarged to an incurable rage. In quarrels between countries, as well as in those between individuals, when they have risen to a certain height, the first cause of dissension is no longer remembered, the minds of the parties being wholly engaged in recollecting and resenting the mutual expressions of their dislike. When feuds have reached that fatal point, all considerations of reason and equity vanish; and a blind fury governs, or rather confounds all things."<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, he counsels toward governmental acts which seem oppressive or unwise an attitude of orderly constitutional opposition, rather than disobedience or resistance:

"Every government" he says, "at some time or other falls into wrong measures. This may proceed from mistake or passion. But every such measure does not dissolve the obligation between the governors and the governed. . . . The mistake may be corrected; the passion may subside. It is the duty of the governed to endeavor to rectify the mistake, and to appease the passion. They have not at first any other right, than to represent their grievances, and pray for redress. . . . If their applications are disregarded, then that kind of opposition becomes justifiable, which can be made without breaking the laws, or disturbing the public peace."<sup>5</sup>

Dickinson was under no illusions as to the nature and source of much political power. He was as realistic as Machiavelli in recognizing that political power often originates in deception and oppression. Thus he says:

<sup>3</sup>All references below to Dickinson's writings will be to the edition published under his own supervision at Wilmington, Delaware, by Bonsal & Niles in 1801 in two volumes under the title of "The Political Writings of John Dickinson, Esquire." Unless otherwise specified, references in the notes will be to this work.

<sup>4</sup>Vol. I, pp. 171-2 (Letters from a Farmer, Letter No. III).

<sup>5</sup>Vol. I, p. 169 (Letters from a Farmer, Letter No. III).

"The cunning, the hard-hearted, laden with lusts, availed themselves of the means afforded to them by the innocent and the imprudent. They affected to be benefactors, that they might be masters. . . . They were too successful. They fastened chains upon the very hands that were held up to heaven in supplication for blessings upon their heads. . . . The interests of the many, pleasing hecatombs in the religion of governors, have been sacrificed to the passions of the few. Tyranny and slavery, intemperance and misery, have raged, and are now raging, over the globe."<sup>6</sup>

"The great potentates of Europe have lately discovered such ample advantages in their attention 'to public order and good government'—to borrow their favourite expressions—by joining together to rob and subjugate their weaker neighbours, adding their territories one after another to their own, that a few years ago it did not seem likely, that any limits could be put to the monstrous masses of despotic power which they were continually rolling up."<sup>7</sup>

"The law of nations, as it is called, partakes too largely of articles imposed by the stronger on the weaker powers."<sup>8</sup>

"The balance of power so much talked of, is generally a compact between the oppressors of mankind, settling among themselves, the quantity of mischief which each may commit, without being disturbed by the rest: and I appeal to history for the truth of which I now say."<sup>9</sup>

But this realistic sense of the origin and use of power does not lead him to the error of regarding force as the basis of cohesive principle of society. That principle he finds in the social affections:

"Humility and benevolence must take the place of pride and selfishness. Reason will then discover to us that we cannot be true to ourselves, without being true to others—that to love not ourselves only, but our neighbors also is to love ourselves in the best manner—that to give is to gain—and that we never consult our own happiness more effectually than when we endeavor to communicate happiness as much as we can to our fellow creatures."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Vol. II, p. 187 (The Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution), Letter No. IV.)

<sup>7</sup>Vol. II, pp. 264-5 (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution), Letter No. XIV).

<sup>8</sup>Vol. I, p. 340 (Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great Britain over the Colonies).

<sup>9</sup>Vol. II, p. 188 (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. IV).

<sup>10</sup>Vol. II, pp. 90-1 (Letters of Fabius (1st Series, on the Adoption of the Constitution) Letter No. III). Dickinson applies this principle in his condemnation of the attitude of the other nations of Europe to the Revolution in France and predicted, as the event proved, that their refusal to make a moderate peace would drive France into a career of military conquest. (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. III, Writings Vol. II, p. 179).

