The Loyalist Perception

ROBERT M. CALHOON

The nature of loyalism in the American Revolution is an intractable historical problem, in part, because the loyalists appeared in several distinct social and political settings: pre-Revolutionary colonial society, rebellious American states, the various parts of the British Empire to which they fled, and the post-Revolutionary republic where still more reemerged as respectable citizens. In each of these contexts the loyalists revealed different facets of the values, attitudes, and characteristics which accounted for their adherence to the Crown. While it is dangerous to read back into the loyalists’ Revolutionary experience things they said in retrospect, it is also misleading to assume that the loyalists revealed everything they had to say about themselves under the intense pressures of specific crises in the pre-Revolutionary controversy or later during the Revolution itself.

While a perceptive kind of comparative history will be needed to bring together the pieces of the loyalist puzzle, it is also important to explore as analytically as possible the loyalists’ perception of reality, the structure of their values, and the pattern of their rational and emotional responses within each of the historical contexts from which they operated. Historians dealing with the loyalists have, for the most part, asked questions about the location and condition of identifiable groups of loyalists, the thrust of loyalist rebuttals to specific tenets of whig belief, and the political and social conditions which made some colonists unusually dependent on British authority for their security and identity. Another kind of question should probe the loyalists’ view of themselves and focus on their own statements of self-consciousness and self-awareness. Pre-Revolutionary critics and victims of a colonial resistance felt conscious of certain political and social roles which they tried to play as the imperial controversy progressed; they wrestled with the dilemma of adapting, improving, relaxing, or intensifying their performance of those roles as the pre-Revolutionary movement made those roles increasingly awkward; as each individual realized that he was not going to regain his former authority, influence, or equanimity, he communed within himself and gave some expression to the anguish he felt. The loyalists’ understanding and presentation of their roles, dilemmas, and anguish in letters, pamphlets, oratory, state papers, and in the way they dealt with public issues and devised strategies
for defending themselves revealed a coherent view of external events and their own character in time of crisis.

A useful tool in the examination of this kind of loyalist testimony is the concept of perception, the process of giving structure to thought and sensations. Perception seeks explanations and patterns in the random data the senses detect in a social situation: it uses language “to determine or at least to influence what one notices around him”: it is a process which creates categories and “category-systems” in the mind. Perception deals with a man’s self-image, emotional and intellectual dexterity and stamina, the imperatives govern his conduct in times of crisis and the predispositions which operate in periods of routine. By treating pre-Revolutionary opponents of colonial resistance as verbalizing, category-building, reflective, self-conscious figures, one can gain access to the interior of their political thought.\(^1\) As the pre-Revolutionary critics and opponents of colonial resistance responded to the crises of that period, they constructed three reasonably distinct models of political reality. One was the enunciation of principle, the repeated statement of legal, historical, and constitutional rules which bound the Empire together and necessarily circumscribed colonial liberty. A second was the search for accommodation, the belief that grounds for compromise existed and could be discovered and exploited through the use of good sense and prudence. A third was the appeal to doctrine, the sometimes shrill, uncompromising insistence that all colonial resistance and remonstrance was morally wrong and aesthetically abhorrent.

Thomas Hutchinson was, of course, the preeminent loyalist enunciator of principle, combining a sure grasp of fundamentals with a sensitivity for intricacies. “I have but one set of principles upon government in general and the constitution of this province in particular. There must be one supreme legislature in every state.” He admitted, however, that “it is a very difficult matter to determine any certain proportion of freedom necessary to the happiness of a subordinate state.”\(^2\) He devoted a lifetime to the search for that “certain proportion of freedom” and we know a great deal about the depth and nature of that commitment from Edmund S. Morgan’s analysis of Hutchinson in the Stamp Act crisis, Malcolm Freiberg’s dissection of his ambition and his self-doubts, Clifford K. Shipton’s defense of his rectitude, and Bernard Bailyn’s discovery of his constitutional acumen.\(^3\) What this fragmented, somewhat static, portrait lacks is an appreciation of Hutchinson’s emotionality—the passions which integrated his roles and aspirations and aggravated his suffering. One way to fill this void is to focus, not only on his manifest principles, ambitions, and skills, but also on the strange paradoxes and polarities of his political character.\(^4\)

