

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "THE MOBS ALL CRYD PEACE WITH AMERICA": THE GORDON RIOTS AND REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

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2023

Dissertation directed by: Burke Professor of American History and
Associate Professor Holly Brewer, Department of
History

In June 1780, London was brought to its knees by a week-long insurrection. Rioters broke open and set ablaze nearly all of London's prisons, ransacked and burned the properties of government officials, and attacked the Bank of England. The riots were in response to the British government's rejection of a mass petition demanding the repeal of a 1778 law granting rights to Catholic subjects to encourage enlistment in the military to fight in the American Revolutionary War. The rioters' reaction to the rejected petition reflected broader, transatlantic concerns about government operating without the consent of the governed, echoing grievances raised by American colonists prior to their declaring independence. To regain control over London, George III ordered 15,000 troops into the city, commanding them to bypass the necessary approval of civil magistrates and fire-at-will, hence abandoning legal restrictions on his power. After the insurrection was over, American Patriots and Loyalists deliberated at length over their

meaning; many Britons, in turn, blamed the riots on dangerous ideologies and American conspirators.

This dissertation explores how the June 1780 riots demonstrate the connections between the American Revolution and wider struggles across the British empire. While building on scholarship of the riots, British politics, and the American Revolution, I argue that these riots brought the American rebellion home to British soil, posing a significant challenge to the stability of the British nation and empire. I examine how the riots gave rise to rumors about the true culprit behind the uprising, with different groups laying blame at the feet of Catholics or Methodists, or as a plot of the British Ministry or the Americans and French. I interrogate how Patriots and Loyalists utilized the riots to reaffirm commitment to their political ideologies. I explore how news of the insurrection influenced delicate diplomatic negotiations amidst an imperial war. By investigating the myriad connections between the London riots and the American Revolution, I show how power was contested on both sides of the Atlantic and how ideas and information spread and shaped political ideology. In doing so, I argue that the London riots were a crucial event during the American Revolution.

“THE MOBS ALL CRYD PEACE WITH AMERICA”:
THE GORDON RIOTS AND REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

by

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Introduction

On June 17, 1780, John Adams, while stationed in Paris, penned a letter to his wife, Abigail, relaying the remarkable news from England. “London is in the Horrors,” he observed, adding that “A Spirit of Bigotry and Fanaticism mixing with the universal discontents of the nation, has broke out into Violences of the most dreadful Nature.” John proceeded to recount the various targets and results of the violence: the mob’s attack on Lord Mansfield’s house and their burning of his venerated manuscripts, the physical attacks and insults to the Lords of Parliament, the destruction of the prisons, the deaths of civilians, and the British government committing Lord George Gordon to the Tower of London for high treason. “The Mobs all cryd Peace with America, and War with France—poor Wretches! as if this were possible,” he concluded. John’s comment reflects his understanding that the political situation in Britain was intertwined with the United States’ Revolutionary War. For the Patriot leader writing from his diplomatic post in France, there could be no peace without recognition of American independence. The crown and conservative cabinet, however, were set upon squashing the American rebellion—to hell with the costs or opposing opinions. And, it seemed, the British government was equally, if not more, intent on crushing the protest and rebellion in London itself.¹

Nearly a week later, John wrote Abigail again, including a newspaper with an account of the riots. He offered additional commentary on the events, noting that the “Riots discover Symptoms of deep distress and misery, among the lower Classes of

¹ “John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1780,” *Founders Online*.

People,” and, most tellingly, “The King seems in a fair Way to the Summit of all his wishes, absolute Power. Martial Law is very agreeable to him.” The Gordon Riots, as history would come to know the week-long riot, laid bare fractures within the British nation and empire. They brought the grievances, anger, and violence of the American rebellion to British soil. At the height of the American War of Independence, John Adams saw in the insurrection parallels and potential results for the American struggle for independence. He was not the only one. People on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the American Revolution drew connections, saw similarities, and found possible outcomes for the American Revolutionary War in the events of the Gordon Riots.²

In early June 1780, flames had licked across London’s night skies. What became a week-long riot started off as people expressing their rights as British subjects: a (mass) protest that accompanied the delivery of a (monster) petition to Parliament asking for the repeal of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act (CRA). The bill, which gave minor concessions to Catholic subjects so that they would be eligible and encouraged to enlist in the king’s military, had received support from both the Tory and Whig parties.³ But

² “John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 June 1780,” *Founders Online*. I differentiate between “American Revolution,” to mean the ideas and political protests between 1765-1775, and the “American War/American Revolutionary War/American War of Independence,” which refers to the violent conflict between the British military and American Continental Army/Militias to secure the independence of the United States. There is a great deal of overlap between the two terms, but I think it is important to distinguish that the American Revolution comes first and culminates in 13 British colonies declaring independence. That said, the ideas of the American Revolution continued during the war, feeding into ongoing political discourse between Britons and Americans.

³ The act relaxed restrictions on Catholic landownership, removed penalties for Catholics attending mass and teaching children, and removed the requirement for Catholics to condemn the Catholic Church when taking the oath to the British crown. See Nicholas Rogers, “The Gordon riots and the politics of war,” in *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Ian Haywood and John Seed, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25-35.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Catholic” to refer to the Roman Catholic religion and its members. While other forms of Catholicism existed in the 18th century, the most prevalent and relevant to the topic at hand was Roman Catholicism. People at the time used variations on the term:

it had also coincided with growing concern about the government's power and relationship to its constituents, tapped into historic fears about Catholic absolutism, and raised questions about what constituted the British identity—similar to questions raised in the crisis with the American colonies. An ambitious and impassioned young Scottish lord, George Gordon, whose elder brother had bought him an English seat in Parliament, became the head of the Protestant Association, a group which formed in response to the Catholic Relief Act. As the group mobilized support for a petition, Lord George met with Lord North, the Prime Minister, and separately with King George III, to express the concerns the Protestant Association had about the Catholic Relief Act. Neither was inclined to act.⁴ Over 40,000 signed the petition to demonstrate the will of the people. The charismatic Lord George encouraged supporters to join him in the presentation of the petition—approximately 50,000 did. Onlookers noted the protestors comported themselves respectfully as they marched through town, despite their size and fervor. These were middling and working-class people who had pride in their identity as Protestant Britons. But as the day wore on, as Members of Parliament who supported the CRA came to Parliament and were met with jeers and attacks on their persons and properties, and—most crucially—as word came from Lord George that the petition would not be taken up that day by Parliament, the crowd grew angry. Lord George implored them to leave peacefully and Parliament's horse guards dispersed the crowd. Most people left without incident. But some decided to express their anger by

“Roman Catholick,” “Romish religion,” “Catholick,” and the loaded “Popish.” To enhance the readability of this work, I have decided to use “Catholic” unless quoting the original text.

⁴ As the third son of the Duke of Gordon, George Gordon was commonly referred to as “Lord George” as a mark of his noble blood, but not his right to inherit the dukedom (he would be “Lord Gordon” then). As such, I refer to him as “Gordon” or “Lord George” throughout this dissertation to reflect his status (and for variety in prose). I appreciate Trevor Burnard for instructing me on this practice.

plundering and setting fire to the Catholic chapels of the Sardinian Embassy and the Bavarian Ambassador. So began the 1780 London riots.

The subsequent nights would see increased destruction and violence. The municipal government, ill-equipped to police the rioters and previously supportive of the political aims of the Protestant Association, was paralyzed to respond as rioters pursued Catholics or those seen as being sympathetic to Catholics. Initial targets were mainly areas that Catholic subjects frequented—chapels, taverns, Catholic enclaves like Moorfields. Sir George Saville, the sponsor of the 1778 CRA, saw his house burned by rioters. But as riots entered their fourth night, the mob’s targets shifted to increasingly be affiliated with the government or those seen as “permissive” of Catholics. Londoners took to painting “No Popery” on their doors, hoping to ward off marauding rioters seeking to root-out and punish those who dared to undercut the notion of Protestant British identity by being tolerant of Catholics and opening the door to absolutism. June 6 saw the rioters sacking the newly rebuilt Newgate Prison, along with all the other major London prisons—Fleet, King’s Bench, the New Prison, and Clerkenwell. Rioters such as Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover attacked these symbols of the government’s power and authority, setting free the prisoners—both those rioters imprisoned from the days before as well as non-rioters imprisoned for other reasons. Mary Gardiner participated with approximately 40 other rioters in ransacking Lord Chief Justice Mansfield’s home in Bloombury Square.⁵ Gardiner pulled wainscotting off the walls, throwing it along with Mansfield’s revered collection of books and manuscripts into the street below, where other rioters used the materials

⁵ #454 Mary Gardiner, 13 September 1780, *Proceedings of the Old Bailey, Old Bailey Online*.

to stoke the bonfire they had built. Other prominent members of the government and society saw similar attacks on their own property—or feared they were next.

The riots peaked on Wednesday, June 7, a night that Horace Walpole called “Black Wednesday” and remarked that it was “the most horrible night I ever beheld, which for six hours together I expected to end in half the town being reduced to ashes.”⁶ As fires raged across the city, the mob mobilized to attack its grandest target yet: the Bank of England. But for the fierce suppression by the king’s troops (aided by Alderman John Wilkes and a desperate Lord George Gordon), the insurrectionists might have succeeded in taking the bank. However, having had enough of the ineptitude of the city government, the King-in-Council had deployed the military into the city to protect the bank and quell the rioters. Approximately 15,000 troops entered the city and encamped in Hyde Park, staying in the city limits for not just the resolution of the riots, but for the duration of the conflict with the American colonies. As the fires died down, between 300 and 700 civilians were dead. The government prosecuted over 150 men and women for participating in the riots, 62 of whom were sentenced to be executed.⁷ The Privy Council arrested Lord George, who had implored rioters to stop after enflaming them with his rhetoric, confining him to the Tower of London and trying him for high treason. All told, the riots resulted in over £100,000 in damages to property, opened the door for the king to acquire more power, and helped to return a conservative majority to Parliament in the subsequent autumn election. For one week in June 1780, in the midst of the American Revolutionary War, London was nearly

⁶ As quoted in J. Paul De Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 110.

⁷ Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 7; 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. Of the 62 sentenced to be executed, 27 had their sentence commuted or pardoned.

brought to its knees by riots over the responsiveness of the governing to the governed. The rebellion abroad had surfaced at home.

The June 1780 riots established that the radical politics that animated American Patriots to reject Parliament and the king's authority and ultimately declare independence were not limited to the North American colonies. The insurrection revealed that Britain's crisis was not just an imperial one, but a domestic one as well. Once one starts to look deeply into the activities, motives, and ideas of participants in the lead up to, during, and following the riots, the connections become obvious. The riots showed that some Britons shared the issues, grievances, and even the desires that kindled rebellion in Britain's American colonies. It was the closest Great Britain came to having an outright revolution within its domestic borders in the eighteenth century, and it happened in the very capital of the empire. Gordon and his Protestant Association drew connections between their criticism of the British government and those of the American Patriots pre-war. The Protestant Association was sharply critical of the 1778 CRA for arming Catholics and sending them to fight against Protestant Americans, their brethren. Government rejection of their petition seemed to confirm their fears about the government's desire for, and amassing of, arbitrary power. The rejection showed that the revered British rights to protest and petition were, perhaps, not as sacrosanct or robust as Britons believed. If the king and Parliament could ignore their subjects' rights, just as they had done in the colonies, then what other solution did Protestant Association supporters have but to violently rebel?

The Protestant Associators' fears were further supported by the king calling in troops and ordering them to act at will (and circumvent civil magistrate approval) in

suppressing the crowd, escalating the number of dead and injured civilians. Amidst the items seized from rioters by soldiers under the command of General Jeffery “Smallpox Blankets” Amherst were handbills advocating for expanding suffrage, redistributing power, and condemning the king as a papist and calling for him to be dethroned.⁸ Further, it is telling that the British Ministry and the king referred to both the riot in London and the revolution in their American colonies as a “rebellion.” Using that term linked the discontent of the London mob with the discontent of the American colonists—for both were a response by the King’s subjects airing their grievances and challenging the authority of the King’s government. To the King and his government, what differentiated the situation in America from that in London was primarily the scope and scale. But essentially, both locations of violent uprisings were threats to the functioning, order, and stability of the British empire.⁹ In different ways, the Protestant Associators and the British Ministry saw connections and similarities between the events in June and the situation in the revolting American colonies. Britain’s imperial crisis in her colonies had come home to roost.

