

## Topic Page: [Intolerable Acts \(1774\)](#)

Definition: **Intolerable Acts, The** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

The US name for a group of British measures directed against Massachusetts in 1774, after the BOSTON TEA PARTY. They consisted of the Boston Port Act, closing the port of Boston, the Massachusetts Government Act, increasing British control, the Transportation Act, permitting British officials accused of capital offences to be tried outside Massachusetts, and the Quartering Act, which stationed royal troops in the barracks of Boston.

Summary Article: **INTOLERABLE ACTS**

From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

### 1774

In the early spring of 1774, the British Parliament responded to the Boston Tea Party by passing three acts to punish Boston and Massachusetts for being centers of opposition to Britain's imperial policies. Parliament also passed another law about the quartering of British soldiers that applied to all the colonies. These four statutes, often called the Coercive Acts, convinced an ever-increasing number of colonists that their rights were endangered. The Quebec Act, passed immediately after the last of these other measures, struck many Americans as yet another ominous assault on their liberties. Angry Americans grouped these five statutes together and dubbed them the Intolerable Acts.

### Chastising Boston

News of the Boston Tea Party reached London on January 20, 1774. The destruction of the East India Company's tea convinced King George III and most politicians that only harsh measures would finally compel Bostonians to accept the rule of law. The prime minister, Lord North, elicited nods of agreement when he asserted, "We are now to establish our authority, or give it up entirely." The Earl of Dartmouth, head of the department that oversaw colonial policy, agreed. If the Americans would not submit to Parliament's laws, "they say in effect that they will no longer be a part of the British Empire." (Murdoch 121-122)

The determination to crush Boston's intransigence and remind all colonists that they must accept the acts of Parliament produced the first Intolerable Act on March 31, 1774. This Boston Port Act closed the port as of June 1. The only regular shipping allowed into Boston would be vessels bringing food and fuel from other parts of America. Before the port could be reopened, several conditions had to be met: the East India Company must be compensated for the tea destroyed during the Tea Party; customs officials who suffered losses in riots in late 1773 and January 1774 must receive compensation; the king must be satisfied that Boston's inhabitants would abide by the laws and that customs officials could perform their duties in safety. The law also punished Boston by directing that, as of June 1, Salem would replace Boston as the capital. King George III and Lord North obviously wanted to make Bostonians more compliant. The king underscored that objective by appointing Gen. Thomas Gage, the commander of the British army in America, to the post of royal governor of Massachusetts. The new governor and the text of the Port Act reached Boston together on May 10.

### Attacking the Boston Port Act

Boston's Committee of Correspondence, which was created in 1772 to communicate with other towns on efforts to defend the colonists' rights, responded to the Port Act by arranging a meeting with the correspondence committees of neighboring towns. This May 12 gathering authorized sending a circular letter to each colony and to America's port cities. The letter called for support of Boston and maintained that the Port Act was intended not just to intimidate and subdue Boston but to intimidate and subdue all America. The meeting also issued a circular letter broaching the idea that residents of Massachusetts might once again boycott British goods. Boston's government, the town meeting, endorsed those actions on May 13. It also issued a resolution urging that all colonies stop importing anything from Great Britain or British possessions until Parliament repealed the Port Act. In late May, the town meeting created a committee to draft an agreement to abstain from buying British manufactured goods that could be obtained from local producers.



*A POLITICAL LESSON.*

*This 1774 print shows a rearing black stallion (representing America), which has thrown its rider (possibly representing England or, more specifically, General Gage) onto the ground, where he has hit his head on a mile marker. The marker reads "To Boston VI miles," and the signpost behind him points the way to Salem. Specifically, the scene represents colonial resistance to the Boston Port Act, which closed the port of Boston and moved the governing British legislative assembly to Salem. (Library of Congress)*

The other colonies responded positively to Boston's pleas for support—money, food, and other necessities began pouring into the city. When the Port Act took effect on June 1, Philadelphia as well as Boston observed a day of mourning. Virginia marked the day with fasting. Thus, the British attempt to isolate Boston had just the opposite effect. Indeed, instead of dividing the colonists, the Port Act increased calls to hold an intercolonial congress. Those calls multiplied when colonists learned that two additional Intolerable Acts had been passed by Parliament.

## **Hobbling Massachusetts**

Two statutes that became law on May 20, 1774, focused on Massachusetts. The more shocking was An Act for the Better Regulating the Government of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, usually called the Massachusetts Government Act. With it, Parliament unilaterally altered the 1691 charter of

Massachusetts. Under that charter, the provincial council, which was the upper house of the legislature, had been elected by the house of representatives and the outgoing council. As of August 1, provincial councilors would no longer be elected; rather, the Crown would appoint them. In addition, whereas the 1691 charter gave provincial councilors a key role in selecting and dismissing provincial officials, the Massachusetts Government Act made the royal governor solely responsible both for appointing and for dismissing all judges, sheriffs, and other magistrates. The jury system was also assaulted. After September, freeholders and inhabitants would no longer select jurors for the various courts; instead, the sheriff, himself an appointee, would choose them. The Massachusetts Government Act also sought to muzzle Massachusetts's town meetings as forums for protesting against British policies. As of August 1, except for the annual meeting to elect local officials, no town meeting could be held unless the governor preapproved the agenda.

In addition to savaging the charter of Massachusetts, Parliament said the rule of law must be reestablished in Massachusetts. The Administration of Justice Act was created in order to stop what Parliament denounced as Massachusetts's tendency to challenge some acts of Parliament openly and violently. This legislation established new procedures for dealing with a person charged with committing murder or another capital crime in the course of helping quell a riot or while assisting officials—for example, customs officers—performing their duties. If the governor believed the accused could not get a fair trial in Massachusetts, the trial could be shifted to another colony or even to Great Britain.