Accordingly, he agrees with Burke that a proper attitude towards the state arises out of a proper attitude towards the family :

"Private affections may generate universal benevolence, and universal benevolence may advance the happiness derived from private affections; but, certainly is never in opposition to them. It is a kindred affection of the great family of love. . . ."

"Plato, esteemed one of the wisest of the heathen philosophers, on the contrary, in order to produce general affections, deemed it necessary utterly to extinguish private affections. His project of bringing up children at the public expense, and never permitting them to know their nearest relations, would have been an education of enemies to the human race."<sup>11</sup>

But with this full recognition of moderation as the basic principle of political conduct, and of good-will and due regard for the rights of others as the foundation of social order, Dickinson nevertheless insists, like a true realist, that violence on one side must inevitably produce violence on the other and that where it does so, we are not entitled to visit the resulting violence with moral reprobation. On this ground, in spite of his supposed conservatism, he, in his old age, justified, while deploring, the excesses of the French Revolution, which he regarded as largely due to the ill-timed and selfish efforts of the other monarchs of Europe to interfere in the affairs of France. Speaking of the execution of King Louis, he says :

"The tempest raged with unceasing fury, and in the midst of its direful glares, a sacrifice, rather to the policy of his pretended friends, than to the hatred of France, fell—one of the best of kings, probably of men—the benevolent Louis the XVI whose virtues I shall value, whose memory I shall revere, whose fate I shall deplore, as long as any sense of esteem, respect, and compassion, embalmed by gratitude, shall rest within my heart."<sup>12</sup>

Dickinson's unwillingness to condemn the French Revolution did not in any sense detract from his lifelong admiration of the British Constitution, which, to the horror of many of his colleagues in the Federal Convention, he pronounced to be the best that the world had ever seen, and whose goodness he ascribed largely to the spirit of moderation and public service which had always actuated the British aristocracy. Speaking in defense of the French Revolution, when he comes to refer to the contest between France and England, he says :

"What real American can desire the desolation of that land, the

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<sup>11</sup>Vol. II, p. 251 (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. XIII).

<sup>12</sup>Vol. II, p. 170 (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. I).

birthplace of heroes, patriots, sages, and saints—from which we have derived the blood that circulates in our arteries and veins—from which we have received the very current of our thoughts—a land, whose meads, hills, and streams point out the spots, where her gallant sons met death, face to face, for . . . liberty; a land, whose kindhearted nobles, in every charter wrenched in attestation of their freedom from the grip of tyranny, inserted clauses in favor of the commons. . . . The history of mankind, as far as I am acquainted with it, does not afford an instance, where the stream has flowed so clear, for such a length of time. Power or faction has not been able to pollute it. The poor and the rich, the labourer and the nobleman, have equal rights to the wholesome draughts."<sup>13</sup>

But on the other hand, with all this regard for the merits of a public-spirited and generous aristocracy, he took in the Federal Convention a strong stand against property qualifications for office, saying that he doubted :

"the policy of interweaving with a republican Constitution a veneration for wealth. It seemed improper that any man of merit should be subjected to disabilities in a republic, where merit was understood to form the great title to public trusts, honors, and rewards."<sup>14</sup>

Dickinson's admiration for the British Constitution was largely due to his recognition that constitutions in any proper and effective sense are not mere legal texts seeking formally to check governmental power by the restrictive covenants of a deed, but that they consist ultimately in the habits and spirit of the people :

"Trial by jury" he says, "and the dependence of taxation upon representation, those corner stones of liberty, were not obtained by a bill of rights or any other records, and have not been and cannot be preserved by them. They and all other rights must be preserved, by soundness of sense and honesty of heart. Compared with these, what are a bill of rights or any characters drawn upon paper or parchment, those frail remembrancers?"<sup>15</sup>

Just because he thus recognizes that a constitution must be so much more than a mere legal instrument, he also recognizes the danger, which is so clear to us today, of seeking in a spirit of legality to impose upon government restrictions which may prove to be incompatible with necessary action in the

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<sup>13</sup>Vol. II pp. 213-5 (*Letters of Fabius* (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. VIII).