The riots were not merely a reflection of the American struggle for independence, but also influenced the way that struggle unfolded. They acted as a

⁸ Lord Grenville to Lord Amherst, 7 June 1780, The National Archives at Kew (TNA, henceforth) WO 34/103/58-60; Lt. Col. Twisleton to Lord Amherst, 9 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/228-233; Richard Worsley to Lord Amherst, 11 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/325-326; Report from Lt. Col. Jonathan Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

General Jeffery Amherst is notorious for the scheme to give blankets infected with smallpox to Native Americans during Pontiac’s War (1763-1766). In both his response to the riots and to the Native Americans rebelling against British control, Amherst displayed a striking ruthlessness attitude.

⁹ John Adams’ unpublished July 22, 1780, letter (“XII. ‘Letters from a Distinguished American,’ No. 12, Unpublished,’ *Founders Online*) meditated on the use of the term “rebellion” in the King’s July 8 speech proroguing Parliament. Adams notes that the king’s ministers used the term to describe his American subjects as a means to undercut and dismiss their concerns. Labeling those who objected to the actions of the British government as in “rebellion” was a means to “Stir up Armies, Navies and nations to unlimited Rage” against those who dared to voice dissent.

prism, taking in the ideas and practices of the American Revolution before refracting and dispersing them. The London insurrection gave rise to rumors over the cause of the uprising, with blame laid at the feet of Catholics or Methodists, or as a plot of the British Ministry or the Americans and French. The conspiracy rumors circulating in the wake of the riots contributed to how individuals around the Atlantic came to terms with the event and situated it against the backdrop of the American Revolutionary War. Meanwhile, in Patriot and Loyalist American networks, the rebellion attracted the attention of politicians, newspaper printers, military officials, and exiled refugees.¹⁰ They spread news of the riots, adding interpretation of its events and crafting narratives that suited their political objectives. To the American Patriots and Loyalists fighting against one another over American independence, the riots were a distillation of the ideas and events of the American Revolution and outbreak of war. But with an added twist on their own story: an ending that confirmed their worst fears and best hopes. The conflict raged between American Patriots and the British government and its Loyalist supporters, whereas the riots had been brought to a close, with just lingering threads for politics and the judiciary to sort out. For Patriots and Loyalists, the riots provided opportunity not only to confirm their own political ideologies, but to read the tea leaves

¹⁰ I use “Patriot” to represent those supporting American Independence, and “Loyalist” for those supporting remaining under British dominion. I acknowledge that these are rather broadly defined—level of commitment to one side or another varied for a variety of reasons—location, race, religion, economic interests, among others. Assigning these labels may be generalizations and imply a stronger political conviction or identity than in fact existed, but are useful to sort through trends in different interpretations and contexts of the news of the riots. I am also aware that these terms carry connotations that may imply a prejudice and implied support. Yet both terms have not only been used by historians for years, but are also terms used—albeit to different degrees—by subjects in their contemporary times. For discussions on using the terms “Patriots” and “Loyalists,” see Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History 1750-1804* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 2, fn. 4; Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973); xi-xii; Jim Picuch, *Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775-1782* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), xi.

and speculate about the potential future of the conflict. The riots further influenced the American war, which had become a global war with the addition of France and Spain as allies to the American insurgents, by injecting themselves into diplomatic negotiations and encounters. Entering these arenas, the riots added a new variable for diplomats to grapple with, adding another area of contingency in the ongoing conflict.

To better understand the transatlantic political developments that led to the 1780 London riots, I conceptualize the British Atlantic as a feedback loop. Feedback loops operate as one of two models, positive or negative, though the system can move from one model to the other, and back again. One key element to the functioning of a feedback loop is the distance/speed between nodes. The negative feedback loop operates in a state of equilibrium, wherein each node feeds the other in a balanced loop. Information is shared quickly between nodes, helping to stabilize the system. But the more dangerous, and more apt for our purposes, is the positive feedback loop, wherein some sort of accelerant causes the loop to intensify between nodes. The slower the feedback between nodes, perhaps created by significant distance between points on the loop, the more unstable and reactive the system becomes. In the situation involving Anglo-Atlantic politics during the British imperial crisis, what was once relatively balanced quickly started to accelerate and intensify the input felt in each node. The initial tensions and misunderstandings mixed with the slowness of transatlantic communication to push the British Atlantic into a positive feedback loop.

The amateur infographics below are my attempt to visualize this process (figures 1 and 2). The Coercive Acts adopted in Britain led to the Boston Tea Party, the formation of the Continental Congress, and the Olive Branch Petition. In response to

the Olive Branch Petition, the British government deployed British troops into the American colonies. Conflict between the British troops and American colonists spurred on the outbreak of war, the Declaration of Independence, and alliances with the Catholic Empires. The alliance increased the demand for troops, which led to the 1778 CRA. Passage of the CRA provoked the Protestant Association petition and the Gordon Riots, which reified political commitment among American Patriots and Loyalists, and interceded in diplomatic negotiations between allies and between belligerents. Circulating back and forth across the Atlantic, the politics radicalized as each side fed off the other in a positive feedback loop. The key accelerants were distance and time. The longer it took for information to travel (anywhere between 3 and 8 weeks across the Atlantic, depending on winds and time of year), the more time both sides had to speculate and react in a vacuum of information. The distance between Britain and the American colonies created the perfect breeding ground for uncertainty and suspicion, which pushed people to react when news and information arrived that they did not expect or like. Understanding the American Revolution and Gordon Riots as part of a positive feedback loop underscores the volatility of the British imperial system.¹¹

¹¹ Some works that helped me conceptualize feedback loops and their operations include Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, "From There to Here: Punctuated Equilibrium to the General Punctuation Thesis to a Theory of Government Information Processing," *The Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 40, no. 1 (2012): 1-19; Charles S. Carver and Michael F. Scheier, "The Self-Attention-Induced Feedback Loop and Social Facilitation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* vol. 17 (1981): 545-568; Akhilesh Bajaj and Sarma R. Nidumolu, "A Feedback Model to Understand Information System Usage," *Information & Management* vol. 33 (1998): 213-224. I would like to thank my brother, Mark Michalak, an electrical engineer, for the helpful conversations explaining how feedback loops work in electrical systems and in explaining the difference between positive and negative feedback loops.

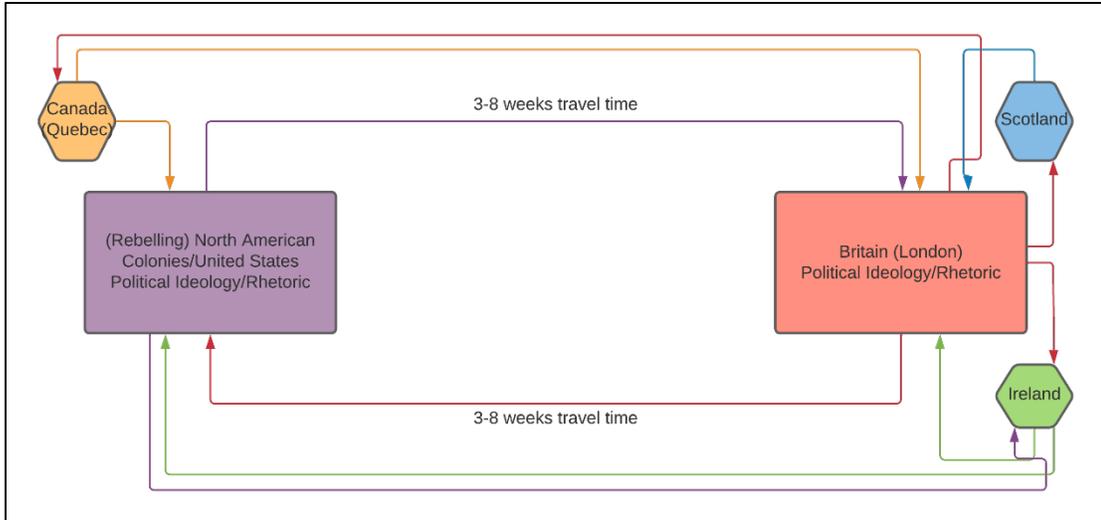


Figure 1: Figure 1: Eighteenth Century Anglo-Atlantic General Feedback Loop

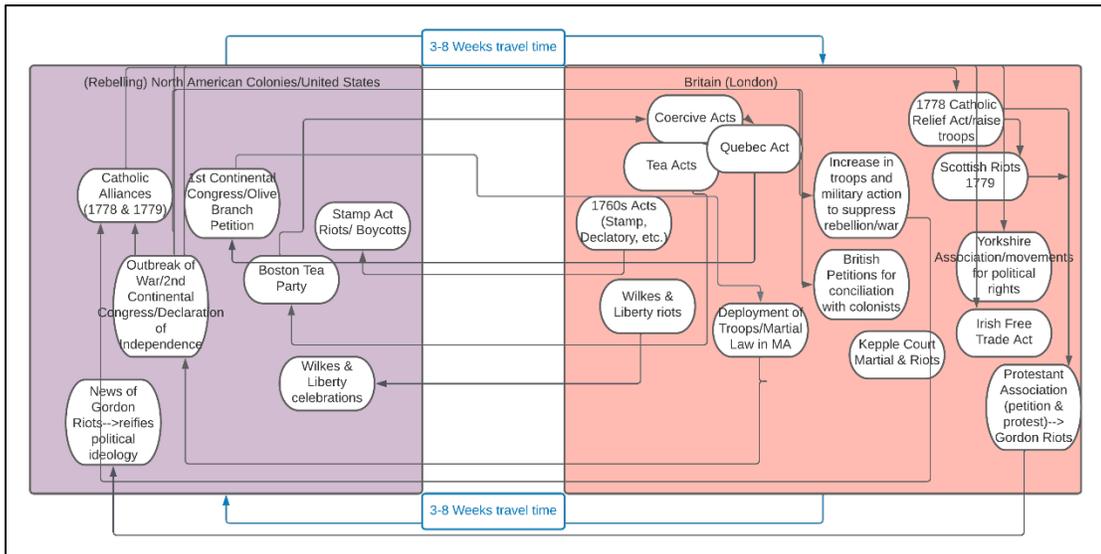


Figure 2: Positive Feedback Loop Model with Some Key Political Events in the American Revolution and War

The domestic riots occurred at a moment when the British Empire was in crisis and revolutionary ideas were percolating around the Atlantic world. The riots exhibited many of the contentions that would help to shape the Age of Revolutions: concerns about representation, questions about power and authority and the role of the government,

attacks on iconographies of power, identity fracturing and formation.¹² The London insurrection did not merely occur alongside this revolutionary moment, but were an integral part of it. They reflected that the anger, discontent, and grievances of the American Revolution were felt by Britons within Britain. Further, the riots influenced the actions and decisions of those participating in the American Revolutionary War—prompting Patriot and Loyalist Americans to continue or consider their political engagement, and opening windows and closing doors on delicate diplomatic exchanges. The 1780 London riots were a pivotal moment in the American Revolutionary War, a significant battlefield that brought the war home to Britain, and influenced the course of the rest of the war.

Historiography

In showing that the Gordon Riots were an extension of the American Revolution, I contend that the riots and the rebellion in America were fruit of the same tree, revealing the larger, systemic fractures in the British system of governance. The London insurrection demonstrated that American Patriots' criticisms of creeping absolutism, deficient representation, and betrayals of British identity and liberties—and what that identity and those liberties were—was not merely an imperial

¹² See Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolution in Global Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Stuart Andrews, *The rediscovery of America: transatlantic crosscurrents in an age of revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

I use Wim Klooster's construct as a guide for situating the Gordon Riots within the Age of Revolutions. Klooster complicates R.R. Palmer's earlier paradigm of the age of revolution being democratic, by noting that democracy is often a "temporary by-product of some insurrections." Since the Gordon Riots did not achieve a revolution, their placement within the framework must depend upon their similarities in origin and method. In this, Klooster's benchmarks are particularly helpful: importance of international politics and inter-imperial warfare, revolution (or rebellion) was not foreordained, and there were often "overtones" of civil war. See Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World*, 1-5.

misunderstanding between the center and the periphery. The riots demonstrated some Britons raised those same criticisms in the very center itself—London—in relation to what was ostensibly a domestic government issue. Scholars have largely ignored the relationship between the Gordon Riots and the American Revolution, and those who have paid attention to it tend to focus on surface level connections.¹³ My work is first to substantially probe the multitude of ties between the London insurrection and the American Revolution. These connections appear not only in hindsight, but were understood in real time by those experiencing the upheavals during the American War of Independence. The major historiographical interpretation of the London riots has primarily explored them from an internal British perspective. I, however, differ from these interpretations by approaching the riots as being intricately connected to the American Revolution—not only in their impact, but also in the influences on the riots and British and American’s interpretations of them. My work builds on and bridges three main historiographies: the history of the London riots, British political history, the history of the American Revolution and the Revolutionary War.

