

Title: The Spark of the Revolution

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I learned about this essay contest from my counselor. Through my school page, she posted a list of scholarships that students can participate in, and I came across this one.

The Spark of the Revolution

The story of the American Revolution is usually told through universally known figures of the revolution such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, and Samuel Adams. However, among this popular group of patriots is a name that is overlooked in this period, James Otis Jr. Before Great Britain even imposed taxes on the colonies, James Otis was among the first patriots to cast doubt upon the authority of the British monarchy. According to a young John Adams, he stated that Otis's role in opposing the imperial policies was "...the spark in which originated the American Revolution" (*The Life of John Adams* 80). Even though Otis was not initially admired for denouncing the motherland, society will soon owe a debt for his commitments of sparking a revolution with his electrifying oratory against the Writs of Assistance, revolutionary writings, and exhortation for a Stamp Act Congress.

Born as the son of a successful lawyer and officer, Colonel James Otis Sr., James Otis Jr. prospered as a prominent lawyer himself. Early in his life, Otis graduated from Harvard in 1743 and was admitted to the bar five years later. He then settled in Boston and opened a law practice in 1750. After some years, Otis rose through the ranks and became the king's advocate general. He would eventually be elected into the Massachusetts House of Representatives with a nearly unanimous vote. His influence among the colonies was eulogized by President John Adams as he stated, "Mr. Otis's popularity was without bounds" ("From John Adams to William Tudor"). This fiery orator first rose to prominence when he denounced the British enforcement of the Writs of Assistance, an act that allowed officials to search anything that seemed suspicious of holding smuggled goods. Passionate and determined to defend the colony's liberty, Otis resigned

his position as advocate general and delivered a five-hour speech that fulminated against the Writs of Assistance. As he put it, “It appears to me the worst instrument of arbitrary power, the most destructive of English liberty and the fundamental principles of law, that ever was found in an English law-book” (*The Collected Political Writings of James Otis*). This “instrument of arbitrary power” became the fuel for a Revolution; Otis was the spark that set aflame to it. As to what historian John Clark Ridpath recalled about the oratory, “... [it] was the living voice which called to resistance, first Boston, then Massachusetts, then New England and then the world!” (Ridpath 56-58). In the courtroom, Otis did more than just rabble about the king’s tyrannical actions. Instead, he galvanized his colonial peers to take action against the king; Otis created the very idea of freedom for which the colonists would lose their blood, sweat, and tears fighting for shortly.

Before anyone that dared to challenge the British Parliament and His Majesty, Otis was the first to act in opposition. As to what President John Adams recalled about Otis, “American Independence was then & there born” and “The seeds of Patriots & Heroes... to defend the Vigorous Youth were then & there sown” (“From John Adams to William Tudor”). After delivering his electrifying speech against the Writs of Assistance, Otis published some of the most influential essays that sparked a revolution. Published in 1762, Otis’s “A Vindication of the Conduct of the House of Representatives” proved to be an essential tract of the American Revolution. Here, Otis implicated that the colonial assembly’s ability to tax was parallel to that of the King’s. He states, “A house of Representatives here at least, bears an equal proportion to a Governor, with that of a House of Commons to the King” (*A vindication* 25). Moreover, in 1764, Otis published his most preeminent pamphlet, “The Rights of British Colonies Asserted and

Proved". Within it, Otis argues that the colonists are entitled to the same rights and liberties as their British counterparts allowed by "the law of God and nature, by the common law, and by act of parliament" (*The rights* 35). Among these inseparable rights, Otis asserts that taxes cannot be imposed on the colonists "but by their consent in person, or by [representatives]" (*The rights* 38). Parliament defended their right to tax the colonies through virtual representation, but Otis thought differently. He believed that no man could take his property without consent. He analogized that, "If he does, he deprives me of my liberty, and makes me a slave" (*The rights* 38). With this, Otis concluded that the imposition of taxes on underrepresented colonists would deprive them of their rights. Thus, Otis is credited with the phrase, "taxation without representation is tyranny".

Aggrieved by underrepresentation and worn out by taxes, the colonists quickly phrased "taxation without representation" as their rallying cry. However, they knew that a single, infant colony could do no more than to wail in the arms of mother England. The colonists spurned the Stamp Act and Sugar Act, but these cries were simply ignored by Parliament. However, it was James Otis who called to the colonies for an intercolonial conference to take a unified stand against Britain. In response, representatives from nine colonies met in New York in 1765 to form the Stamp Act Congress. These delegates resolved, "it is inseparably essential to the freedom of a people... that no taxes be imposed on them, but with their own consent, given personally, or by their representatives" ("Resolutions of the Continental Congress"). Partook in this Congress was Massachusetts delegate James Otis himself. There, he met John Dickinson who would later entrust Otis with a review of his drafts for his "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania". Dickinson wrote a letter asking for Otis's opinion and within it, Dickinson states, "I do not forget

the Obligations, which all Americans are under to you in particular, for the indefatigable Zeal and undaunted Courage you have shewn in defending their Rights” (Tudor 291). However, the Stamp Act Congress accomplished almost nothing in repealing the Stamp Act compared to the widespread boycotts that were held within the colonies. It was still an essential step towards unity; it was the first time that delegates from conflicting colonies took a unified stand against an oppressive force. By virtue of Otis’s first recommendation for it, the congress set a precedent for future conventions.

Several years later, Otis’s mental health became problematic. He started to regret everything he had done in opposition against Britain, and he would go as far as burning most of his papers in the fear of being accused of treason against the king. Despite this, the American Revolution was in full swing. Befuddled colonists who cowered with the idea of fighting against Britain were revolutionized as liberty-loving patriots by the influence of Otis. He sacrificed his whole political career and dignity for the pursuit of defending colonial rights. Just a few months prior to American independence, James Otis drew his last breath. Though the spark of the revolution had faded, the flame of American Independence remains ablaze. In response to his death, John Adams asserts, “... he has left a Character, which will never die, while the Memory of the American Revolution remains” (“From John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren”).

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