<sup>14</sup>Madison's Notes on the Debates in the Federal Convention, Session of July 26, 1787, ed. Hunt & Scott (New York 1920) p. 328.

<sup>15</sup>Vol. II, pp. 110-11 (*Letters of Fabius* (1st Series, on the Adoption of the Constitution) Letter No. IV).

public interest. I know of no more statesmanlike warning than that contained in the following words of his :

"To their own vigor and attention, therefore, is the people of England under Providence indebted for the blessing they enjoy. . . . They know, that there are powers that cannot be expressly limited, without injury to themselves; and their magnanimity scorns any fear of such powers. . . . They ask not for compacts, of which the national welfare, and, in some cases, its existence, may demand violations. They despise such dangerous provisions against danger."<sup>16</sup>

And just as he recognizes the impracticability of seeking to restrain abuse of power by imposing restrictions on the necessary use of power, so too he recognized and insisted that no constitution can be fixed once for all, but that every constitution must undergo continual changes in the light of experience. Here too, his words have a timely significance for us today :

"As to alterations of the constitution" he says, "a little experience will cast more light upon the subject than a multitude of debates."

"If all the wise men of ancient and modern times, all the Solons, Lycurguses, Penns, and Lockes, that ever lived, could be assembled together for deliberation on the subject, they could not form a constitution or system of government that would not require future alterations. . . . The British government, which some persons so much celebrate, is a collection of innovations. . . . There is a continual flow in human affairs. The ceaseless waves have carried man on to delightful discoveries, greatly meliorating his condition. There are more discoveries yet to be made, and perhaps more favorable to his condition. While other sciences are advancing, why should we supinely or vainly suppose, that we in the Argo lately constructed by us, have already reached the 'ultima thule,' the farthest point in the navigation of policy?"

"Every improvement in our Constitution that can be discovered, should be immediately adopted as a part of it."<sup>17</sup>

Just as Dickinson saw the compatibility between constitutional government on the one hand and the necessary flexibility of constitutional power on the other, so, although a representative of a small state and a firm believer in the advantage of preserving state rights and state powers, he nevertheless believed that the scope of the powers of the Federal Government should

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<sup>16</sup>Vol. II, pp. 161-2 (Letters of Fabius (1st Series, on the Adoption of the Constitution) Letter No. IX).

<sup>17</sup>Vol. II, pp. 153-4 (Letters of Fabius (1st Series, on the Adoption of the Constitution) Letter No. VIII). Elsewhere Dickinson explains his insistence on the right of moderate and orderly change by pointing out that "oppressions and dissatisfactions being permitted to accumulate, if ever the governed throw off the load, they will do more. A people does not reform with moderation". Vol. I, p. 257 (Letters from a Farmer, Letter No. XI).

always be broad enough to cover the whole field of national interests. Here again, his insight into governmental first principles is worth more to us as a guide today than a library of legal distinctions. He says:

"When persons speak of a confederation, do they, or do they not acknowledge, that the whole is interested in the safety of every part—in the agreement of parts—in the relation of the parts to one another and to the whole? If they do, then, the authority of the whole must be coextensive with its interests—and, if it is the will of the whole, must and ought in such cases to govern; or else the whole would have interests without authority to manage them—a position which prejudice itself cannot digest. . . . As to the idea, that the superintending sovereign will must of consequence destroy the subordinate sovereignties of the several states, it is begging the question by inferring that a manifest and great usefulness must necessarily end in abuse."<sup>18</sup>

Dickinson's economic insight is as penetrating as his political insight and his observations in the field of economics are the more remarkable in that they anticipate by several years the publication of "The Wealth of Nations". To him, as to Adam Smith, there is no sharp line between politics and economics. As in politics he starts from a recognition that social order rests on due regard for one another's rights, so in his economic thinking he commences with the recognition of the difference between public interest on the one hand and the private interest that springs from special privilege on the other:

"There is a vast difference to be made in calculating the gains of any particular branch of business to the public, and to individuals. The advantage to the last may be small, and yet great to the first, or the reverse."<sup>19</sup>