The strongest of those polarities was his belief that he was primarily a defender of colonial liberty and that prudent submission to British authority was a subtle strategy for preserving that liberty. As Edmund Morgan showed in 1948, Hutchinson privately came close to denying the legitimacy of the entire Grenville program and stated categorically that it did infringe on inherent colonial rights;
yet in 1770 he privately proposed a horrifying set of coercive measures for Britain to impose on Massachusetts. Hutchinson was never conscious of any contradiction. The coercion he sadly recommended was intended to have a stunning, sobering effect on the shortsighted and excited men and inaugurate a stabilizing period and thereby strengthen Massachusetts’ capacity to resist British encroachments. Hutchinson’s tremendous personal reserve created the very suspicions which kept his political life in upheaval; against his aloofness, however, tugged his ambition to provide decisive public leadership. He candidly spoke of this tension in his character during his dispute with the General Court over the Boston Resolves in 1773:

If I am wrong in my principles of government or in the inferences I have drawn from them, I wish to be convinced of my error. I have laid before you the principles of your constitution. If you do not agree with me I wish to know your objections. They may be convincing to me or I may be able to satisfy you of the insufficiency of them. In either case, I hope, we shall be able to put an end to those irregularities which shall ever be the portion of a government where the supreme authority is controverted.

In 1773, that was exactly the kind of dialogue Hutchinson sought to have with his contemporaries—a healing exchange in which he prescribed the premises of the discussion. He could emerge just that far, but no further, from his private contemplation of the issues of liberty and authority.

Hutchinson struggled intelligently with these conflicting impulses toward withdrawal and involvement. He resisted the temptation to dismiss whig argument with superficial rebuttals; he regarded the complexity of the pre-Revolutionary debate with great seriousness; this polarity pitted his dismay against his intellect and curiosity. It enabled him to be at once withdrawn and self-conscious and also capable of seeing himself in a larger context. When he became fully engaged in the task of understanding a tenet of whig belief, Hutchinson brought to his work the full force of his highly controlled emotionality. During the protracted dispute from 1769 to 1772, over the removal of the General Court from Boston, he tried to breathe life and vitality into the notion that the royal instructions to colonial governors were a positive benefit to the political life of the province. As he elaborated his explanation, the Crown’s prerogative became an intimate, all-embracing, pervasive, organic influence which transmuted mobility and finesse to otherwise static executive authority. In turn the governor’s receptiveness, discretion, and intelligence in responding to imperial directives determined their effectiveness. Hutchinson constructed an idealized minuet between Crown and governor which was almost poetic and sensuous in its structure and intricacy. Hutchinson, significantly, conceived of British power as a throbbing, expansive force which could permeate and activate his own behavior as governor. Colonial leaders conceived of British power in exactly the same fashion; as Bernard Bailyn observes, they were transfixed by the “essential . . . aggressiveness”
of political power and by its “endlessly propulsive tendency to expand itself beyond legitimate boundaries.” Confident that he could serve as a channel and instrument of British authority without damaging the liberty of his province, Hutchinson only succeeded in confirming his enemies’ deepest fears about the capacity of the Crown to insinuate itself into the political life of the province.

Hutchinson’s insistence on principle and his calculated style of debate and exposition distinguished him from William Smith, Jr., and other moderate critics of colonial resistance who shunned dispute over principle and sought practical, improvised accommodation with Britain. In 1767, Smith devised a constitution for the British Empire which he believed should be a malleable instrument which could accommodate the growing political maturity of the colonies.

His ability as a constitutional theorist and diagnostician complemented a different set of Smith’s predispositions during the pre-Revolutionary period: his fondness for the intricate strategies which his fellow councillors employed in competing for the ear and trust of successive royal governors, especially William Tryon who arrived in 1771. After one protracted struggle Smith believed he had won Tryon’s confidence and made him suspicious of the rival Delancey faction. “I shall feed that spirit,” he exulted in a moment of revelation, “to disentangle him from a fear of Council and Assembly.” During the Tea crisis in December 1773, he tried to use the same methods to guide Tryon’s hand during a hazardous period. He besieged Tryon with suggestions on how to avoid violence if the tea was landed or how to prevent its unloading if violence was unavoidable. The destruction of the tea in Boston took the decision out of Tryon’s hands and launched a new period of greater crisis for royal officials. “It must mortify Tryon who had spoken so vauntingly and assured the government of the landing” of the tea, Smith noted with customary care. But he was much more aware that his own attempts to guide Tryon’s hand had been of little practical value to the governor. “Tryon will think I animated him to render him unpopular,” he lamented; “how dangerous it is to give private advice.”

