

“They Hoped That the Time Was Approaching, When the Powers of the State Would Be Exerted”: Loyalists’ Interpretation of the 1780 Gordon Riots*

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“All is now peace again. Out of confusion order has arose. Government is rendered more firm, Administration more fixed, and more determined in their measures—because the people have by it discovered that they can have no safety but in those to whom the powers of government are committed.”¹

–“Extract of a letter from a Gentleman of distinction in London.”

In the first week of June 1780, London was nearly brought to her knees. Riots gripped the city nightly from Friday the 2nd through the wee hours of Thursday the 9th, making the evening sky glow from the bonfires built from furniture, books, and artwork, in the streets. Rioters sought deliberate targets for their rage: At first, Catholic chapels, Catholic enclaves and Catholic-owned businesses (such as distilleries), and Members of Parliament coming to and from Westminster—targets rioters associated with the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, which afforded limited rights to Catholics and inspired the massive petition and protest that directly preceded the outburst of riots. But as the week wore on, the targets increasingly became those associated with the state: Nearly every prison in the city, the homes of judges and MPs, and finally the Bank of England. Rioters aired their grievances against symbols of the state, which had declined to remedy, let alone hear, their petition. Despite the deployment of troops into the city starting June 3rd, the civil magistrates could not effectively use them to quell the riots. George III, with the support of his Privy Council, issued the extraordinary order for the troops to bypass obtaining permission from the civil magistrates and fire-at-will on the crowd. As a result of this order, the number of casualties skyrocketed, with troops killing between 400 and 700 persons, and injuring countless more. Arrested also grew upwards of 450, of which 160 were tried, with 75 convicted and 25 executed

* This paper is drawn from two chapters of my forthcoming dissertation, “The Mobs All Cry’d Peace with America: The Gordon Riots and Revolution in England and America.” Versions of this paper have been shared at the Consortium of the Revolutionary Era 2021 Virtual Conference and with the McNeil Center for Early American Studies Fellows Workshop 2021. I would like to thank the many co-panelists and commentators at the meetings who shared suggestions and critiques, especially Peter Walker, Rebecca Brannon, Cho-Chien Feng, Benjamin Bankhurst, Emily Yankowitz, G. Patrick O’Brien, Jason Sharples, Emma Hart, Andrew Shankman, and my cohort of 2021-2022 McNeil Center fellows. I’m grateful to Ed Gray for their insightful engagement with this material as a peer-reviewer, and to Bryan Banks, Jeffrey Burson, and the CRE Selected Papers editorial team for their assistance and kindness. Finally, I would like to thank my writing group, Jessica Wicks-Allen and Sabrina Gonzalez, and my advisor, Holly Brewer, for asking the hard questions and critically engaging with my words and ideas.

¹ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 6 September 1780.

(62 were initially sentenced to death, but 37 were granted clemency) for participating in the riots.² Following the suppression of the riots, Lord George Gordon, the head of the Protestant Association who organized the petition and protest, was arrested for inciting the riot and tried for high treason (he was ultimately acquitted).

News of the Gordon Riots circulated the Atlantic World at a significant moment in the course of the American Revolutionary War. By 1780, the conflict was entering its fifth year, and the ebbs and flow of the war did not definitively point towards victory for one side or the other. The way Loyalists interpreted and framed news of the Gordon Riots can give us a window into how Loyalists sustained their commitment to the British empire. In a year that brought signs of hope—the capture of Charleston by British forces in May, the defection of Benedict Arnold in September—the narrative Loyalists crafted about the Gordon Riots, which first reached American shores in August, bolstered their belief and hope that the tide was turning in favor of victory. It was a useful addition to their broader narrative, suggesting similar experiences between Loyalists in America and British in London, and reified a shared sense of British identity. British subjects at the heart of the empire had been exposed to the same terror unleashed by aggrieved fellow-subjects, just as the Loyalists had endured for over five years. Yet the government prevailed in reasserting order to London, in strengthening the nation to guard against the manifestation of dangerous discourses that challenged the relationship between the governed and the government. This interpretation of the riots was compelling to Loyalists who longed for the end of war and a return to normal.