My dissertation contributes to the historiography of the riots by illuminating how the riots manifested revolutionary ideas in Britain and influenced political ideology during the war. The historiography of the riots has evolved substantially over the span of two centuries. The earliest works on the insurrection portrayed the rioters

¹³ For some that have explored some of the relatively surface level connections between the riots and the American Revolution/Revolutionary War, see: Ian Haywood and John Seed, eds., *The Gordon Riots*; David Featherstone, “Atlantic networks, antagonisms, and the formation of subaltern political identities,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (June 2005): 387-404; Brad A. Jones, “In Favour of Popery: Patriotism, Protestantism, and the Gordon Riots in the Revolutionary British Atlantic,” *Journal of British Studies* 52 (January 2013): 79-101; Mike Rapport, *The Unruly City: Paris, London, and New York in the Age of Revolution* (Basic Books, 2017), Brad A. Jones, *Resisting Independence: Popular Loyalism in the Revolutionary British Atlantic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

as drunkards and criminals. Those rioters not painted as the dregs of society were instead portrayed as easily manipulated by their prejudice and ignorance. This interpretation, captured in engravings and in literary works by authors such as Charles Dickens, formed the primary narrative of the riots until the twentieth century.¹⁴ In the first half of the twentieth century, Paul de Castro and Christopher Hibbert added nuance to the story of the riots, particularly in granting some legitimacy to the Protestant Association and their petition. Though Castro and Hibbert both sympathized with the petitioners' motives, they faulted them for their intolerance towards Catholics and how easily their movement was compromised by a dangerous mob.¹⁵

A turning point in the historiographical interpretation of the riot occurred with the rise of social history and the work of George Rudé. Through analysis of the demographics of the crowd and their victims, Rudé argued that the rioters had both political and material motives that informed their choice of targets. Crucially, Rudé contended that the crowd's attacks on key symbols of power and authority (MPs' and justices' homes, prisons, the Bank of England) reflected rioters' displeasure at the actions of those in power and of a higher status.¹⁶ Since Rudé's work scholars have

¹⁴ Thomas Holcroft, *Thomas Holcroft's A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Gordon Riots, London, 1780*, Garland Garvey Smith, ed. (Atlanta, GA: The Emory University Library, 1944). This interpretation was later fictionalized in Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1841). For more analysis of these early types of portrayals of the riots, including a more critical read on them, see Ian Haywood, "A metropolis in flames and a nation in ruins': the Gordon riots as sublime spectacle," *The Gordon Riots*, 117-143; Miriam L. Wallace, "Thomas Holcroft and the Gordon riots: Romantic revisionings," *The Gordon Riots*, 162-181.

¹⁵ J. Paul De Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926); Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord Gordon and the London Riots of 1780* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958; rev. Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004).

¹⁶ 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; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964); George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York: The Viking Press, 1952, rev. 1970).

started with the premise of the riots being a legitimate expression of social, political, and cultural anxiety. This is an important transition, which underlies my larger analysis that the riots were part of an Atlantic revolutionary challenge to traditional political structures. Nicholas Rogers' book on crowds, culture, and politics in eighteenth-century Britain framed the riots as a populist uprising, stirred by anti-authority sentiment, but still with political aims.¹⁷ More recently, Ian Haywood and John Seed brought together a variety of essays in an edited volume on the Gordon Riots that examined the cultural and political influences on the rioters and the historiography. These essays explored petitioning culture in eighteenth century Britain, anti-Popery traditions, Protestantism in British identity formation, cultural factors that led to the June 1780 riots, and artistic and written portrayals of the riots in the years following. Haywood and Seed's collection asserted that the riots reflected the social and political discontents of the time and the responses to them, including (to limited extent) the revolutionary ideas and events circulating the Atlantic.¹⁸

Following the turn towards Atlantic history in the last forty years, historians of the riots have begun to incorporate and explore some of the Atlantic influences and links to the London insurrection. Authors such as David Featherstone and Brad Jones have examined Atlantic influences on the development of both mainstream and subaltern political identity, noting how interactions brought on by the circulation of goods, peoples, and ideas around the Atlantic shaped peoples' sense of national and political identity. These Atlantic connections and influences on the crowd are further

¹⁷ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Haywood and Seed, eds., *The Gordon Riots*.

reflected in Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh's work, in which they argued that a nascent, international class-consciousness had formed that motivated the rioters in selecting their targets.¹⁹ I build upon this most recent historiography of the riots to fully probe the Atlantic ties between the riots and the American Revolution.

Second, my work builds upon and contributes to the history of eighteenth-century British politics. In the last century, works in this field have moved beyond the Namierite school of Georgian politics driven by personal motivation to appreciate the role that ideology and party played in political developments.²⁰ As historians have expanded our understanding of how the British state evolved and operated in the eighteenth century, many incorporate the riots into their narrative of political and social developments during the American war and political reform movements. For some histories of the British nation in the eighteenth century, the riots primarily served to highlight anti-Catholic bigotry and the importance of Protestantism within the British nation.²¹ Other authors have explored the persistence of crowd activity in the eighteenth century as part of regular, class-based regulation and activity, including the riots as

¹⁹ Featherstone, "Atlantic networks, antagonisms, and the formation of subaltern political identities"; Jones, "In Favour of Popery"; Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*. In addition to the scholars exploring the Atlantic influence on the riots, Dominic Green has explored Lord George Gordon's Atlantic ties in his 2012 dissertation on Gordon's life. See Green, "The Lunatick Apostle: The Life and Times of Lord George Gordon (1751-1793)," PhD diss., (Brandeis University, 2012).

²⁰ Lewis B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1963); Lewis B. Namier, *Crossroads of Power; Essays on Eighteenth-Century England*, v. 2 (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970); Lewis B. Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, 2d ed (London: Macmillan, 1966); John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 1976); Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians; the Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford, 1951-2*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Penelope J. Corfield, *The Georgians: The Deeds and Misdeeds of 18th-Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Paul Langford, *Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

demonstrative of this trends persistence and modification.²² Other historians, such as Ian R. Christie, Eliga Gould, and John Brewer, have examined how imperial wars shaped the growth of the British state and influenced political actions and beliefs. However, in their effort to tell the larger story of the British imperial state's development and operation, they end up treating the riots as a brief, disruptive event in the larger operation of British government and politics.²³ The focus of these works obscures the importance of the riots to the fracturing of the British empire and the challenges to the British constitutional order. Building on these important works, my dissertation sheds light on the role that the Gordon Riots played in bringing the American rebellion onto British soil. While the London insurrection posed a serious challenge to the British government, that government was able to pivot from the riots to retain its majority and curtail coinciding political reform efforts that featured many of the grievances voiced by American Patriots.

Third, my dissertation contributes to the historiography of the American Revolution by broadening what (and where) we conceive of as revolutionary activity and how that factors into the course of the war. Aside from early works on the American Revolution written in the few decades after the war concluded, the London riots have largely been absent from major works that document the revolution's causes and

²² Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964); Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 2004); Lloyd I. Rudolph, "The Eighteenth Century Mob in America and Europe," *American Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1959): 447–69; Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*.

²³ Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815*, *The New History of England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture/University of North Carolina Press, 2000); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

course.²⁴ However, by building on the works of historians examining the causes and course of the American Revolution, I contend the insurrection in London provides further support for the role of ideas in driving the revolution.²⁵ Bernard Bailyn modeled taking seriously political writings by tracing how Americans' ideas about consent, governance, and the structuring of society drew from early radical English political thought and reinterpreted through the lens of the American colonial experiences. Similarly, Gordon Wood asserted the radicalism of the American Revolution by examining Patriots' embrace of a republican form of government and rejection of monarchy and aristocracy. The radicalism of the American Revolution comes into sharp focus when examining the London insurrection inspired by Patriot rhetoric and sharing their grievances.²⁶ Amidst the London rebels were handbills advocating for the dethroning of the king and an expansion of political rights for the people, echoing Patriots' political demands.²⁷ My work contributes to the historiography of the

²⁴ For the early works that include the riots in their narrative of the revolution, see David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, ed. Lester Cohen (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1990 (orig. 1789)); Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution. Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1805). Some of the major, more recent works on the American Revolution and Revolutionary War that ignore the riots include: Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016); Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution: Revised Edition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). For works that have included the riots, but to a relatively limited degree (a few pages or perhaps a chapter), see Richard Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983); Brad A. Jones, *Resisting Independence*.

²⁵ For the role of ideas in the American Revolution, see: Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1992); Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution; Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776.*, (New York: Knopf, 1972).

²⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). See also T.H. Breen's recent work, which couched revolutionary actors as "insurgents," as another expression of the American Revolution's radicalism. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People*, First edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

²⁷ Lord Grenville to Lord Amherst, 7 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/58-60; Lt. Col. Twisleton to Lord Amherst, 9 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/228-233; Richard Worsley to Lord Amherst, 11 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/325-326; Report from Lt. Col. Jonathan Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

American Revolution that considers the role of ideas as motivating factors for revolutionary action, and expands that location to include activity that occurred in the heart of the British empire. I build on this historiographical theme by explaining why shared ideological origins and similar circumstances produced one event that history remembers as a revolution, and another event remembered as an unsuccessful rebellion. Because of the differences in outcomes these two events have yet to be adequately examined as part of the same underlying struggle over power and authority.

Additionally, my work contributes to histories that examine the course of the war by examining the motivation of Patriots and Loyalists in the midst of the conflict. There is a deep historiography on Loyalists and Patriots, covering everything from ideology, motivations, organization, and activities. Historiography of the Patriots tends to be subsumed into the larger historiography of the American Revolution itself. Yet there are still works that drill down into Patriot ideology, motivations, and organization that I build upon in this dissertation.²⁸ While tackling different aspects to Americans' decisions to throw in with the Patriot cause, these works help situate the multifaceted goals that Patriots pursued in waging war to achieve independence. Particularly useful have been the works by historians examining Patriot ideology and Patriot networks of communication (which often overlapped).²⁹ I situate the news of the Gordon Riots

²⁸ Some influential works include: Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking, 2005); Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*; Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party & the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

²⁹ Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, *The Press & the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981); Joseph M. Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing, 1763-1789*

within this Venn Diagram of ideology and communication. The news of the riots was shaped by (and further shaped) Patriot ideology to illuminate particular lessons; these lessons were then disseminated by printers and political leaders through communication networks to reach intended (and unintended) audiences. The historiography of Loyalists follows a similar pattern of attention and analysis, and has been quite robust in the last fifty years.³⁰ The recent work on Loyalists also explores their ideology and motivations, though, like that of their Patriot counterparts, rarely mention the London insurrection. However these historians do provide windows into the morale and ideology of Loyalists at the time when news of the riots circulated. I use these works on Loyalism to augment the few sources discussing the riots from Loyalists living in the rebelling American colonies.