Smith appeared in 1774–1775 simply to be a conservative gravitating to the right of his former allies in the Livingston faction; in reality he was wholly engrossed in working out the implications of his chosen roles as constitutional analyst and behind-the-scenes manipulator of government and party policy. He wrote and circulated numerous essays on the constitutional and tactical problems facing colonial leaders and propounded an almost clinical set of negotiating tactics, which included “feeling the pulse of the ministry,” proceeding “without a word about rights,” and exercising exquisite tact and timing. When all this came to naught he responded by writing his longest and most moving exposition of the issues of the Revolution, one which juxtaposed a scathing indictment of British policy and defense of colonial liberty with an absolute refusal to sanction armed rebellion. The conflict between the two commitments reduced him to an abject state of intellectual immobility long before his apparently opportunistic conversion to the British cause. “I persuade myself,” he told an inquisitive committee of
safety on July 4, 1776, “that Great Britain will discern the propriety of negotiating for a pacification.” He could not relinquish the hope that the elusive search for accommodation would transfix the lives of other men as completely as it had his own.11

The enunciation of principle often reflected a concern with law and the details of imperial administration while the search for accommodation expressed an awareness of the subtleties of colonial politics. In contrast, the appeal to doctrine came from men on the periphery of political life and imperial government. Eschewing legal and practical objections to colonial resistance, they focused directly on the immortality and ugliness of discontent. The high Anglican polemicists were, of course, the quintessential doctrinaire loyalists and Bailyn has most effectively shown that their writings struck with jugular accuracy at the most significant tenets of whig theory. In Samuel Seabury’s vivid denunciation of violence and intimidation, Jonathan Boucher’s taut authoritarian logic, and Thomas Bradbury Chandler’s breathtaking endorsement of subordination, Bailyn found “wrathful epitaphs” to an “ancient, honorable, moribund philosophy” of order and obedience.12

Seabury’s fame as a polemicist rests on his colorful and pugnacious denunciation of whig tactics for enforcing the Continental Association boycott on trade with Britain in late 1774 and early 1775. But his vivid language has distracted attention away from the systematic argument which formed the core of the Letters of a Westchester Farmer—the nature of perception itself. Seabury was fascinated with the way in which the mind handles sense impressions and organizes them into concepts. He beseeched his readers to practice enough sophistication to subject each new impression of rebellion to careful and critical scrutiny. Unless men assessed the future implications of their actions and appreciated the power and destructiveness of mass contagion, they could not prudently restrain their enthusiasms nor calm the passions of their fellow men. The root of the problem was the finite capacity of the mind and the limitless appeal of false political ideas. “At present politics seems to engross almost every body,” he complained in 1769, “and leaves no room for more serious and important reflection.” The result by 1774 was a “sullen, sulky obstinacy” which “takes possession of us . . . Preposterous pride! . . . It degrades instead of exalting our characters” and was the product of “all the insidious arts that evilminded and designing men can possibly make use of.” Only by assuming a posture of aloof, watchful skepticism could a man avoid contamination from glib, appealing, but unsupportable patriot contentions. In the midst of a long series of obtuse propositions—one, for example, resurrected virtual representation in terms which no politically knowledgeable loyalist would have defended—Seabury abruptly related the discussion to his central concern. “That you will perceive the force of this reasoning,” he told his polemical rival, Alexander Hamilton, “I cannot pretend to say. A person . . . with jaundice sees no color but yellow. Party heat, the fever of liberty, may vitiate the mind as much as jaundice does the eyes.”13
Hutchinson, Smith, and Seabury only suggest the distinctiveness of the ideas, beliefs, sensibilities, and patterns of response exhibited by men who enunciated principle, searched for accommodation, or appealed to doctrine during the pre-Revolutionary controversy. Although principle, accommodation, and doctrine were not mutually exclusive categories into which men can be placed, the leading prominent opponents of colonial resistance and the most widely circulated antiflight ideas of the pre-Revolutionary period almost all adhere to one of these three modes of thought and feeling. Principle, accommodation, and doctrine were orientations and assumptions which gave direction and focus to men’s thinking and conduct. In some cases individuals shared more than one of these orientations. John Wentworth of New Hampshire was preeminently a man of accommodation with his warm association with the Rockingham Whigs, thorough contempt for the policies and style of officials like Lord Hillsborough, and primary concern for the interests of his province. He gracefully adapted to a substantial reduction in his family’s power in New Hampshire during his governorship. He had a rare degree of serenity which enabled him—without a trace of ambivalence—to contemplate the use of military force to uphold British authority and accept without apparent bitterness his own exile from America. No other loyalist embodied so fully as Wentworth a congenial attachment to both principle and accommodation.14