Historians of Loyalists and Loyalism have done remarkable work demonstrating the diverse rationales and motives for Loyalist activities, alliances, and beliefs. Building on the pathbreaking work of Robert Calhoon, who showed the complexities of Loyalists' motives and perceptions, historians have further explored how matters beyond simple ideology or circumstance—proximity to conflict, economic considerations, social pressures, and freedom—compelled different people at different times to embrace loyalty to the British empire.³ Cognizant

² George Rudé, “The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and Their Victims: The Alexander Prize Essay.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, Vol. 6 (1956): 93-114, 99. There is quite a decent historiography on the Gordon Riots stretching back into the early 20th century. Relevant recent works include Ian Haywood and John Seed, *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, UK ; Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (Sutton, 2004); Brad A. Jones, “‘In Favour of Popery’: Patriotism, Protestantism, and the Gordon Riots in the Revolutionary British Atlantic,” *The Journal of British Studies* 52, no. 01 (January 2013): 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2012.60>. Other works touch on the Gordon Riots as part of their examination of political, social, and geographic explorations of the 18th century. See Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, UK: Hambledon and London, 2004); Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Clarendon Press, 1998); Michael Rapport, *The Unruly City: Paris, London and New York in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). While these works have analyzed the Gordon Riots through various lenses, I contend in my broader dissertation project that more attention should be given to the connections between the Gordon Riots and the American Revolution.

³ Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973); Robert M. Calhoon, Timothy M. Barnes, and Robert S. Davis, eds, *Tory Insurgents: The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010); Jim Piecuch, *Three People, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775-1782* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Rebecca Brannon and Joseph S. Moore, eds., *The Consequences of Loyalism: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Calhoon* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019); Ruma Chopra, *Choosing Sides: Loyalists in Revolutionary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Ruma Chopra, *Unnatural Rebellion: Loyalists in New York City during the Revolution* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

Brad A. Jones' recent book, *Resisting Independence: Popular Loyalism in the Revolutionary British Atlantic* (Cornell University Press, 2021), adds to our understanding of Loyalist's motivations and how they are complicated by location in

of the multitude of factors that pushed individuals to choose loyalty to the British crown that Loyalists scholars have demonstrated, I do not seek to demonstrate conclusively how all Loyalists viewed the Gordon Riots—with the different motives propelling people to loyalism, it's fair to say they may have different interpretations of the riots. However, by examining how Loyalist writers and newspaper printers interpreted and framed the riots, we are able to get a sense of how they sought to utilize the event and its aftermath to suit the Loyalist cause and encourage other Loyalists to remain committed. For even though not all Loyalists were ideologically driven, their commitment to the cause would still need to be fostered and maintained, especially years into the war. My reading of Loyalist newspapers suggests that the Gordon Riots and their aftermath confirmed the strength and righteousness of the British government, bolstering certainty in the government's ultimate victory and reaffirming that Loyalists had chosen the just, and winning, side.

The narrative crafted in Loyalist newspapers and in private letters depicts the Gordon Riots as a dreadful event. Rioters posed a real threat to the very heart of the British empire, targeting not just Catholic and Catholic-sympathizing persons and their establishments, but also symbols of the government and nation—Members of Parliament, justices and judges, prisons, and the Bank of England. Newspaper printers in particular took deliberate measures to frame the participants and events of the riots as the product of dangerous rhetoric and ideology—rhetoric and ideology that would ring familiar to Loyalists steeped in Patriot rhetoric and ideology.⁴ From the first reports on the riots in Loyalist newspapers, the event and those involved were portrayed as insane. The August 26th edition of James Rivington's *Royal Gazette* labeled Lord George Gordon, the president of the Protestant Association which organized the petition and massive protest (and after whom the riots would come to be named), a “mad man” who should be “put in a straight jacket” for his part in kindling the violence.⁵ This accusation of Lord George's insanity was similarly asserted in an August 24th letter from Pennsylvania Loyalist William Smith, the former provost of the University of Pennsylvania, indicating a common Loyalist interpretation of the underlying cause

the British Atlantic and events as the American Revolution and war unfolds. Jones' work touches on the role of the Gordon Riots—nearly absent from all other Loyalist historiography—and anti-papery in animating Loyalist ideology, but his focus in these sections is on Loyalists located primarily in Glasgow and Halifax, whereas I examine Loyalist sources (newspapers and correspondence) from within the rebelling 13 colonies. Further, while Jones uses an expansive definition of “Loyalist” to include subjects living in non-rebelling colonies and Scotland, I contend that Loyalists living in or exiled from the rebelling colonies have a perspective on the riots informed by their experience of being exposed to Patriot rhetoric and living through the upheavals of war.