As an example of the private interest which injures the public, he cites the trade restrictions which fettered the international commerce of Europe in the Eighteenth Century:

"Europe" he says, "has been for about two centuries deeply injured by a selfish, monopolizing jealousy of commerce. The rapacity, the meanness and the folly, that betrayed themselves in English merchants and manufacturers, before our revolutionary war, and which with such facility acquired the national sanction of statutes, were samples of the envy and baseness that, seeking to gain wealth by impoverishing innocence and industry, have distracted the public repose, and caused

<sup>18</sup>Vol. II, p. 97 (Letters of Fabius (1st Series, on the Adoption of the Constitution) Letter No. III). This test of national vs. local interest remains perhaps the most fruitful guide through the intricacies of inter-state and intra-state power which so perplex us today.

<sup>19</sup>Vol. I, pp. 58-9 (The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered).

streams of blood to stain every quarter of the globe."<sup>20</sup>

Again, he anticipated Smith in the field of taxation by insisting that taxes, to be fair and just, should be measured by ability to pay :

"Taxes in every free state have been" he says, "and ought to be, as exactly proportioned as is possible to the abilities of those who are to pay them. They cannot otherwise be just. Even a hottentot would comprehend the unreasonableness of making a poor man pay as much for 'defending' the property of a rich man, as the rich man pays himself."<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, he expressed strong opposition to sales and other indirect taxes which are readily concealed in the price of a commodity and bear with equal heaviness upon rich and poor.

"This mode of taxation" he says, "is the mode suited to arbitrary and oppressive governments."<sup>22</sup>

Another economic topic upon which Dickinson found occasion to express himself was the perennial question of money and currency. He took his stand upon the elementary truth, so often disregarded, that it is not merely the quantity of money in a nation that makes it wealthy, but the bringing of money into the country by the general industry of its inhabitants.<sup>23</sup> He therefore expresses opposition on general principles to emissions of paper currency, but, determined as always not to follow theory in the face of facts, he admitted the utility of paper emissions under certain circumstances and under proper safeguards. Thus he defends, on the ground of the constant drainage of gold and silver to England, the Pennsylvania colonial bills secured upon real property and coupled with a provision for amortization. "These bills" he says, "represent money in the same manner that money represents other things. As long, therefore, as the quantity is proportioned to the uses, these emissions have the same effects that the gradual introduction of additional sums would have."<sup>24</sup>

The outstanding impression left by this brief review of Dickinson's thought is his freedom from subservience to contemporary dogmas and ideapatterns, his refusal to follow abstract half-truths to their logical conclusion, and his habit of always giving due weight to the logically opposing principles lying at the heart of every difficult problem. Thus it is impossible to ticket or

<sup>20</sup>Vol. II, p. 256 (Letters of Fabius (2nd Series, on the French Revolution) Letter No. XIII).

<sup>21</sup>Vol. I, p. 251 (Letters from a Farmer, Letter No. X).

<sup>22</sup>Vol. I, p. 207 (Letters from a Farmer, Letter No. VII).

<sup>23</sup>Vol. I, p. 83 (The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered).

<sup>24</sup>Vol. I, p. 57 (The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered).

pigeon-hole him as belonging to any political school or sect. If we undertake to think of him as a conservative, we are at once brought up against the fact that he regarded most existing governments as founded upon tyranny and oppression, that he defended the French Revolution, that he opposed a property qualification for voters, and that he believed in the constant alteration and improvement of political constitutions. On the other hand, if we are tempted to think of him as a liberal, we are confronted with his belief in a limited monarchy as the best form of government, his admiration for the institution of the British nobility, his distrust of paper constitutions and his opposition to resistance to constituted authority. If we seek to fit him into the category of a defender of states' rights, we find that he advocates the extension of national power to the full scope and measure of national interests. On the other hand, if we try to classify him as a nationalist, we discover that he regards the preservation of the states as the basis of our constitutional system. Doctrinaire theorists, no doubt, cannot understand such a man. They regard him as inconsistent because consistency in their view means devotion to abstractions. But life, not abstractions, is the province of the statesman, and life consists, as Dickinson illustrated, in combining and harmonizing the conflicting forces which conflicting abstractions represent. It is a juster criticism that the breadth of vision which recognizes opposing truths, too frequently leads to indecision, paralysis of will and vacillation of purpose. So it often does, in men of smaller calibre, but when this danger is escaped, it produces a far higher, because a far wiser, kind of statesmanship than any narrow pursuit of some petty preconceived reform. So far did Dickinson escape it that instead of pursuing a timid time-serving course, he was the most courageously independent statesman of his time.<sup>25</sup> This courage he displayed on four great occasions.