In most cases, a man who partook of more than one of these orientations was dominated by one particular view of political reality and borrowed incidentally from the others. Joseph Galloway desperately wanted to engineer single-handedly an imperial compromise in 1774. The structure of his ideas about the preservation of liberty and the scope of his ambition to heal the Empire in one brilliant stroke dictated that he pronounce rigid principles about the nature of the Empire and that he insist on the complete acquiescence of other colonial leaders to his leadership. When men did not listen to his explanations of principle and liberty and ignored his pretensions to leadership, they created an unexpectedly severe dilemma: they shattered his image of himself as a master of political theory and public persuasion. Galloway then replaced this shattered self-image with one still more magnificent and yet also consistent with his initial posture as an advocate of accommodation and enunciator of principle: “I have deduced your rights and explained your duties. I have laid before you the constitutional extent of parliamentary jurisdiction. I have pointed to the mode which you ought to pursue for a restoration of those rights.” His concept of role and the dilemma in which it placed him compelled Galloway to locate all of the wisdom necessary to a solution of the imperial impasse in his own mind. At each stage his perception undermined his advocacy of accommodation and intensified his insistence on principle.15

Orientations toward principle, accommodation, or doctrine not only overlapped, they also cut across without completely severing other intellectual alignments during the pre-Revolutionary controversy. Alan Heimert has associated rationalist theology with loyalism or with lukewarm, insensitive support of the
whig movement. In direct conflict with the Calvinist whigs, the rationalist clergy neither believed that British policy sprang from utter human depravity nor believed that confession and repentance was an integral preliminary stage in the defense of American liberty. To the rationalist clergy sin afflicted the thoughtless and unreflective. In political terms the sins which needed confessing and forgiving in 1774–1775 were “turbulent desires, secret views of fostering party spirit, lust for unjust dominion, and impatience with lawful government.” In elaboration of Heimert’s thesis it must also be pointed out that rationalists were subdivided into accommodating and doctrinaire loyalist positions. The accommodating rationalists included Anglicans like William Smith and Jacob Duche and Congregationalists like Gad Hitchcock and Daniel Shute. They endorsed just enough remonstrance to bring colonial discontent to British attention but not so much as to exacerbate the conflict. The doctrinaire rationalist clergy led by Boucher, Chandler, Myles Cooper, and Seabury eschewed this search for a moderate position: political opposition was not an instrument which men might employ responsibly; its “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and evil speaking . . . bitter ungodly spirit toward those who differ . . . in things civil or religious” were intrinsically evil, explained the Rev. Samuel Andrews of Connecticut in 1775. The “confidence” and sense of “girding” for righteous conflict which he saw all around him—which the accommodating rationalists wanted to dignify, channel and moderate—blinded men in Andrews’s view, to the truth that political change was the prerogative of God and not of men.