Colonial radicals lashed out at the new legislation. Samuel Adams said the Massachusetts Government Act sought "to destroy our free Constitution" and replace it with "an absolute despotic one." The so-called Justice Act was, Adams claimed, in reality a system for protecting "any Soldier who shall Murder an American for asserting his Right[s]." (Alexander 133) Political moderates and even conservatives were also shaken. John Rowe, a wealthy Boston merchant who longed for "Harmony & Peace" between the colonies and the mother country, had lamented the fate of Bostonians when the Port Act took effect, but he was horrified and angered by the Massachusetts Government Act. Rowe asserted that the statute attacked the charter granted to Massachusetts by the Crown in 1691. The law would generate "many Evils" and "sour the minds of most of the Inhabitants" of Massachusetts. Indeed, "I am afraid of the Consequences that this Act will Produce.... The People have done amiss & no sober man can vindicate their Conduct [in the Tea Party] but the Revenge of the [British] Ministry is too severe." (Alexander 134) And Edward Shippen, a moderate Pennsylvania Tory, stressed that the new statutes endangered more than Massachusetts. Shippen warned that if Parliament could emasculate Massachusetts's charter and alter its justice system, it could do the same to any colony. Americans thus agreed about why these laws were "intolerable." The Massachusetts Government Act raised the specter of Parliament eviscerating the charters that colonists of all political persuasions viewed as constitutions; the Administration of Justice Act undermined the cherished British ideal of being tried by a jury of one's peers.

Boston's correspondence committee responded to the new assaults by creating "a Solemn League and Covenant," a name that alluded to the alliance formed against King Charles I during the English Civil War. The plan was approved on June 5 and forwarded to all Massachusetts towns three days later. The "Solemn League and Covenant" established a program of economic warfare designed to bring the masses, including women and the less affluent, into the resistance movement. The inhabitants were to join together and pledge to stop all commercial relations with Great Britain. Any British goods that arrived in America after August 31 must be shunned, and, as of October 1, people should not even use

anything manufactured in Britain. The names of those who refused to sign such a pledge should be made public so they could be boycotted and ostracized *forever*. Normal commercial intercourse would be resumed only after Parliament rescinded the Intolerable Acts.

## Looking Past Massachusetts

Whereas the first three Intolerable Acts targeted Massachusetts and especially Boston, the final two acts that earned the epithet "intolerable" applied to all the colonies. Under the previous Quartering Act (1765), each colonial assembly had been required to provide barracks and pay for the maintenance of British troops stationed in its colony. The law also stipulated what to do if no barracks existed or if the barracks were too small to accommodate all the troops. In that case, the assembly could have the troops housed in inns or other public houses. If the need for shelter was still unmet, then, and only then, the governor and his council could appoint agents to locate and rent uninhabited houses, barns, or other buildings. The Quartering Act of June 2, 1774, gave the British military commander in the colonies more discretionary power. If he determined that the location of any colonial barracks might prevent soldiers from being able to function effectively, he could order that they be billeted in inns and taverns. If that proved inadequate, soldiers could take up residence in unoccupied homes or other privately owned buildings. The process could become even more streamlined if colonial authorities did not provide acceptable housing for all soldiers within 24 hours of its being demanded. In that case, the troops could immediately be quartered in unoccupied houses or other privately owned buildings. While owners were to receive reasonable compensation for the use of their buildings, the new law raised fears of British troops living among the general population as occupiers, not defenders.

### RELATED ENTRIES

This Volume

Adams, Samuel; Boston Tea Party; Committees of Correspondence; Quartering Acts

Although the Quartering Act did not elicit the reactions that greeted the first three Intolerable Acts, the last Intolerable Act unleashed a firestorm of protest. The Quebec Act of June 22, 1774, was a complex piece of legislation designed, in part, to solve problems lingering from the transfer of Canadian lands to Great Britain in 1763. The Quebec Act scrapped the original plan of establishing an elected legislature in favor of having a governor and an appointed council. Moreover, French law would continue to be used in civil cases; the English legal system would apply only in criminal cases. While these provisions reflected sensitivity to the traditional legal and political systems in Canada, many American colonists saw them as additional examples of Great Britain's subverting the British constitution and the rights of Englishmen. Acknowledging that the French-Canadian population was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, the Quebec Act also recognized the legitimacy of the Catholic church and even allowed it to continue tithing its communicants. These provisions roused the deep-seated anti-Catholicism that permeated the American colonies. Finally, the Quebec Act directed that lands east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River, a vast area that included the Great Lakes and surrounding territory, would become part of Quebec. That provision would effectively stifle the plans of innumerable land speculators; it convinced many, especially Virginians, that the law must be repealed. Indeed, of all Britain's actions to date, Richard Lee of Virginia proclaimed, the Quebec Act was "the worst grievance." (Holton 36)

# The Legacy of the Intolerable Acts

From the passage of the first Intolerable Act in late March to the enactment of the last in June 1774, Parliament gave more and more colonists reason to want to challenge the British government. The acts sparked efforts to include the masses in waging economic warfare against Britain. They led to increased calls for holding an intercolonial congress. By mid-June 1774, even before definitive news of the passage of the last two Intolerable Acts had reached America, the Massachusetts house of representatives set the wheels in motion for holding an intercolonial congress; this congress convened in Philadelphia in September. The Intolerable Acts thus fueled the movement to hold an intercolonial congress and gave it a dramatically expanded list of grievances to consider.

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