⁴ For further context on the practices of 18th century printers, including source networks, editorial decision making, and the particulars of Loyalist and Patriot printers pulling information and news from one another, see Joseph Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), esp. ch. 5 “Patriots, Loyalists, and the Perils of Wartime Printing.” Also see Janice Potter-MacKinnon and Robert M. Calhoun, “The Character and Coherence of the Loyalist Press,” in *Tory Insurgents*, 125-159, for a more detailed analysis of Loyalist printers and their operations and ideological aims.

⁵ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 26 August 1780. Historians have determined that James Rivington, often considered a prominent Loyalist in New York, was actually a member of the Culper Spy Ring that smuggled information to General George Washington about British troop movements (Catherine S. Crary, “The Tory and the Spy: The Double Life of James Rivington,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XVI (1959): 61-72). Despite this revelation, Rivington would have needed to maintain the popular perception that he was a Loyalist in order to have access to the information he smuggled to Washington. Maintaining this cover would mean continuing to print his Loyalist newspaper, which gave him access to information and reaffirmed the belief that he was a Loyalist. That also meant that his newspaper would need to appeal to a Loyalist audience by continuing to reflect their interpretation of events and values. For more information on James Rivington as a Loyalist printer, see Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America with a Biography of Printers & an Account of Newspapers* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1970), 478-480, 508-511; Calhoun, Barnes and Davis, *Tory Insurgents*, 321.

of the events—madness.⁶ In a second article in the *Royal Gazette*'s August 26th edition, information from a London letter explained that “the young Lord, who headed the Republican Mob in London, had been seized” and was being held in custody.⁷ This brief passage made two important conjectures to the Loyalist audience: that Lord George's age—he was twenty-eight at the time of the riots—may have had some influence on his actions, and that the mob held republican ideology and aims. The association of youth and republicanism reflected Loyalist criticism of the Patriots for their immature petulance and attempt to upset the proper social order preserved by the British constitution.⁸ Through both direct and indirect mention, the Loyalist press crafted a portrait of Lord George that diminished the legitimacy of his concerns and could be used as a parable of what would befall those pursuing the Patriot agenda. For Loyalists, Lord George and the Patriots demonstrated naïveté for pursuing an ideology that was dangerous and paved the way for mob rule—quite the opposite of what Loyalists viewed as the calm, considered, and ordered societal structures offered by the British constitution.

By far the most descriptive retelling of the riots printed by a Loyalist newspaper was the *Royal Gazette*'s September 2nd issue. Taking up over three full columns, the *Royal Gazette* made it emphatically clear that the report had been taken from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*'s August 23rd issue, a known Patriot newspaper. Yet underneath this attribution was a subtitle stating that the intelligence was “taken from English Prints” on a recently arrived ship. This ostensible contradiction—as other Patriot newspapers that printed this same report did not cite “English Prints” as the source of the news—was a deliberate choice of the printers to give credence to the incredible story while also absolving any criticism of the British government as the result of Patriot bias.⁹ The report began by detailing the Protestant Association's protest amassing 50,000 men to march on Parliament and deliver the petition demanding the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act. As the crowd grew rowdier, they began intimidating Members of Parliament by forcing them to “take oaths,” “put blue cockades in their hats,” and even began kicking members “violently on the legs.” The final paragraph in the first column ends with the reflection of the writer that the “hasty account” of the events

is sufficient to make every friend to peace and good government heartily wish, that those in power may take effectual means to prevent so gross an insult to Parliament....It is vain to talk of the liberties of a country, where the democracy can at the pleasure, at the caprice, or in consequence of the mistaken zeal of any individual...be summoned together in large bodies, and having so assembled, can exercise the most lawless and oppressive tyranny, and set the civil power at defiance.¹⁰

⁶ William Smith to “Madam,” 24 August 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, Vol. 243, William L. Clements Library (WLCL henceforth), University of Michigan. Smith was writing from Philadelphia, a town restored to Patriot control in 1779. His knowledge of the events of the Gordon Riots would have likely come from either his social/professional network, or local (Patriot) newspapers. Therefore, by asserting in his letter that Lord George was mad, it indicates a common Loyalist interpretation that extends beyond Loyalist strongholds of New York or the South.

⁷ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 26 August 1780.

⁸ For more on the Loyalist criticisms of Patriots, see Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” 125-159. Particularly in their second section of the essay (128-149), the authors reveal common themes of “disaffection, petulance, ingratitude, and disloyalty” in Loyalist criticisms. I argue that these themes are also reflected in the portrayal of the Gordon Riots to the Loyalist audience.

