CHAPTER 6

“Sign or Die”

The Imperial Crisis and the Reconstruction of South Carolina’s Government

The South Carolina elite faced many challenges in building and maintaining the system of government they had created over the course of the eighteenth century. Their government was able to survive the challenges of slave resistance, crime, disorder, growing poverty, British placemen, and back-country unrest and demands for access to important legal and political institutions. To meet these challenges, the lowcountry elite had to compromise occasionally, but they never compromised the basic nature of their political system. In the end, the greatest challenge proved to be the imperial crisis because it represented a convergence of forces that led to the demise of the old system—and its rebirth during the imperial crisis.¹

The elite successfully survived independence as a ruling class, recreated their system of government by 1776, and firmly reestablished their authority after the war. In doing so, they had to contend with four primary challenges. First, the Commons House of Assembly, upon which the entire colonial government depended, was utterly crippled by 1775 due to the escalating placeholder conflicts. Second, the imperial crisis reached its crescendo in 1774 and 1775. By that time, the lowcountry elite had exhausted legal attempts to

¹ Studies of the resistance movement in South Carolina have focused on organization and popular uprisings, but they have not much detailed the resistance government’s evolution, which should be understood in the context of how the lowcountry elite governed South Carolina in the colonial period. For a study of the artisans and their increased politicization during the imperial crisis, see Richard Walsh, Charleston’s Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763–1789 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959). For a detailed study of the committee structure of the resistance government, Eva Bayne Poythress, “Revolution by Committee: An Administrative History of the Extralegal Committees in South Carolina, 1774–1776” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1975). Two studies focus on the course and consequences of mob violence: Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972) and Carp, Rebels Rising. The imperial crisis has also been studied in terms of why the elite responded so strongly to British policy in this period. While this approach emphasizes how British policy undermined the colonial elite and failed to make allies of them by not permitting “home rule,” it does not address the reconstruction of South Carolina’s political system before independence, Weir, “The Last of American Freemen,” 65, 77.
obtain redress from Britain. With the assembly and royal officials in a deadlock, the political elite needed a new focal point to carry on the fight for provincial autonomy. When it became clear that fight was hopeless within the old system, it became a fight for independence that required a new government. Both the extra-legal resistance organizations and the new state government were based on the centralized colonial system. Third, the imperial crisis provided new opportunities for lower class whites to enter the world of politics. Artisans and small farmers were important allies in the struggles with Britain and would be absolutely critical in the event of war. Thus, the lowcountry elite had to account for their increased politicization and activity in the resistance movement, but they had to accommodate them in a way that did not alter the system's fundamental nature.

Finally, the elite had to deal with dissension. These men were not democrats, and many entered resistance to British authority very reluctantly. While the elite had to accommodate lower class whites, who made up the rank and file of the Sons of Liberty, they also had to channel and control the activities of the mob with a strong, centrally controlled organization. Slaves and free black people were also sources of dissent. The rhetoric of liberty could be a natural threat to a slave society, and the elite had to be careful to maintain and augment the system used to control slaves. The fight with Great Britain could not be allowed to destroy the plantation economy. A minority within elite ranks also dissented, because many were simply unwilling to adopt extra-legal means of resistance or to break their (often profitable) ties with Britain. These conservatives feared that resistance might unleash more dangerous forces and could result in the death of liberty rather than its salvation. The resistance and state governments employed inquisitorial attacks on reputation and livelihood to bring loyalists to heel, which bore similarities to tactics employed during placeholder struggles. By 1776, the revolutionary remnant of the lowcountry elite had purged the conservative loyalists from government, retained political authority, rebuilt the system and eliminated many of its old deficiencies. Their great political challenge after 1776 continued to be retaining the exclusive ability to structure and limit access to the new system in the face of war and a rising class of backcountry farmers and planters.

These difficult challenges merged and presented themselves simultaneously. There was never a substantial debate among lowcountry elites about whether or not to resist British encroachments on colonial autonomy. The debate centered on tactics, the consequences of resistance, and the nature of the imperial constitution. Did Parliament have a right to legislate within the entire empire? At what point did extra-legal resistance become legitimate? Could the elite stay in control of forces that the revolution might unleash? The