The first was on his earliest appearance in public life at the age of 32. The Province of Pennsylvania had become thoroughly discontented with the proprietary government of the Penn family and a proposal was advanced, supported by the great authority of Franklin, to place the Province under direct royal government. With only four other members of the Assembly to support him, Dickinson, a comparatively unknown young man, attacked the

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<sup>25</sup>"No one ever doubted his position or was misled as to his opinions. He was perfectly frank and sincere, even when the avowal of his views might have involved him in great personal danger; and it is to the possession of these qualities of openness and sincerity, as much as to his unquestioned ability, that he owed many of the public positions which he filled". (*The Life and Times of John Dickinson*, by Charles J. Stille, Philadelphia 1891, p. 239). This openness and sincerity had the effect of winning for him the personal admiration and affection even of opponents. "Nothing is more interesting in the career of Dickinson than the instances which are constantly brought before us of what has been sometimes rather inappropriately called his magnetic power. Not only does he seem to have had many warm friends, and of course like all men of strong character many bitter enemies, but he also had the power of attaching to himself in a very remarkable degree many of those from whom he differed very widely in political opinion". (*Ibid.*, pp. 214-5).

overwhelming sentiment of the Province on the ground that the question was not whether the existing government was a bad one, for of that there could be no doubt, but whether direct royal government would improve the condition of the inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> He maintained that it would not, because the very worst acts of the Penn family had been those in which they had been most strongly supported by the Crown. Dickinson was overwhelmingly defeated but the soundness of his stand was proved by the fact that the petition was never presented to the King.<sup>27</sup>

The second great illustration of his political courage was his refusal to sign the Declaration of Independence at a time when such refusal meant the apparent end of his political career and subjected him to the basest misinterpretation of motives. For twelve years he had stood at the head of those who championed America's rights against Great Britain. He had written the "Declaration on Taking up Arms" in whose ringing phrases the Continental Congress had justified the resort to force as a last recourse for the protection of their rights. He believed, however, that the success of all that he had worked for was placed in jeopardy by the hot headed extremists who clamored for what he regarded as premature independence and he refused to give to their conduct the sanction of his vote.<sup>28</sup> Once, however, the vote was taken, he bowed to the duly authorized expression of the opinion of the country and practically alone among the members of Congress took his musket in hand as a private soldier to defend the policy for which he had refused to vote. He says :

"Two rules I have laid down for myself throughout this contest, to which I have constantly adhered, and still design to adhere : first, on all occasions where I am called upon, as a trustee for my countrymen, to deliberate on questions important to their happiness, disdaining all personal advantages to be derived from a suppression of my real sentiments, and defying all dangers to be risked by a declaration of them, openly to avow them; and secondly, after thus discharging this duty, whenever the public resolutions are taken, to regard them, though opposite to my opinion, as sacred, because they lead to public measures in which the Commonwealth must be interested, and to join in supporting them as earnestly as if my voice had been given for them."<sup>29</sup>

A third critical occasion for the display of Dickinson's courage was when, as President of Pennsylvania, he stood alone among the members of the Executive Council, and in opposition to the great majority of the legislature, in demanding justice for the Connecticut settlers in the Wyoming valley against the clamors of Pennsylvania claimants for their lands. He had no power and

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<sup>26</sup>Stille, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.