⁹ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 2 September 1780.

¹⁰ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 2 September 1780.

To a Loyalist audience, the statement reflected the very concerns they had about the dangers of the democracy which they believed elemental of the Patriot cause.¹¹ It was not the tyranny of the crown or government that was a threat to the liberty of a people, but that of democracy under the sway of a zealous leader or idea. Indeed, in his letters the exiled Loyalist Samuel Curwen made a striking observation that linked the rioters to the ideology and organization of the American Patriots. Curwen's July 15th letter to William Pynchon recounted the rioters' attack on Catholic Relief Act sponsor Sir George Saville's house, noting that Saville's character ("a steady whig, and an anti-ministerialist" but also "a friend to taxation" and a "man of property") deemed him "worthy of these *sons of liberty* and supporters of the Protestant cause to exercise their patriotism upon."¹² Curwen's comparison of the rioters to the Sons of Liberty is telling—in his mind, both groups violently assert their cause in a fervor of misguided "patriotism." For Loyalist printers and writers, the mob gathered in London attacking government officials to secure their demands shared inherent similarities to the actions and rhetoric of the Patriots that precipitated the war. Both were predicated, Loyalists asserted, on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between the consent of the governed and the protection of society from the tyranny of the majority.

Yet the rioters were brought to heel, finally, by George III deploying and empowering 15,000 troops to fire on the crowd at will, bypassing civil magistrate constraints that had, in part, hamstrung city officials from successfully quelling the riots.¹³ Multiple Loyalist newspapers focused on this process for reasserting order, highlighting the role of the Privy Council in encouraging the king to "instantly issue a proclamation" to quell the mob and denying that the king had resorted to martial law, which would have led to "so momentous an alteration in the situation of life, liberty, and property."¹⁴ The Loyalist newspapers also turned their attention to reprinting extracts from British letters connecting the events in London with the American War. In its September 6 issue, the *Royal Gazette* printed three extracts of letters from London which all analyzed the events of the riots and how they related to the American war. In explicit terms, the authors of these letters insisted that the riots and the government response had produced a stronger government and unified people, "because the people have by it discovered that they can have no safety but in those to whom the powers of government are committed." The deployment of the military to forcefully suppress the riots did not, "to the astonishment and disappointment of the sons of liberty," prompt Patriot sympathizers to protest the measures, but instead resulted in "the thanks of the great city."¹⁵ By printing these observations, the *Royal Gazette* underscored both the

¹¹ Timothy M. Barnes and Robert M. Calhoon, "Loyalist Discourse and the Moderation of the American Revolution," *Tory Insurgents*, 176-181; This belief is not entirely unfounded, as democratic principles were used to entice people to the Patriot cause. See Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005). The expansion of these democratic principles would prompt a reactionary constriction in later years, as Gordon Wood argues in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 229-369.

¹² Samuel Curwen, *Journal and Letters of the Late Samuel Curwen*...p. 256. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Civil magistrates were required by law to read out the Riot Act and approve troop action before troops could physically (and violently) repress a crowd. But with the spread of riots across London, and a dearth of civil magistrates willing and able to act, the situation was primed to devolve further. Indeed, some magistrates reportedly feared to act due to concerns about crowd retribution—which was not wholly unwarranted, as the crowd did attack Justice Hyde's home after he read the Riot Act and ordered the dispersal of the crowd from the Palace Yard. See Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), 102-104; Michael Rapport, *The Unruly City: Paris, London and New York in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 111-112.

¹⁴ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 2 September 1780; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 13 September 1780.

¹⁵ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 6 September 1780.

appropriate strength of the British government and the possibility for a unified body politic to come from tumultuous fractures.