One of the major trends in American Revolution historiography has been to debate whether the revolution was truly revolutionary. Progressive historians of the early-twentieth century viewed the Revolution as a class conflict, in which the growing economic divergence between the center and periphery created discord between upper

(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Jordan E. Taylor, *Misinformation Nation: Foreign News and the Politics of Truth in Revolutionary America*, 1 online resource vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Catherine Treesh, "Writing Union into Resistance: How Committees of Correspondence Forged a Continental Community," Ph.D. Diss. (New Haven, CT, Yale University, 2021); Jeffrey L. Pasley, "*The Tyranny of Printers*": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

³⁰ Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan, *The Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Robert M. Calhoon, *The Consequences of Loyalism: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Calhoon* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2019); Robert M. Calhoon, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Ruma Chopra, *Choosing Sides: Loyalists in Revolutionary America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, 2013); Robert M. Calhoon et al., eds., *Tory Insurgents: The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010); Mary Beth Norton, *The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972); Jones, *Resisting Independence*; Jim Picuch, *Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775-1782* (Columbia, S.C.: Univ of South Carolina Press, 2008); Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Claude Halstead Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: Peter Smith, 1929).

and lower classes that translated into animus at unfair imperial policies. Imperial historians of the same period also saw the Revolution as revolutionary, but emphasized that defects in the British imperial constitution prompted in the split, as colonists had become accustomed to more self-governance and balked when imperial policies threatened that practice. In the mid-twentieth century, consensus historians challenged the revolutionary premise of the Revolution, arguing instead that there was little internal class conflict, that Americans saw themselves as the true inheritors of English liberties and rights, and that the Americans had established government frameworks prior to the revolution that were continued on after independence was achieved. This interpretation was challenged on multiple fronts in the 1960s and beyond, primarily by those showing changing intellectual and political perspectives on governance, internal conflict as political factors (as demonstrated by the presence of Loyalists), and renewed interest in the socioeconomic divide and changes post-revolution. More recently, the interpretation of the American Revolution has continued several of these arguments, but have incorporated social history methods that look at individual locations, subpopulations, and cultures. Other recent trends have been to incorporate the Atlantic perspective into the analysis of the American Revolution, seeking to place it in the context of the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas—yet often this framework has de-emphasized the imperial role in favor of individual agency. Of note, authors such as Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy have emphasized putting the American Revolution into context with wider, imperial dynamics. My analysis fits within this latter historiographical vein, but in a manner that bridges the imperial and domestic realms that are all-to-often kept apart. I operate by taking seriously ideas as they are expressed

and circulated by individuals participating in or objecting to the American Revolution and the Gordon Riots, while also remaining cognizant of the wider imperial apparatus and constitution that set parameters that some subjects adhered to as other subjects shattered them.³¹

By exhuming the multiple ties and mutual influences between the Gordon Riots into and the American Revolution and the Atlantic world, my research bridges the divide between historiographical interpretations of this era and these events and more fully explores the intersections and overlap that has been largely absent. Both the London insurrection and the American Revolution shared at their core critiques of the relationship between the governed and the governing, raising questions about the British constitution and who had rights and liberties. For the Americans, the theory of virtual representation was an inefficient and demeaning panacea offered by the British government. Their petitions, sent to Parliament and the King, fell on deaf ears by MPs who had little connection to—or fear of—“their” constituents thousands of miles away. The rioters, most of them middling to lower class, also saw their petitions ignored by those politicians, mainly upper class and nobility, supposed to represent them. When Americans’ and Londoners’ rights were dismissed by the British government, they

³¹ For a good baseline representation of the shifts in historiography over the last approximately 100 years can be found in the intriguing historiographical essay in the October 2017 *William and Mary Quarterly*. While the article looks primarily at works published in the journal itself, the importance of the *WMQ* to early American historians means that many prominent authors and their works have been published there, often connected to or in advance for monographs. See Michael A. McDonnell and David Waldstreicher, “Revolution in the *Quarterly*? A Historiographical Analysis,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (October 2017): 633-666. Michael Hattem also has constructed a very useful, open access, visual timeline, [found here](#). For works on the imperial aspect to the American Revolution, see Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*.

rebelled and challenged the authority of the governing structure. The reaction of the British government to these challenges engendered responses that deepened the imperial crisis: the American War prompted the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, which was the lightning rod for the Gordon Riots, which resulted in strengthening the British ruling conservative party, impacted diplomatic relations, and strengthened the resolve among American—all of which prolonged the war. By exploring the connections between the riots and the revolution, my dissertation brings together elements of the various historiographical interpretations to show how the American Revolution was truly complex, interconnected, and Atlantic.

Parameters and Methods

For this study, I focus primarily on the years of the war, 1775-1783, with an emphasis on the two years surrounding the June 1780 riots. I cover a fairly expansive geography (the North American British colonies that become the United States, Britain and Ireland, France, and Spain), though not comprehensively all the areas within these empires. This intensive focus both temporally and geographically permits me to delve deep into the various connections that link the London insurrection to the American Revolution. By keeping the temporal and geographic focus relatively tight, I am able to capture not just the obvious connections that other historians have picked up upon in their effort to tell larger stories about the American Revolution, but to bring to light the ideological, human, subversive, and contingent ties that reveal the riots as part of the American Revolution. I surface explicit and implicit connections between the ideas, rhetoric, and actions of the rioters and the revolutionaries by reading critically writings

of political leaders and government officials, ephemera soldiers collected from the rioters, and stories circulating in newspapers around the Atlantic.³²

I strive here to be as comprehensive in my source material as possible, while recognizing the limitations of archival silences and omissions.³³ I attempt to overcome the lost voices and perspectives by reading closely sources that speak around or for these voices. That means examining court records, government records, and newspapers with an eye to individuals caught up in these systems. But I cannot claim that this study is a comprehensive study of individuals from the ground up, and though I try to filter in voices from those not at the upper echelons of power and society, my primary focus is on the people in power or with access to it, and their relationship to the Gordon Riots vis-à-vis the American Revolution. To capture the connections that people made in real-time between the Gordon Riots and the American Revolution and Revolutionary War, I examine letters, memoirs, diaries and journals, government reports, and newspapers. Newspapers perhaps make up the largest component of my source base. These are imperfect sources, especially given the practices of eighteenth-century journalism, but they are a crucial window into what information was spreading and how that information was constructed and shaped. I examine newspaper articles

³² That means that I do, unfortunately, sacrifice some avenues to maintain a feasible project. The British empire was at the time a global empire, with colonies and occupied territories around the Atlantic, off the coast of Africa, and into the Pacific. For sake of clarity, I could not explore how ideas and news from the American Revolution and the Gordon Riots filter into all parts of the British empire. Left on the cutting room floor are the Caribbean colonies, and Canada, and India—places which deserve further integration into our treatment of the British empire and the American Revolution that led to American Independence. While some have examined portions of those areas in relation to the Gordon Riots and the American Revolution (see Brad Jones' *Resisting Independence* for some discussion of Halifax, Nova Scotia and Kingstown, Jamaica), more work can definitely be done in this area.

³³ Some of the works that have inspired my approach to the silences of the archive include: Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).

against one another, looking for similarities and differences amidst the copying practices of the time. By examining the nuanced changes made in newspaper articles, either by editorial framing or omission/addition of information, I tease out how different political actors created narratives to serve particular ideologies. I further pair these newspaper sources with commentary from personal and official correspondence and records, illuminating how the narratives of the riots were shaped and received through emphasizing certain elements of the riots or by spreading particular rumors of who was the responsible party. By closely reading these sources, and tracing differences in the circulation of this information, I am able to tease out the different reads on the riots that situated them as part of the American Revolution.

This dissertation could not have been completed without the use of digital humanities projects and tools. Often these projects and tools go hidden or assumed, perhaps listed in footnotes or bibliographies. Yet having worked for the last six years as part of a digital humanities project, I know—to some extent—the work that goes into making available primary sources, analytical tools, and organizing tools. As a result, I would like to take space to list the digital projects and tools that allowed me to research and write this dissertation.

Collections:

- Georgian Papers Programme
- HathiTrust
- Eighteenth Century Collections Online
- Eighteenth Century Dramas Online
- Founders Online
- Readex's Historical Imprints
- Readex's Historical Newspapers
- Burney Collection, British Library
- State Papers Online
- Old Bailey Online/London Lives/Digital Panopticon

Tools:

ArcGIS [StoryMap](#)

Tropy

Zotero

For historians, “going to the archive” is almost a sacred experience. Yet it is increasingly difficult, no more so than in a pandemic. Digital projects are not an exact substitute, but they can at least offer something. While they might not be a perfect replica of the archive experience, and may only reproduce a fraction of the holdings in an archive, they offer other tools that can help us sort through massive amounts of materials. Take, for instance, eighteenth century newspapers, one of my main sources to give insight into how news of the riots was sculpted and transmitted. I was able to use keyword searches within targeted date ranges to surface newspapers covering the riots or related persons/events. I still had to review each result—Optical Character Recognition on eighteenth century print is not without mistakes!—but I culled together from this practice a collection of newspaper issues that I could then review and analyze. Similarly, using the file management system Tropy allowed me to sort through my primary sources (newspapers, letters, memoirs, reports) in different ways to yield different results. It was arduous at times to input the metadata—dates, names, locations, subject tags—for each item I had collected, whether by physical archival trip or downloaded from digital projects. But it was worth it when I could pull up every item I had tagged with “Rumors” or sort newspapers and letters by date to trace the spread of the news. Along these lines, I used the ArcGIS StoryMaps program to create a [StoryMap](#) of the primary events of the London riots to help me visualize and appreciate the scale and geographical spread of the riots. Digital humanities tools and programs

are the backbone of my dissertation, permitting me to digest and sort through a mountain of sources in a comprehensive and coherent manner.³⁴

Organization

The following dissertation is organized thematically, though the themes lend themselves to a slight chronological order. I focus tightly on the years surrounding the riots, and explore its impact in ever widening circles. In doing so, I drill down into how Britons, Americans, and other Europeans found or made connections between the riots in London and the American Revolution. I explore how people in different locations and with different politics utilized the riots, either through narratives or rumors about them, to reaffirm ideological commitments while the American War dragged on. I examine how the riots shaped politics—both domestically and geopolitically. By taking a thematic approach, I am able to mediate on connections between the riots and the Revolution that happen across geographies and at the same time. The multitude of connections and interconnections that Britons, Americans, and Europeans witnessed or made become legible in a way a chronological approach might obscure. Doing so

³⁴ I write this methods section not just to be transparent with how I approached the sources, but also as an appreciation for the very things that made my methods possible. We have been in the digital age for over 30 years now and have grown accustomed to the plethora of sources at our fingertips. Yet without recognizing the work that it takes to make that so, we are in jeopardy of taking that for granted. It is not free to produce these products and tools—someone is footing the bill. Be it government agency, non-profit foundations, or increasingly, for-profit corporations. Our ability to do history has always depended upon the access to sources we have. Yet in an era where it seems we have access to more sources than ever, we must be vigilant that our access is, as ever, mediated by economics and other forces. Digital projects that are open access, often funded by governments or non-profits, are the ideal. But these projects still necessitate work to make them happen, and that work takes time when resources are limited. Projects behind paywalls can seem to come together much quicker with for-profit funding behind them, yet that model makes access more difficult when institutions cannot afford to purchase subscriptions. There is no easy solutions here, exactly, and I'm not sure I intend to propose any in the introduction to a Ph.D. dissertation. But I think it's still important to raise the issue, for posterity's sake if nothing else, and to acknowledge the privilege I had in accessing the paywalled digital projects that made my dissertation possible.

allows me to remedy the dearth of attention that history has paid to the Gordon Riots' connection to the American Revolution.

The first chapter explores the events in Britain preceding, during, and after the riots, looking at the role of British politics in the unfolding of events. This chapter starts the dissertation's project of laying bare the connections the riots had to the American Revolution and to the American War of Independence. I connect the rhetoric and objectives of the Protestant Association and of the rioters to ideas expressed by American revolutionaries. This chapter also situates the Protestant Association and riots with other political reform movements in Britain, as well as political developments in Ireland and Scotland, and connects them with events and parallels in Britain's American colonies. In particular, this chapter examines the outcome of the riots in regards to the politics of the British government, and how that factored into prolonging the war.

The second chapter explores the role of rumors and conspiracy theories that circulated amidst Britons and Americans in the wake of the riots. This chapter builds on existing scholarship that has examined the Atlantic and American connections of some rioters, but expands this analysis further to investigate how pervasive the Atlantic was in British political culture. This pervasiveness created a fear of infiltration and intrigue that different groups tapped into through conspiracy theories and rumors. The conspiratorial rumors permitted a variety of people around the British Atlantic to shift blame for the riots away from the demands and grievances of the rioters themselves. Instead, the rumors placed blame for the riots on Catholics, on Methodists, on a plot by some members of the British Ministry, and, most substantially, on the Americans and

their French allies. While Whigs and Tories differed in their interpretation, the riots also shifted alliances (Edmund Burke's political transformation from reformer to Tory bastion can arguably be pinned to the riots, for example). But the conspiracy theories were not merely conspiratorial. They also point to patterns of connections—of thought, of concern, of fear—that gripped parallel and interconnected movements.

The third chapter examines how Patriot Americans understood and interpreted the riots. This chapter traces reports on the riots and related figures in Patriot newspapers, arguing that editors purposefully selected and framed the riots to convey messages to their readers. Further, this chapter contextualizes the news reports with the writings of prominent and politically connected individuals, demonstrating their keen interest and understanding of the riots and their meaning to Patriots. At a time when the war had stretched on and seemed without end, Patriots viewed the riots as confirmation of their ideology, evidence that their critiques of the British system held merit, and a warning of what might befall them should they lose the war. Doing so, they asserted that the British monarchy and government had returned to absolutist policies, and asserted that they and those aligned with their cause, including Lord George Gordon, were the rightful heirs of English rights and liberties. Patriots viewed the riots as further proof of the British constitution's weakness—a massive upheaval against an unrepresentative government that used illegal force to suppress and oppress their subjects into submission.