Just as Andrews felt compelled to look squarely at the moral earnestness of his whig contemporaries, most pre-Revolutionary loyalists felt driven to discover and articulate a single quintessential insight into the causes of the Revolution and of their own plight. The reconstruction of their perception leads directly to each man’s discovery of some central truth about himself and the Revolution. For Egerton Leigh, it came when he discovered that he could relate every step in South Carolina’s political and constitutional development to some stage in his own humiliation and downfall. Once he sensed that unity and coherence in South Carolina history, he could at the same time write a trenchant account of the province’s political development and also establish his own identity by accentuating the very presumptions about himself that most outraged Charleston’s planter-merchant elite and made him a pariah. Jonathan Sewall’s withering contempt for the whig protest in Massachusetts reflected a conflict he had felt throughout his adult life: tension between his intellectual distinction and courage on the one hand and his insecurity about his social and political preeminence on the other. He developed an ironic, slightly cynical, and sometimes bemused dismay over any exuberant human enterprise. These defenses protected him from the kind of volcanic eruptions of rage that racked his friend and ally Peter Oliver. Sewall’s insight enabled him to recognize the source of disorder in Massachusetts, which “is, I say, so truly astonishing, so entirely out of the course of nature, so repugnant to the known principles which most forceably actuate the human
mind that we must search deeper for the grand and hidden spring. . . . This is an enthusiasm in politics like that which religious notions inspire, that drives men on with an unnatural impetuosity [and] baffles and confounds all calculation grounded upon rational principles.”

The loyalist perception of the coming of the American Revolution consisted of brilliantly incisive but partially formed and almost stillborn political fears, apprehensions, uncertainties, impulses toward obstruction, and sensations of ambivalence, immobility, and helplessness. This fragmentation and lack of coalescence in pre-Revolutionary loyalist ideology testified to the fragility of elaborate political ideas in eighteenth-century America and the rapid mortality rate of particular formulations of thought as public men continually struggled to revamp slightly out-of-date intellectual postures. In a political culture that took ideas very seriously, this instability cast marginal political figures such as the critics and victims of pre-Revolutionary protest into an excruciating position. This unstable, fluid political culture not only dominated the eighteenth century—as Jack P. Greene’s two articles on colonial pessimism and anxiety dramatically emphasized—but elements of this malady continued well into the nineteenth century and provided much of the distraught energy expended by James M. Banner’s Federalists and Fred Somkin’s Fourth of July orators.

With the commencement of hostilities in 1775 and the declaration of American independence in 1776, the discrete categories—conservatism and defense of the established order—tended to dissolve. War and the creation of new state governments widened the scope of the conflict and caught thousands of previously obscure men in the machinery of internal security. The people that William H. Nelson calls the “Tory Rank and File” were clusters of “cultural minorities” scattered along the geographical and social periphery of American life: religious pacifists, pro-British Indian traders, backcountry southern farmers, unassimilated ethnic minorities, as well as isolated individuals everywhere impelled by custom, instinct, greed, accident, resentment, or bad luck to oppose independence. They expressed their opposition to the Revolution in more elemental ways than did their counterparts in the pre-Revolutionary controversy. As the War for Independence created loyalist communities in occupied New York, Charleston, and Philadelphia and as communities of exiles formed in England and Canada, a new sense of loyalist identity emerged: the loyalists’ ironic discovery that they were victims of both American aggression and British incompetence. An understandable, if somewhat irrational, paranoia became a positive force in shaping post-Revolutionary loyalist behavior. It engendered a tough, realistic, and implacable determination to surmount the difficulties of rebuilding their lives and constructing a new political social order in British North America. The pre-Revolutionary loyalist perception was only one ingredient in this long and fascinating process. But if this interpretation of the stages of loyalist thought is a valid preliminary diagnosis of the historical problem, then the riches of the Loyalist Papers Project may well fuel a far-reaching inquiry into the comparative intellectual history of...
colonial America, Revolutionary America and England, and post-Revolutionary Canada. 23

Author’s Note (1988)

By the time I wrote this essay, the correct name of the organization mentioned in the last sentence was the Program for Loyalist Studies and Publications, Robert A. East and James E. Mooney, executive and associate directors. While the complete photocopying of loyalist manuscripts, envisioned by the project, was not feasible because of funding limitations, the project did compile and publish A Bibliography of Loyalist Source Material in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, ed., Gregory Palmer (Westport, Conn.: Meckler Publishing, 1982).

Author’s Note (2008)

The principle/accommodation/doctrine conceptualization has held up fairly well over the years. Admittedly no one has strongly invoked it or critically questioned its validity. Nevertheless this formulation now needs fine-tuning.