In the same issue, the *Royal Gazette* began its theme of linking the riots to American Patriot agents, thereby countering any insinuations that the riots were symptomatic of inherent problems in the British constitution. “You will see the details of this business in the public prints, there are not five men of sense and candour in the three kingdoms, but pronounce a certain American Negotiator in France to be at the bottom of it,” one letter asserted, implying that Benjamin Franklin had a role in the riots.¹⁶ The insinuation that American agents acted in some way to foment the riots was echoed in another letter printed by the *Royal Gazette* on September 9th, and in the recount of the speech of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, to the House of Lords which asserted that “no man could determine, with any degree of precision, the actual cause of the riots, from the apparent ostensible circumstances which immediately produced them.”¹⁷ This opinion by such an esteemed authority led the article’s author to assert that Lord Mansfield’s speech corroborated accounts from America that “an universal expectation existed there upwards of a month ago, that the metropolis of England would be, in a short time, in ashes.”¹⁸ The insinuation of American involvement and instigation of the riots possibly came from, or was confirmed by, letters to leaders of the British military forces in America. In a July 2nd, 1780, letter to Sir Henry Clinton, J.P. Clinton reported that there was “very little doubt, but that it was a scheme formed by the Americans and French to burn down London.”¹⁹ Charles Mellish’s July 4th letter to Sir Clinton also alleged that American agents had played some role or attempted to benefit from the riots, while further proclaiming that because the civil magistrates had “run away from their Duty” the king was “obliged to issue orders to the Military to proceed against the Rioters.”²⁰ The Loyalist newspapers, utilizing sources such as British allies, provided their audience reason to continue supporting the British government by printing letters and articles that emphasized the solidity of and support for the British government, and the plausibility that Patriot agents had in some way been involved in fueling the riots. If the British government could prevail in restoring order and retaining control in London, it surely could do the same in the American continent.

The Loyalist printers’ narrative of the Gordon Riots and their aftermath was in many ways a version, in miniature, of the Loyalist experiences before and during the war—as well as their hopes for the ultimate outcome of the war. The Protestant Associators presented their grievances, claiming the government had impinged on their rights and acted without their consent, yet when they could not bully the Parliament into acquiescing the crowd resorted to violence, rebellion, and riot. How similar to the actions of the American rebels, a Loyalist might think. The rioters rained holy hell upon their fellow subjects, terrorizing them into painting “No Popery” on their doors and wearing blue cockades, the slogan and symbol of the Protestant Association, to avoid being targeted. Why is that not like forcing them to take loyalty oaths, a Loyalist might wonder? George III and the military’s triumph in quelling the riots and restoring order inspired hope. If it can be done in London (and earlier, in Charleston), a Loyalist might ponder, it can certainly be done in the whole of America. The government response to the riots—prosecution and punishment (and mercy, in some cases), bills strengthening civil magistrates’ powers, efforts to make restitution to those damaged by the riots—certainly inspired hope for similar outcomes in the American context.

¹⁶ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 6 September 1780.

¹⁷ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 9 September 1780; *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 4 October 1780.

¹⁸ *Royal Gazette* (New-York), 4 October 1780.

¹⁹ J.P. Clinton to Sir Henry Clinton, 2 July 1780, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, Vol. 108, WLCL.

²⁰ Charles Mellish to Sir Henry Clinton, 4 July 1780, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, Vol. 109, WLCL.

Taken as a whole, the two years in which news of the riots and their aftermath were reported in Loyalist newspapers paints a particular picture designed to reassure and reaffirm Loyalists' decision to remain subjects of the British empire.

In a 1780 pamphlet printed prior to the Gordon Riots, Joseph Galloway, the Pennsylvania Loyalist and former delegate to the first Continental Congress, asserted that Loyalists had "hoped that the time was approaching, when the powers of the State would be exerted; and they knew, that those powers, if conducted with wisdom, would be more than sufficient to crush the intended rebellion."²¹ He made this observation about Loyalist attitudes following the conclusion of the First Continental Congress in 1774. But the same sentiment could still be applied to Loyalists in 1780. The successful capture of Charleston in May buoyed Loyalist spirits. With the deliberately crafted news of the Gordon Riots, Loyalists found further proof that the British Government was successfully exerting its powers on both sides of the Atlantic. While Loyalists' hopes would ultimately come to naught by the end of 1781, exploring how Loyalists interpreted and utilized the news of the Gordon Riots affords us an opportunity to better understand how Loyalists maintained morale and commitment in the midst of a drawn-out civil war. Loyalists crafted a narrative of the Gordon Riots that further confirmed shared experiences with other British subjects, reifying their British identity and their conviction that their choice to remain loyal to the British empire was right and prudent.

²¹ Joseph Galloway, *Historical and Political Reflections on the Rise and Progress of the American Rebellion*, (London: G. Wilkie, No. 71, St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1780), 94; Thomas Adams, "The British Pamphlet Press and the American Controversy," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* Vol. 89, Pt. 1 (April 1979): 33-88, 81.