The fourth chapter focuses on how Loyalist Americans understood the riots. Using the few extant Loyalist newspapers and letters and memoirs of Loyalists that mention the riots, this chapter shows how Loyalists had a conflicted interpretation of

the riots. On the one hand, Loyalists were thrilled at the success of the King and his government in suppressing the riots, and hoped that the British government would soon be similarly successful in suppressing the American rebellion. On the other hand, Loyalists were troubled that such a substantial riot could come so close to upending the British government, and connected this disturbance to Patriot ideas and rhetoric spreading in Britain. In making this argument, I recognize the silences produced by the horrors of war and fears of retribution in the American rebelling colonial spaces, and so this chapter includes letters and memoirs from British military allies and refugee Loyalists in Britain to reconstruct Loyalists' interpretation of the riots. Seeing the riots as evidence of the threat of revolutionary ideology, Loyalists chose to find comfort in recent British victories: the military capture of Charleston and victory at Camden, and the quashing of the riots in London. The British government appeared to be racking up victories around the Atlantic, providing Loyalists hope that the war would be over soon and the rebellious tide would finally recede.

Chapter five traces how the Gordon Riots reverberated out into the Atlantic, effecting alliances in the war. This chapter integrates the Gordon Riots into diplomatic relations between the involved parties of the war. In particular, it details how news of the Gordon Riots dampened the possibility of Spain switching their alliance from the United States to the British, and what that meant for the course of the war. Telling the tale of Richard Cumberland, the not-so-secret secret British negotiator sent to the Spanish court, I reexamine Cumberland's claim that news of the riots at his first meeting with Spanish Secretary of State Conde de Floridablanca damned the negotiations at the very start. This chapter will similarly look at how the Gordon Riots

impacted the French alliance to the United States. In the arena of high diplomacy, the political opportunity created by the Gordon Riots crystalized the division between American diplomat John Adams and French foreign minister the Comte de Vergennes. The British election announced in the wake of the riots created a moment John Adams wished to seize, but was prevented from doing so by the more senior, and more powerful, member of the Franco-American alliance. Yet in another arena, the American reaction to the riots was a window for the French military posted in Newport, Rhode Island, to understand their allies. The material related to the riots printed in *La Gazette Francoise*, a French-language newspaper printed on a portable printing press brought by the French military, reminded the French readers of the bigotry of their British enemy and the relative tolerance that met them from their American hosts. The chapter on diplomacy emphasizes the contingencies created by the Gordon Riots in relation to the war, and the importance of timing and power in the delicate diplomatic dance.

The June 1780 riots were an important turning point in the American Revolutionary War. The very heart of the empire experienced the same anger, discontent, and violence that had surfaced in the empire's colonial North American territories. The London petitioners and rioters unleashed their anger against a government purporting to represent them, but unwilling to even entertain their request to hear their petition. They brought the "rebellion" of the North American colonists right to the doorsteps of the British government. And the government reacted, sending troops to secure the city through extralegal uses of force and spreading rumors that the Americans and French were behind the riots. Beyond Britain's shores, fallout from the

riots affected how Patriots, Loyalists, and foreign states thought and acted regarding the war. Patriots and Loyalists crafted the riots into narratives that reaffirmed their different ideologies. But they also created fear and heartburn for those in these camps, seeding doubts and fears about the strength and security of the British government (Loyalists) and the lengths that the government would go to (Patriots). The riots created moments of disruption and opportunity at crucial moments in diplomatic engagements, which ultimately propelled the war to continue. By surfacing the multitude of ways that the Gordon Riots intersected with, and shaped the outcome of, the American Revolutionary War, we gain a better sense of the totality of that fight. It was not merely a conflict between an empire and its colonies (with foreign assistance), but a conflict deep seated in the very nature of the British constitution, imperial *and* domestic.

Chapter 1: “In Support and Defense of Our Rights and Privileges”: The Gordon Riots & the British Political Moment

No Popery Down with it/George III is a Roman Catholick
Dethrone him or else he will Masacree you all

-“A True Protistant”¹

The protesters gathered in the courtyard of the Palace of Westminster, home of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. A churning mass of some 40,000-60,000 people, the crowd greeted the Members of Parliament (MPs) with cheers and jeers—and sometimes fists—as they passed through the protest. Protestors tore at the clothes and disheveled the hair of Lords Hillsborough, Stormont, Townshend, Willoughby, and Mansfield as they moved towards the entrance of Parliament. The crowd pulled Lord Ashburnham from his carriage. Numerous MPs had their property—snuffboxes, watches, wigs—taken by the crowd. The spectacle disoriented the MPs as they fought their way through the throng to attend that day’s session.² It was June 2, 1780, and the masses assembled had turned out to show their support for the delivery of their petition to repeal the 1778 Catholic Relief Act to the House of Commons.

Parliament’s passage of the Catholic Relief Act (CRA) in 1778 was the result of a few factors, but most crucial was the increased need for more soldiers. Britain was hemorrhaging money and resources from the ongoing American rebellion. Britain’s average annual number of personnel in the army and navy during the American Revolutionary War topped out at 190,000, a substantial number of personnel to feed,

¹ Manuscript handbill, Report from Lt. Col. James Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

² Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford. In Nine Volumes*. Peter Cunningham, ed. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1866), 7: 376-377, HathiTrust.

clothe, house, and pay.³ But this average considers all years of the conflict with the North American colonies. With the French joining the fight and allying with their rebelling colonies in February 1778, the British government faced an even greater challenge and potential threat. Not only would their rebelling subjects receive an increase in funds and resources to continue their fight for independence, but the theater of war expanded to the seas surrounding the British Isles. Having sent over substantial numbers of soldiers and sailors to the colonies, Britain's domestic defenses were minimal—something which her enemies might take advantage. Passing the CRA was a means to buttress domestic defenses and increase the number of troops to protect the homeland and send across the Atlantic to fight the reinvigorated (and restocked) rebels. It offered what MPs considered to be minimal concessions to English Catholic subjects, including a revised oath of allegiance, in hopes that Catholic men would join the military. MPs also saw the act as having the benefit of further engendering allegiance from Catholic subjects to Britain at a moment when they might consider supporting the French enemy because of their shared religion (and two centuries, give or take, of Catholic persecution). The American War of Independence had forced the British government to court Catholics to replenish their army and navy, but the action was not without consequences.⁴

³ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688-1783* (London: Routledge, 2002), 29-63, 30.

⁴ A similar act, discussed below, was passed in Ireland in 1779 for many of the same reasons. Ireland had a far greater number of Catholic subjects (approximately 3 million of a total population of 4 million), but that fact also created a messier situation in Ireland and raised concerns about domestic Catholic insurrections among elite Protestant leaders in Ireland. The CRA passed for England (and it was only for England, and Wales, as the act being relieved was enacted prior to the unification of the Scottish and English kingdoms in 1707) applied to a significantly smaller number of English and Welsh Catholic subjects (approximately 80,000 out of a total population of 6 million). Still, at the time of passage, any additional soldier or seaman that could be raised was a benefit to Britain's military at a crucial time. See Robert Kent Donovan, "The Military Origins of the Roman Catholic Relief Programme of 1778," *The Historical Journal* vol. 28: no 1 (March 1985): 79-102; 82.

MPs faced those consequences on that hot June day in 1780. Wearing blue cockades on their hats and clothing, the crowd formed in Parliament's courtyard at the behest of the Protestant Association and its president, Lord George Gordon, after first gathering in St. George's Field at around 11am.⁵ Lord George met them there, and after attempting to organize the crowd into four planned divisions, he left ahead of them with the massive petition that members of the Protestant Association had assembled and stitched together from individual petitions. The four divisions—City of London, Borough of Southwark, City of Westminster, and the Scottish Londoners—divided to begin their march, a majority marching over London Bridge, reconvening on the other bank of the Thames and then marching to Parliament. Along the way, the sober and orderly crowd attracted additional participants, intrigued by the marching columns of well-dressed and somber citizens. Initially quiet, the crowd grew more boisterous as they passed by churches—and revered opposition figure John Wilkes' house. The crowd reassembled at approximately 3pm, just in time to greet the MPs as they entered Parliament for that day's session—and just in time to persuade them to support their cause.⁶

Standing in the streets and courtyard outside the Palace of Westminster, the crowd waited in anticipation for news of the reception of their petition, breaking out into chants of “No Popery” as MPs and Lords passed by them. Some of the crowd pushed into the lobby so that they would be first to hear the news and could keep pressure on the MPs,

⁵ Currently, the Waterloo Railway Station sits where St. George's Field was located in 1780. Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), 43.

⁶ Dominic Green, “The Lunatic Apostle: The Life and Times of Lord George Gordon (1651-1793),” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2013), 211-214; *The New Annual Register... 1780* (London, 1781), 170-171, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO henceforth); Hibbert, *King Mob*, 45-46.

no doubt—making it near impossible for the Commons to divide.⁷ Lord George appeared periodically from the Speaker’s balcony, telling the outside crowd of the MPs’ refusal to take up their petition that day.⁸ His words riled the masses as he decried Lord North’s actions to delay consideration of the petition and relaying the names of those members speaking against the crowd and the petition. Despite the daunting atmosphere, Lord North, Prime Minister of the king’s government, remained steadfast with his offer to Gordon to consider the petition the following Tuesday, June 6. As the day turned to night, Lord George relented and announced the decision to the crowd. Gordon and other MPs implored the crowd to disperse quietly and calmly, and many did. At around 9pm, the magistrates authorized the Horse and Foot Guard to scatter the rest, who struck out into the streets teeming with people full of pent-up anger and energy. Impotent in forcing Parliament to grant them redress, the remaining crowd decided to take direct action against the national threat—Popery.⁹

In Protestant England, there were few locations where Catholics could attend mass without penalty, even after the passage of the 1778 CRA. The Bavarian and Sardinian Embassies were such locations, and enterprising members of the mob knew it. The crowd divided, a contingent headed to Warwick Street where they struck the Bavarian chapel, plundering its contents and destroying the “alter, ornaments, and furniture” before setting the chapel ablaze.¹⁰ At the Sardinian chapel in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, the contingent of

⁷ MPs in the House of Commons used a voting procedure known as “division,” whereby members physically leave the Commons chamber and pass through particular doors (one for aye, the other for nay) into outside lobbies.

⁸ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 376-377.

⁹ *Whitehall Evening-Post*, London, June 1-3, 1780. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection (henceforth Burney Collection); *The New Annual Register...1780* (1781), [Principal Occurrences Section], 48.

¹⁰ *The New Annual Register...1780* (1781), [Principal Occurrences Section], 48.

rioters ransacked the building, pulling out the furniture and setting it on fire in the street. So fearful of the crowd, the firemen refused to put out the blaze until the arrival of the guards, who arrested approximately 13 persons.¹¹ The riots had begun.

The June riots occurred amidst an imperial crisis, an Atlantic war, and sustained, organized efforts for domestic political reform. Britain was five years into a war to quell its rebelling American colonies—after efforts of coercion had failed—a war that had become global in scope with the entrance of France and Spain as belligerents. The government’s hemorrhaging of money to pay for the increased war effort was one cause of a concerted reform effort, manifested in the County Association movement, and put forth by different factions of those opposed to the North Administration.¹² One of the other causes echoed criticisms of American colonists prior to their declaring independence—unequal political representation and a corrupt system of political patronage that trended towards tyranny. The story of the Gordon Riots intersects with these other phenomena, yet is too often pigeon-holed as an example of anti-Catholic bigotry resurgent in a time of Enlightenment toleration. While this whiggish interpretation has in recent years been challenged by historians such as Nicholas Rogers, Ian Haywood, and John Seed, the riots nevertheless deserve further consideration regarding their relationship to broader imperial events.¹³ Fundamentally, the rhetoric and ideas circulating

¹¹ *Whitehall Evening-Post*, London, June 1-3, 1780; Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 377.

¹² Ian Christie, *Wars and Revolution: Britain, 1760-1815* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 135-138; N.C. Phillips, “The British General Election of 1780: A Vortex of Politics,” *Political Science* 11, no. 2 (September 1959): 3-22; Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Omohundro Institute/University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 164-178; Mark Knights, “The 1780 Protestant petition and the culture of petitioning,” in *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, eds. Ian Haywood and John Seed (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46-68.