Principled loyalism received substantial reinforcement in 1973, the same year this essay was first published, when my teacher, Jack P. Greene, published the then newly discovered manuscript treatise by William Knox, “Considerations on the great Question, what is to be done with America?” Knox was Whitehall’s chief authority on colonial administration and also a Georgia loyalist with property and connections in the buffer colony between South Carolina and East Florida. Written in 1778 or early 1779, Knox’s treatise sought a deeper explanation as to why the war had not been the cakewalk he and other imperial officials had assumed it would be and, specifically, why more colonists had not rallied to the royal standard.

“The causes . . . are inherent in the Constitution,” Knox speculated, and by “Constitution” he meant literally the materials from which the colonial system had been put together—or constituted. “Opulence” and geographic “greatness” had instilled into colonial thinking the idea that the colonies were “distinct” rather than subordinate communities. Love of monarchy had atrophied in North America and habits of reliance on their “connection” with the British state never put down deep roots. The earliest settlers knew “poverty” and lived in a “mean condition,” which, from the outset, instilled abhorrence of British taxes and distaste for the accoutrements of royal government. The abundance of lawyers in the colonial elite was an “important and fatal cause of the predominancy of Democratic power.” Concessions early charters made to religious dissenters undermined religious as well as social “hierarchy.” Finally the ignorance of Crown officials about these very manifestations of imperial weakness spawned “mistakes” in imperial governance that could be corrected only by laying down “a new foundation upon Principles of Wisdom, Justice, and solid Policy” giving “happiness” to the colonists sufficient to “render equally their Inclination and their interest to continue [as] Members of the British Empire.”
What stands out in *that* enunciation of loyalist principle is the admission that loyalism was a persuasion dependent on enlightened statecraft. Had I been more alert to Knox’s newly surfaced insights as I completed “The Loyalist Perception,” this essay would have focused more on statecraft than on provincial political identity. (See Jack P. Greene, ed., “William Knox’s Explanation for the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 30 [April 1973]: 293–306, and “The Deeper Roots of Colonial Discontent: William Knox’s Structural Explanation for the American Revolution,” in *Understanding the American Revolution: Issues and Actors* [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995], 10–17.)

Likewise, doctrine, the final element in the loyalist perception, has been powerfully reinforced by subsequent scholarship: J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Clark’s companion volume, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), argue that high toryism was normative throughout rural England and that this healthy development accounted for the stability of British politics during what Robert R. Palmer has called “the age of the democratic revolution.” While the majority of Americans in the 1770s and 1780s had moved beyond the pale of Clark’s sense of political reality in England, had I looked more closely at English toryism in the scholarship of the 1980s, I would have better appreciated the bedrock of political support in England on which the North ministry, and its loyalist allies, depended.

Finally, whither accommodation? When the accommodating loyalists beheld the Rockingham Whigs, they perceived the kind of British political leadership that could save the colonies from revolution and keep Americans content under mild imperial rule. Rockingham Whiggery was a mirror in which the accommodating loyalists saw their fondest dreams. In Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), the Rockingham party was not mentioned. But a closer reading revealed that the Rockingham Whigs were not in his book because they were not products of the political culture of their times. Rich, idealistic, and intellectually ambitious, they had no need of imperial grandeur and hierarchy to complete their identity and no cause to be mindful of the fragility of the Hanoverian regime Robert Walpole and George I had socially constructed in the 1720s and 1730s as a special trusteeship for factional politicians later in the century. The historic moderation of the Rockingham Whigs and their colonial clients obscured the political culture of their times.24

Repealing the Stamp Act and instituting negotiations for peace in 1782 represented the outer limits of their capabilities. In 1766 they took the pressure off the accommodating loyalists; in 1782 they set in motion the negotiations that nudged the Continental Congress toward loyalist conciliation and which Parliament sweetened with a grant for loyalist compensation.
Notes


6. Hutchinson, Speeches of... Governor Hutchinson to the General Assembly... (Boston, 1773), pp. 13–14; see also his “Dialogue between a European and an American [Englishman],” Hutchinson Papers, vol. 28, p. 102, Mass. Arch.