could only protest, but his protest was a defiance of public opinion on behalf of justice and humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, in his old age he gave one more great exhibition of courage when on the alignment of parties under the new Federal Government he joined the party of Jefferson and defended the French Revolution against most of the friends with whom he had been accustomed to act throughout his earlier political life. His biographer, a late Provost of the University of Pennsylvania, professes difficulty in understanding what he looks upon as a complete change of views on the part "of a man who had been regarded during his whole previous life as a conservative of the conservatives, and who now came forward in support of those who advocated popular, almost revolutionary, doctrines."<sup>31</sup> Dr. Stille's surprise will not be shared, I believe, by those who have penetrated the meaning of Dickinson's thought. He was no more a conservative than he was a radical. He was concerned with other than doctrinal and abstract issues. To one who reads sympathetically the record of his thinking, it must be plain that he had nothing in common with the mercantile, speculative party of Hamilton, or with the doctrinaire pedantry of John Adams, now as extreme an advocate of theoretical aristocracy as he had once been an extreme advocate of independence. Dickinson's fundamental social views were those of Jefferson, a belief in freedom of trade, in an aristocracy of merit and in an essentially agricultural civilization. Thus in his old age he wrote :

"A landed interest widely diffused among the mass of a people, by the personal virtues of honest industry, fair dealing, and laudable frugality, is the firmest foundation that can be laid, for the secure establishment of civil liberty, and national independence. Requisite arts, useful manufactures, and advantageous commerce, naturally grow up from such an establishment. . . . The cultivation of the earth, its returns for the skill and labor bestowed upon it, the varieties and properties of its products, the changes of seasons and their effects, the beautiful alterations of scenery made by art surrounding the designer with a sort of creation by his own hands, and the gradual improvement of circumstances by the regular application of industry to the honest acquisition of necessaries and conveniences, all conspire, to render a farmer at the same time a kind of philosopher and by his domestic comforts to extend the circle of social enjoyments; till by continual enlargement it embraces his country."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 250-1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>32</sup>Vol. II, p. 324 (Appendix of Notes to Letters of Fabius). With this belief in the benefits of an agricultural civilization there was combined in Dickinson's thought strong disapproval of speculation and extravagance. Elsewhere he says : "Industry and frugality are national benefits. A taste for ostentatious living often leads to overtrading, speculating, fraudulent dealing, bankruptcy, and wide-spreading destruction to multitudes of innocent families. Vengality too frequently follows loss of character and property. . . . 'Hence', says Lord

It is significant that the name by which he preferred to be known was that of "The Pennsylvania Farmer".

John Dickinson is an appropriate figure to commemorate on an academic occasion like this, because no other of our statesmen was so deeply indebted to sound learning and a wide acquaintance with best literature of ancient and modern times. "After all" says his biographer, "he was chiefly a student". It is of local interest here today that what was left of his great library, after its destruction by the British, he presented to this college to form the foundation of your college library. It is an interesting subject for reflection how the study and teaching of politics can be made to issue in the ripe wisdom, the broad understanding and the constructive moderation which are the hallmarks of Dickinson's thought. Too frequently the influence of academic study of politics and economics seems to be in the direction of promoting temporary and partial systems, inculcating passing idea-patterns and propagandizing for doctrinaire schemes of reform. We need in academic circles to get back to fundamentals and nothing can better teach us by example how to distill fundamentals from the accumulated records of human thought than a study of the writings of Dickinson.

There is another reason why it is appropriate to commemorate Dickinson at a college like this. He was above all a Christian statesman. Living in an age of rationalism and free thought and convinced as firmly as any of his contemporaries of the power and potentialities of human reason, he, nevertheless, throughout his life, lost no appropriate occasion to profess his faith in revealed religion. In religion as in politics he was not a doctrinaire. His religion was in the last analysis his life, a life of faith, courage and charity, marked throughout by a long series of benefactions of which this institution is the most lasting monument. May it go forward under its new President to years of future service and may it inspire in its sons something of the spirit and something of the wisdom of the patriot whose name it commemorates.

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Chancellor Bacon, arose that observation of Lucan concerning the condition of the Roman Empire before the civil war—

*'Hinc usura vorax, rapidumque in tempore foenus,  
'Hinc concussa fides, et multis utile bellum.'*