¹³ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, culture, and politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998); Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*. Some works that still tend to emphasize the domestic and anti-Catholic nature of the riots, include Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1701-1837* (New Haven:

around the Atlantic reflected a common critique of the British constitutional system. The riots in June 1780 were yet another manifestation of those ideas, an instance of the rebellious spirit that had erupted in America now manifesting in England. If rebelling North American colonies could achieve independence, if their grievances were similar to grievances felt in other imperial territories—like Ireland—then why should those territories remain part of the empire? And what about those who identified certain grievances as not just imperial, but also domestic as well? Was there something inherently rotten in the British constitution?

The Protestant Association's petition, and the subsequent riots, was yet another popular sovereignty challenge to the British government's structure, in line with the reforms advocated for by the radical elements of the County Associations movement in the 1780s, by American colonists in the decade prior to the Declaration of Independence, and dovetailing with similar constitutional issues raised in Ireland and Scotland.¹⁴ Though in ways advocating for a regressive change—the loss of political rights for Catholics—the Protestant Association mobilized a mass petition campaign and organized a large protest to impress upon the government that it should be responsive to, and representative of, the people. When the government failed to act as the Protestant Association wished, their

Yale University Press, 1992); Christie, *Wars and Revolutions*; Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hambleton and London, 2004).

¹⁴ Popular sovereignty in the 1770s and 1780s was a much-debated concept, especially as it had the potential to upend hierarchical structures of power. Proponents of adhering to popular sovereignty argued in favor of a version of government whose authority stemmed from the wider populace through elected representatives (with caveats about who counted in that populace and how). Opponents feared that this more democratic understanding of governance would lead to mob rule. The conflict over this concept undergirds much of the conflict during the American Revolution and in 1780, wherein reform groups attempt to insert more popular sovereignty reforms through regular political methods (petitioning, legislation) or through riots. For more on the debates over and uses of popular sovereignty in this era, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1988), esp. chapters 2 and 9; Pasi Ihalainen, *Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734–1800*. Studies in the History of Political Thought (Leiden: Brill, 2010), esp. 246-269,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=338722&site=ehost-live>.

members and the public they had helped energize, responded with violence and destruction to emphasize their will. The Protestant Association and the Gordon Riots, as part of a series of popular sovereignty challenges to the British government, linked the American colonists' imperial criticism to domestic policies, revealing a fundamental problem found throughout the entire constitutional structure.

From Petition to Protest to Riot – The Trajectory of the Protestant Association

The English Protestant Association was organized in February 1779. While chapters of the organization formed in many locations across the country, the most active and organized was the branch in London. Membership consisted of all classes of people, but a large majority of the association came from the middle and artisan classes. Membership also spanned both Anglican and Dissenting Protestants, and drew support from city aldermen and liverymen.¹⁵ These were not the dregs of society, but upstanding members, some of whom were embedded in crucial social and political spheres. In addition to those in positions of leadership, other prominent individuals threw their weight behind the Protestant Association's aims, most notably the Reverend John Wesley, founder of Methodism. He not only allowed the Protestant Association to post their petition at his

¹⁵ *The Protestant Magazine; or, Christian Treasury. Designed to Encourage a Perfect Knowledge of The Protestant Religion. By several eminent Divines, of different Denominations, assisted by many private Gentlemen* (London: Printed and published by R. Denham, 1781), 1: 53-54, ECCO. Building off Rudé's works, John Seed has most recently attempted to unearth the various social and economic statuses of members of the PA committee (leadership) as well as those who signed the petition. Seed notes that while some members of the committee are identifiable as clergy at relatively small, dissenting parishes, other members are more difficult to discern and could be either clergy or men of moderate economic means. Similarly, the names signed to the extant copy of the petition (the original has been lost) indicate a variety of social and religious petitioners. See Seed, "The Fall of Romish Babylon anticipated": plebian Dissenters and anti-popery in the Gordon Riots," in *The Gordon Riots*, 69-92.

church, but would defend them in public letters printed in the *Public Advertiser* and published in pamphlet form in 1781.¹⁶

For members of the Protestant Association, Parliament's passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act set the nation on a dangerous course. Since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth-century, English Protestants feared the return of "Popery." For the Protestant Associators, popery was a system that threatened "civil and religious liberty," as Papists:

[T]hunder excommunication against all who differ from them in opinion, and their religious profession itself breathes the very spirit of persecution and cruelty, against those whom they anathematize as heretics; who, if Princes, are to be deposed and murdered; if subjects, to be massacred: when they avow such principles as these, what security can be given to any state for their peaceable behaviour?¹⁷

Protestants viewed the obedience integral to Catholicism as conducive to arbitrary power, which had permitted past kings and queens to skirt or outright ignore constitutional checks on their power. Anti-popery was therefore a political ideology, one intent on maintaining the rights and privileges of Protestants and guarding against the ascribed "arbitrary power, ignorance, and its handmaid, superstition" that undergirded Catholic rule. As Protestants conceived it, Popery threatened the British constitution by seeking to topple Protestant

¹⁶ John Wesley, *A Letter to the Printer of the Public Advertiser, Occasioned By the late Act, passed in favour of Popery*, (London: Printed by J. Paramore, 1781), ECCO.

¹⁷ Protestant Association, *An Appeal from the Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain; Concerning the Probable tendency of the late act of Parliament in favour of the papists* (London: Printed by J.W. Pasham, 1779), 4-5. HathiTrust. For more on British concerns about Popery and Anti-Popery ideology, see Peter Lake, "Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice" *Conflict in Early Stuart England*, Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds. (London: Routledge, 1989, ebook 2014), 72-106; and most recently, Evan Haefeli, ed., *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020). Haefeli's definition, on p. 1-2, provides a useful framework for understanding the anti-popery of the Protestant Associators and their supporters: "Anti-popery is related to, and often hard to distinguish from, anti-Catholicism. The boundaries between them are fuzzy, not least because the rhetoric, literature, and ideas overlap. However, where anti-Catholicism is often regarded as a religious prejudice, an animus to Roman Catholics and their religion, scholars of early modern England have been arguing that anti-popery was an ideology diverting from hostility to the religious *and* political example of the Roman Catholic papacy" (emphasis original).

monarchs and install Catholic monarchs who would persecute Protestants, insist on strict subjugation, and obediently and unquestioningly follow the directives of the Pope. Historical memory of massacres under Queen Mary and in Ireland in 1641, popish plots in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, James II and the Glorious Revolution, and Jacobite activity in the mid-eighteenth century provided ample evidence for Protestants' fears. Popery could rear its head at any time, threatening the very foundations of the British nation by stripping Protestant subjects of their civil and religious rights and their physical safety.¹⁸

Yet the dearth of Popish plots in the approximately 30 years prior to the formation of the Protestant Association gave Protestants a sense of relative stability. English Catholics were tolerated socially by their Protestant fellow subjects, and had found work-arounds to prohibitions on property ownership and political rights. They shared in practice, if not in law, the same political rights as a majority of their Protestant compatriots—no franchise, but with the right to petition for redress. Yet, despite the similarities in lived practice, the legal penalties on Catholics enabled many disenfranchised Protestants to feel secure in their British identity—they were, after all, more a part of the nation than the Catholics. Protestant Associators supported this practice of limited, social toleration, noting repeatedly in their letters and publications that the status quo prior to repeal of the Catholic penalties had produced a secure and stable body politic. Many Protestant Association writers stressed that their movement was not out to persecute Catholics because of their religion, but insisted that their alarm was over the government permitting changes to a law which had fostered tranquility and protected the constitution.¹⁹

¹⁸ *The Protestant Magazine* (1781), 1: 54; Protestant Association, *An Appeal*, 8-14.

¹⁹ Many historians have explored the relationship between Protestantism and British identity in the early modern era, including Colley, *Britons*; Carla Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British*

The 1778 Catholic Relief Act destabilized the British body politic, or so the members of the Protestant Association believed, by removing Catholic penalties that dated back to William III's reign and that had supposedly safeguarded the nation from arbitrary power. But to its sponsors and the members of Parliament (both Opposition and Ministry-aligned) who voted overwhelmingly to pass it, the bill merely relaxed penalties for a few prohibitions that English law enforcement had already turned a blind eye towards. MPs championed in the bill in Parliament, as brief as the debate over it was, as an act of tolerance, a reward for decades of English Catholic loyalty.²⁰ The law removed the penalty for holding mass, which had restricted Catholic worship to a few locations (such as the embassy chapels). It also removed the penalty for Catholics to establish schools to educate their children. Perhaps most significantly, the act permitted English Catholics to own and inherit land, removing a prohibition that Catholics had long worked around by leasing land from their Protestant relatives. They still could not vote, even if they met property requirements in their local jurisdiction. Nor could they stand for office.²¹ The most

Atlantic World (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Peter Lake, "Anti-popery: the Structure of a Prejudice," in *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics, 1603-1642*, eds. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (London: Longman, 1989), 72-106; Haefeli, ed., *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism*, J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

One Protestant Associator offered an alternative form of tolerance than those passed in the CRA. Under their proposal, most of the previous penalties would be reinstated, but instead of perpetual imprisonment for priests and bishops the author offered perpetual banishment instead. See *The Protestant Magazine* (1781), 1: 57.

²⁰ *Morning Post* (London), 15 May 1778; *London Evening Post*, 16 May 1778; *Morning Post* (London), 19 May 1778.

²¹ Land ownership was a central political organizing principle under the British constitution. Land ownership conveyed particular political rights (the ability to vote and stand for election), as well as social standing. Therefore limiting who could own land—i.e. prohibiting Catholics—was a means to exclude them from political and social life. Land ownership requirements also were a means to exclude undesirables from participating in formal politics. The land ownership requirements varied from different types of jurisdictions, and many reform proposals to expand the franchise in the 18th century did not advocate for universal franchise, but instead suggested broadening the definition of property ownership to include more men who owned a certain level of property—real or personal. See Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: In Four Books. Fifth Edition*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1773), 1: 171, HathiTrust; Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian*

important provision of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, however, was the modification to the oath of allegiance, as this opened up possibilities for Catholics to serve in the king's military. In an age in which oaths were taken extremely seriously, the modified oath offered to Catholic subjects a means of proving their loyalty and support of the British government above any religious fealty. Under the prescribed oath, the oath-taker swore their allegiance to George III and his Protestant descendants, rejected any claim that the Catholic Pretender, Charles III, made to the throne, and rejected the belief "that is it lawful to murder or destroy any Person or Persons whatsoever, for or under Pretense of their being Hereticks." The oath-taker further affirmed that the Pope had no "temporal or civil Jurisdiction, Power, Superiority, or Pre-eminence, directly or indirectly, within this Realm" and that they took the oath without any dispensation or promise of dispensation from the Pope or Catholic church. The new oath for Catholics enabled their service in the military at a crucial moment, when the British needed more manpower to subdue not only their rebelling colonies, but also fight against their perennial foe, the French.²²

While the government had many reasons to pass the Catholic Relief Act, for Protestant Association members these reasons were inexcusable. Associators believed that even the milquetoast toleration contained in the CRA would lead to the return of Popery and the arbitrary power associated with it. Protestant Associators expressed alarm at the avenues that landownership and inheritance opened up, arguing that it would lead to

England 1734-1832 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Gordon Edmund Mingay, *English landed society in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 1963, reprint 2006) 3-18.

²² 18 Geo. III c. 60. For the discussion in Parliament on the bill, see *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England: from the Norman Conquest, in 1066, to the year, 1803* (London: Published by R. Bagshaw, 1803), 19: 1137-1145. Various London newspapers also covered the brief debate and passage of the bill, with some providing more extensive coverage of the limited debate between MPs. See, for example, *The Morning Post (London)*, 15 May 1778 & 20 May 1778; *The London Chronicle*, 23 May 1778; *St. James's Chronicle*, 19 May 1778. For discussion on the military need as basis for the act, see Donovan, "The Military Origins of the Roman Catholic Relief Programme of 1778."

Catholics gaining political influence and power, and asserted that the removal of penalties against Catholics granted them more rights than Protestant dissenters. They were equally worried about the permitting of Catholic priests and bishops to hold mass and open schools, arguing that Catholic clergy would use these activities to proselytize to poorer English subjects through their children and grow the number of Catholics in the country. Taken together, this “save the children” panic and concerns about the political power of landownership, reveal a conspiratorial element to the Protestant Associators’ outrage. The danger inherent in the CRA was not just in its immediate effect, but in its creating an avenue for Catholicism to grow its members and power, eventually threatening the religious and civil liberties of the Protestant nation in the years to come.²³

Protestant Associators were also quite concerned with the prospect that “a *Protestant state* should be indebted to the *arms of Papists*” to support the needs of the government, particularly in relation to the ongoing war. Indeed, this component of the act alarmed Lord George the most. In his letter accepting the Protestant Association’s presidency offer, he remarked upon the “eagerness and joy the Papists were willing to contribute... in support of an unhappy civil war against the Protestants in America.”²⁴ Indeed, this concern harkens back to a concern shared by American Patriots in the prior to the outbreak of war. Among the many Patriot objections to the 1774 Quebec Act, the potential for Quebec Catholics to serve in the British military to suppress their Protestant neighbors was a grave concern. In fact, in the early days of the war, this concern

²³ Protestant Association, *An Appeal*, 33-34, 49-50; *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 110. The concern for the children seems to be the issue that received the most consideration from Parliament following the PA protest and the riots. Legislation was debated in both houses of Parliament in late June and early July that would forbid Catholics (priests and laypersons) from educating Protestant children. The legislation passed the Commons, but failed in the Lords. See *Adam’s Weekly Courant* (Chester), 27 June 1780; *Journal of the House of Lords Volume 26, 1779-1783* (London, 1767-1830), 139-177, British History Online.

²⁴ Protestant Association, *An Appeal*, 33-36, 43, 48-52, 57-58; *The Protestant Magazine*, vol. 1, 157.

materialized with regiments being raised in Quebec that included Catholic subjects.²⁵ Just a few years later, and similar fears surfaced on the other side of the Atlantic with the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act. Yet not only were Gordon and Protestant Associators concerned that armed Papists would be sent to suppress their Protestant brethren in America, but, as will be discussed below, in Ireland some were concerned about what armed Irish Catholics would mean for Irish Protestants. The Protestant Association's concerns about arming Catholics reflected concerns shared on both sides of the Atlantic—and the Irish Sea.

The Protestant Association's fears about the dangers of the Catholic Relief Act connected to longstanding British concerns about arbitrary power—a concern shared by many American colonists prior to independence. In many instances, Protestant Associators drew attention to the dangers of permitting Catholics to obtain a sanctioned place within civil society. These observations made slippery-slope-type arguments, that without the penalties that precluded Catholics from owning land, educating youth, practicing their religion openly, and participating in civil society (oath-taking), Catholic influence would grow through the increase in numbers of adherents and the privileges given to landowners. This was not a sudden, overt assault to restore Popery, but an insidious, gradual infection that would ultimately lead to arbitrary government. What was worse, this infection was initiated by the very government designed to prevent the operation of arbitrary power. American colonists had similarly voiced concerns about the government engaging with arbitrary power. In the decade prior to declaring independence,

²⁵ Brad Jones, *Resisting Independence: Popular Loyalism in the Revolutionary British Atlantic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 104-112; Olliver Hubert and François Furstenberg, eds., *Entangling the Quebec Act: Transnational Contexts, Meanings, and Legacies in North America and the British Empire* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2016), 84-86.

Americans decried Parliament, and eventually the crown, as operating as an arbitrary government through the policies and practices they set for the colonies. Especially with the passage of the 1774 Quebec Act, Americans perceived the British government as making a concerted effort to permit Popery to thrive right on their colonial borders—not only in the permissions for Catholics in that colony to practice their religion, but in the creation of judicial and representative practices that fell within the nature of arbitrary government. With the ongoing tension between the British government and the aggrieved North American colonies, many American colonists feared that the Quebec Act was a template that the government might use to reorganize, and discipline into submission, other existing colonies.²⁶ Gordon’s worry that, as a result of passing the CRA, Catholics were exuberant in their ability to take up arms and suppress the rebelling Protestant Americans brings the issue full circle, creating a real possibility of Catholic-on-Protestant violence enabled by the Protestant state. As Lord George and the Protestant Associators saw it, the same arbitrary government that persecuted the American colonists was enabling Catholics to arm themselves and act as agents of the state, furthering the descent into arbitrary government.

Despite the brief parliamentary debate and passage of the bill, newspapers included letters to the editor against (and occasionally for) the measure while the act made its way through Parliament.²⁷ Shortly after King George III gave his assent to the bill for

²⁶ See, for example, John Dickinson, Address to the Inhabitants of Quebec, 1774, Box 3, Folder 12, R.R. Logan Dickinson Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP hereafter). For more on role of the Quebec Act, and objections to it, see the essays in Hubert & Furstenberg, eds., *Entangling the Quebec Act*, especially Hannah Weiss Muller, “As may consist with their Allegiance to His Majest’: Redefining Loyal Subjects in 1774,” 47-73; Michel Morin, “Choosing between French and English Law: The Legal Origins of the Quebec Act,” 101-130; Christian R. Buset, “Quebec, Bengal, and the Rise of Authoritarian Legal Pluralism,” 102-162; and Brad A. Jones, “A ‘Fit Instrument’: The Quebec Act and the Outbreak of Rebellion in Two British Atlantic Port Cities,” 232-264.

²⁷ For example, see A Protestant, “For the Morning Post. Popery,” *The Morning Post*, 19 May 1778; Aristides, “For the Morning Post. Papist Bill,” *The Morning Post*, 22 May 1778.

England—just two weeks after it was first introduced in the House of Commons in May 1778, the speed of its passage a point of contention for the Protestant Association—Protestant agitation against the act continued to grow. After formally organizing in February 1779, almost concurrent with the anti-Catholic riots occurring in Scotland (discussed later in this chapter), the Protestant Association set to work developing a network of affiliated branches and corralling opposition to the act into an organized objection. The leaders first set about building their coalition by writing letters to clergy in both the Anglican and dissenting churches, inviting them to join the Protestant Association and asking them to share information about the organization with their congregations.²⁸ In November 1779, they undertook their next step: publishing the *Appeal from the Protestant Association to the people of Great Britain*. To further spread their message, the Committee sent letters along with the *Appeal* to the country chapters, urging the creation of a network of “Associations in different parts” to make “a *respectable application to Parliament*, for a restoration of those wise and wholesome laws.”²⁹ Protestant Associators stressed that their advocacy for the repeal was not a matter of oppressing fellow Catholic subjects, but stemmed from their strident belief that the relaxing of Catholic penalties would engender the growth of Catholic influence and power, resulting in the return of Popery. Ultimately, the organization decided to launch a petition to demand that the government repeal the law.

²⁸ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 150-152.

²⁹ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 153-154. This network activity spreading information and political materials mimicked the Committees of Correspondence used by American colonists during the 1760s & 1770s. For a recent analysis on the practices and outcomes of the American Committees of Correspondence, see Catherine Treesh, "Writing Union into Resistance: How Committees of Correspondence Forged a Continental Community" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2021).

Petition action began in early 1780, shortly after the Protestant Association members resolved to ask Lord George Gordon to become president of the group. Lord George, who had made a name for himself advocating on behalf of the Scottish Protestant organizations in their objection to a Scottish CRA, accepted and set about to fervently advance the cause. The Protestant Association advertised in newspapers to let Londoners know where to sign, and circulated the petition at their regular (approximately weekly) public meetings and nearly daily in coffeehouses, livery company halls, taverns, and at Gordon's house. The Committee wrote to clergy, asking to recommend the petition to their congregants and place petitions in their vestries for signature. To solicit funds to pay for the expenses associated with organizing the petition, the Protestant Association set up a subscription collected by multiple bankers. The Committee organized a meeting between Lord George and Lord North in early January to solicit the latter's involvement in presenting the petition (which he declined to do).³⁰

Over the course of the spring, Lord George held multiple audiences with King George III, in which Gordon raised the issue of the Catholic Relief Act and the Protestant Association's petition for repeal. The king demurred in these early meetings and stories of the audience leaked to the press which portrayed Gordon as eccentric in his behavior and decorum with the king. At their final audience before the riots, on May 19, 1780, Lord George pressed the king for a firmer commitment to support the petition and made insinuations about how Protestants viewed the king's part in the repeal of Catholic penalties. "I added, how much it would be for his Majesty's honour and security in the present distracted state of these kingdoms and colonies, to clear away all the suspicions of

³⁰ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 160-164.

Popery from his government and counsels,” Lord George recounted in a pamphlet published in 1783. Undeterred by Gordon’s implication that he was engaging in the return of popery (an accusation that would rear its head in handbills circulating during the riots that called for the king to be dethroned), George affirmed he was a Protestant but asserted he was a friend to toleration as well.³¹ Despite the appearance of the efforts he went to, Lord George had not truly expected that George III would support the petition.³² His presentation to the king was part of a petitioning tradition in Anglo-politics, whereby both the monarch and the Parliament were recipients of petitions for redress.³³ Gordon was likely hedging his bets and engaging in the performative politics of the era, but he knew all along that the true recipients for the petition would need to be the House of Commons, where the 1778 act originated and who had the power to repeal such an act.³⁴ Yet by going through the motions of presenting his petition to the king, Gordon demonstrated for his Protestant Association supporters and the public more generally that he was operating within the political norms and practices. He had kissed the ring, and presented the concerns and desires of the people he represented, both bowing to the king’s power while subtly asserting the power of the people. While his meeting with the king fit within the standards of eighteenth-century performative politics, Gordon could use the reaction, or

³¹ Manuscript handbill, Report from Lt. Col. James Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

³² Lord George Gordon, *Innocence Vindicated, and the intrigues of Popery and its abettors displayed...Part II* (London: Printed and Sold by R. Denham), 2: 15-17, ECCO.

³³ James Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Mark Knights, “‘The Lowest Degree of Freedom’: The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640-1800,” *Parliamentary History* (2018): 18-34; Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, “Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918,” *Past and Present* vol. 248, no. 1 (2020): 123-164; Gregory A. Mark, “The Vestigial Constitution: The History and Significance of the Right to Petition,” *Fordham Law Review* vol. 66, no. 6 (1998): 2153-2231, esp. 2163-2170.

³⁴ Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* Second Edition (London: MacMillan, 1963), 1-61; Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery, “The Political Day in London, c. 1697-1834,” *Past and Present* vol. 252, no. 1 (August 2021), 101-137.

non-reaction, of the king to show Protestant Associators further evidence of the disconnect between the government and the will of the people.

Lord George and the Protestant Association were determined to demonstrate to Parliament the massive public support for their petition. At the final meeting of the Protestant Association before the presentation of the petition, on May 29, 1780, the association overwhelmingly voted to meet up at St. George's Field at 11am on June 2, whereby the crowd would be organized into divisions to march across the Thames at 12pm and on to Parliament. Advertisements were placed in the newspapers announcing that since "no Hall in London can contain Forty Thousand Men" the Association resolved to meet on June 2 "to consider the most prudent and respectful Manner of attending their Petition, which will be presented the same Day to the House of Commons." The advertisement further announced that petitioners were to wear "blue Cockades in their Hats, to distinguish themselves from the Papists, and those who approve of the late Act in Favour of Popery" and that the group upon meeting would divide themselves into four divisions to peaceably deliver the petition.³⁵

The sheer size of the petition's support, an implicit argument for popular sovereignty, was the point that Lord George and the Protestant Association members wanted to drive home viscerally. Beyond presenting a mass petition, signed by between 100,000 and 120,000 people according to contemporary sources including Gordon himself on the Commons floor, the boisterous bodies in the courtyard intensified the sense of pressure placed on MPs.³⁶ Indeed, petitioning and protesting was one of the most revered

³⁵ *The Public Advertiser*, 1 June 1780.

³⁶ The range in the number of signatures is based upon the numbers used in *The New Annual Register* (100,000) and in *The Protestant Magazine* (120,000) and in Lord Gordon's floor speech (*Whitehall Evening-Post*, 3 June 1780) to the House of Commons on 2 June (120,000). Mark Knights, "The 1780 Protestant petitions and the culture of petitioning," in *The Gordon Riots*, has pegged the actual number of signatures at

tools that British subjects had. By pairing the two, the Protestant Association intended to make it difficult for MPs to dismiss the concerns and demands outlined in the petition. But the tactic may have backfired. As MPs rode through on horseback or in carriages, some, particularly those identified as being supportive of the 1778 CRA, were subjected to the mob's attacks. Their clothing pulled, parts of their carriages broken off, members endured physical and violent intimidation by the crowd. But rather than scare members into submission, the actions may have provoked, or at least contributed to, Parliament's response when Lord George presented the petition.

Members were furious about their treatment and the treatment of their colleagues. While rough and rowdy politics was not out of the ordinary in eighteenth-century Britain, the threat posed by such a large crowd ratcheted up the danger. The presence of and actions by some members of the protest seemed to exemplify the very criticisms that opponents of popular sovereignty had leveled against the democratic elements. Giving people power and sovereignty enabled mob-like behavior that threatened civil society.³⁷ Seeing their fears apparently confirmed, the MPs expressed their outrage at Gordon. Colonel Murray explicitly threatened Gordon, telling him that "I see that many lives will be lost, but, by God, yours shall be one of them!"³⁸ General Grant pulled Lord George aside to plead with Gordon not to "lead these poor people into any danger."³⁹ In the House of Lords, members of the Administration and Opposition traded blame for the management of the crowd, with Opposition members such as Lord Shelburne noting that the gathering had been advertised and yet the Administration had not prepared for it by

around 45,000, though still notes that this makes the petition the "largest of the entire eighteenth century, outstripping the anti-slavery and reform petitions," (46).

³⁷ Shoemaker, *The London Mob*, 111-152; Morgan, *Inventing the People*; Ihalainen, *Agents of the People*.

³⁸ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 378.

³⁹ *Whitehall Evening-Post*, 3 June 1780..

having the city magistrates at hand to keep order. While Administration members accused the Opposition of giving approval to the violent and disruptive attacks on fellow members, Shelburne asserted that the mob outside “might be a scheme of Administration” to show that “though we could not quell the rebellion in America, we can prevent, and we are determined to suppress the efforts of rebels at home.”⁴⁰ Shelburne’s accusation of a ministry plot reveals that members of all political stripes understood the Protestant Association petitioners as sharing similarities with the American rebels.

While debate raged in the House of Lords, Gordon pressed on in his motion to present the petition to the House of Commons, noting that it was signed by nearly 120,000 subjects. By emphasizing the number of signatures, Lord George demonstrated his view of the relationship between the government and its people, one in which the government should be representative of and responsive to the wish of its constituents. But on June 2, Gordon was nearly on his own in advancing this argument. Even MPs supportive of popular sovereignty-based reform efforts, such as Charles James Fox, rejected the tactics that Lord George employed and objected to the overt bigotry of the protestors’ objectives that clashed with MPs’ notions of toleration.⁴¹ Lord North, no friend to reform efforts and reluctant to give into strong-arm tactics, refused to allow further action for that day on the petition beyond its first reading. But seeking to cool the heated temperature of the crowd that had already accosted members of both houses on their way into Parliament, he

⁴⁰ *Whitehall Evening-Post*, 3 June 1780. Shelburne was not the only person to make accusations about the real impetus behind those who gathered to deliver the petition. Others accused supporters of being paid and not true believers (“English Catholic” in *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 43-44), and many accusations about Papist and foreign instigation abounded. The meaning and role of rumors and accusations will be explored further in Chapter 2.

⁴¹ Charles James Fox, *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox, Volume 1*, Lord John Russell, ed. (London: Richard Bentley, 1853), 1: 250-251.

ultimately offered a compromise for the Commons to take the petition into consideration on the following Tuesday, June 6.⁴²

Lord George, who had been running back and forth between the Commons' floor and the Speaker's balcony to keep the crowd informed of the MPs' actions and who was speaking against their petition, relayed Lord North's decision to the masses. He must have realized how frenzied the crowd had become, for he implored them to stay calm. Other MPs, both those friendly and unfriendly to the crowd, begged them to leave peacefully.⁴³ Many in the crowd did, especially once Judge Addington arrived with the Horse and Foot Guard and negotiated with those gathered to leave without incident. Though the vast majority of the crowd dispersed peaceably, the disaffected were not satisfied and sought to release their frustration on the Sardinian and Bavarian Embassies' Catholic Chapels. Plundering the contents of these chapels, and setting fire in front of the Sardinian Embassy, the mob's pent-up rage became a spectacle.⁴⁴

Politics Out-Of-Doors

A shift had occurred, with popular politics taking place in the streets, violently, rather than the halls and courtyards of Parliament. The nightly attacks continued for the next week. At first, the rioters targeted overtly Catholic symbols and locations—the Catholic chapels at embassies on the night of June 2, the homes, businesses, and Catholic chapels in the Irish Catholic enclave of Moorfields on June 3 and 4. In these attacks, the rioters pilfered property, set bonfires in the street, broke into distilleries, and caused significant property damage. But no one was killed. The targets soon turned to those

⁴² *The New Annual Register...for 1780*, (Public Occurrences), 48.

⁴³ Green, "The Lunatick Apostle," 225-227.

⁴⁴ *Whitehall Evening-Post*, 3 June 1780; *The New Annual Register...for 1780*, (Public Occurrences) 48.

identified as sympathetic to Catholics. On June 5, rioters attacked the home of Sir George Savile, the sponsor of the CRA, breaking the windows and setting fire to his furniture in the street.⁴⁵ Rioters targeted the homes of prominent citizens and politicians, including Sir John Fielding, the magistrate who had examined those rioters arrested over the weekend at his Bow Street office. To appease the rioters and stem further property damage, citizens took to writing “No Popery” on the doors of their homes and wearing blue cockades, the symbol that the Protestant Association adopted in their petitioning and on their June 2 protest march.⁴⁶

City officials appeared hamstrung. Their paralysis could have been caused by a number of reasons: they feared the mob, as some officials expressed afterwards; or because they had supported their cause initially (some city aldermen had signed the petition); or because of the relatively weak policing system in London. Still, there were a few arrests made by sheriffs and magistrates in the first few nights of the riots.⁴⁷ Those arrested were primarily taken to the newly constructed Newgate Prison. On June 6, the rioters decided to liberate not only their fellow imprisoned rioters, but all prisoners held at Newgate. In a matter of hours, the rioters had freed all prisoners and set the prison ablaze. That same day, rioters attacked the home of Lord Mansfield, the Chief Justice, building a bonfire in the street of his furniture and venerated library. In this new stage of the riots, the shift in

⁴⁵ *The Public Advertiser*, 7 June 1780.

⁴⁶ Social commentators, politicians, and those testifying against the rioters noted the continued appearance of the blue cockade on rioters’ hats and clothing as riot unfolded over the course of the week. The fact that rioters continued to wear this highly visible symbol while committing crimes indicates a desire to ascribe their actions to a communal goal, particularly the cause of the Protestant Association who so explicitly called for the wearing of the blue cockade to indicate support for the petition. The protest movement may have evolved, or even been co-opted by the dredges of society as PA members and supporters contended, but the symbolism of the earlier protest continued on. For examples of commentary on the wearing of the blue cockade by rioters, see Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 336-340; *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, 28 June 1780, #301 Henry John Maskall, Old Bailey Online; *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, 28 June 1780, #346 William Pateman, Old Bailey Online.

⁴⁷ Hibbert, *King Mob*, 59-98; Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 5-6; *London Courant*, 10 June 1780.

rioters' targets paired with an increase in radical rhetoric. Troops attempting to maintain order collected written and printed handbills that advocated for expanding the vote to every man and for dethroning the king.⁴⁸ To back up these demands, rioters repeated their attack on symbols of state authority and power during the following nights, pulling down and releasing prisoners at the Clink, Clerkenwell Bridewell, Fleet Prison, King's Bench, and New Prison. Horace Walpole would infamously label the night of June 7 as "Black Wednesday" due to the fires that licked the night sky.⁴⁹ The riots reached fever pitch when, in the late hours of June 7, rioters attempted to attack the Bank of England. There, they were finally rebuffed by a collective defense that featured soldiers, John Wilkes (an earlier mob hero in the 1760s who now reveled in shooting rioters), and Lord George, who after pleading with the crowd to stop and leave, joined to defend the institution.⁵⁰

With the government forces' successful rebuff of the attack on the Bank of England, the tide finally turned against the Protestant Associators and the rioters. The king and his Privy Council, disgusted with the inability of the City of London government to quell the riots, intervened to restore order. Starting on June 3, the king's military moved nearly 10,000 troops into the city, but their ability to quash the riot had been constrained by a combination of the geographic spread of the riots across the metropolis and the insufficient number of magistrates willing or able to permit soldiers at the scene to fire on the crowd. The king-in-council determined that a chief impediment to fully suppressing

⁴⁸ Lord Grenville to Lord Amherst, 7 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/58-60; Lt. Col. Twisleton to Lord Amherst, 9 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/228-233; Richard Worsley to Lord Amherst, 11 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/325-326; Report from Lt. Col. Jonathan Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

⁴⁹ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 402.

⁵⁰ *The New Annual Register...for 1780*, (Public Occurrences) 51-53; Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 7; John Wilkes, *The Diaries of John Wilkes, 1770-1797*, Robin Eagles, ed. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2014), 279. Wilkes notes that he fired "6 or seven times on rioters" and "killed two rioters directly opposite to the great gate of the Bank."

the riots was the need for civil magistrates, under the Riot Act, to give soldiers permission to fire on the crowds. Rather than wait for this civil approval, the king-in-council, frustrated by the persisting violence, issued an order just before midnight on June 6 “for the military to act without waiting for directions from civil magistrates, and to use force for dispersing the illegal and tumultuous assemblies of the people.”⁵¹ Such an order circumvented the checks on military and executive power in removing the civil approval for state violence, but it was crucial in bringing the riots to a close. The new order allowed troops to bypass civil magistrates who, for reasons mentioned above, had been impotent in the scope of the riotous activities.⁵² No less than Lord Mansfield would defend this extrajudicial procedure later in the House of Lords when Opposition Lords raised concerns over this abuse of power. The actions taken by the king-in-council appeared to many as martial law, so much so that newspapers put out clarifications that the king technically did not invoke martial law during the riots. A distinction without difference, perhaps, but one that aimed to smooth over the concerns of some.⁵³

⁵¹ *The New Annual Register...for 1780*, (Public Occurrences) 53; RA GEO/MAIN/3825 George III to Lord North, 5 June 1780, *Georgian Papers Online*; RA GEO/MAIN/3830 George III to Lord North, 6 June 1780, *Georgian Papers Online*; RA GEO/MAIN/3833 Minutes of the Cabinet, 6 June 1780, *Georgian Papers Online*.

⁵² *London Courant*, 10 June 1780; *St. James's Chronicle*, 10 June 1780. Blackstone was skeptical about the legality of martial law, and considered it “something indulged rather than allowed as a law” (*Commentaries*, 1: 413). Blackstone posits it can only be used in wartime, which would grant George III basis to use it in the case of the Gordon Riots. The fact that he didn't raises more troubling questions, especially in light of Blackstone's observations on oppression:

“[A]s to cases of ordinary public oppression, where the vitals of the constitution are not attacked, the law hath also assigned a remedy. For as a king cannot misuse his power, without the advice of evil counsellors, and the assistance of wicked ministers, these men may be examined and punished. The constitution has therefore provided, by means of indictments, and parliamentary impeachments, that no man shall dare to assist the crown in contradiction to the laws of the land. But it is at the same time a maxim in those laws, that the king himself can do no wrong: since it would be a great weakness and absurdity in any system of positive law, to define any possible wrong, without any possible redress” (1:244).”

George and his supporters quickly squashed any concerns by Opposition members that could have risen to any sort of impeachment for their conduct during the riots. With a secured majority, and working within a grey area around martial law, the King and his council were able to skate by without facing significant pushback or challenge over their actions.

⁵³ *Adam's Weekly Courant* (Chester), 27 June 1780.

Meanwhile, when the Commons reassembled on June 6 to discuss the Protestant Association's petition, they were once again greeted by a massive crowd, like that of June 2. But if anything, MPs' resolves against the petition were even stronger than before. Members from across the political spectrum spoke out against not only the riots, but those whom they saw as instigating the riots—namely, Lord George and the Protestant Association. The ministry and their supporters also cast blame on Opposition members, many of whom had been supportive of the American Patriots, for either encouraging the behavior or not doing enough to stop it. Despite efforts to spread blame, nearly all MPs agreed that the Commons could in no way operate while “beset with the soldiery and the mob.” Lord George tried to placate his fellow MPs by asserting that he had no doubt the tumults would end if the “House would appoint a day to discuss the business, and promise to do it to the satisfaction of the people.”⁵⁴ The Commons instead essentially adjourned until June 19, and though it debated the petition at the end of June, it declined to fully repeal the CRA as the petitioners wanted. Instead, MPs passed a bill to make minor revisions to restrict Catholic schools from educating Protestant children.⁵⁵

After the government's violent suppression of the riots, the fallout lingered into the subsequent years. Under the direction of the Privy Council, Lord George was arrested, held in the Tower of London, and tried for high treason for inciting a riot against the government. He was acquitted in February 1781, resumed his duties with the Protestant Association, and attempted to stand again for election as a London MP in an off-term election in 1781 (the member who had held the seat had died). But despite retaining support among the still dedicated Protestant Associators, both Lord George and the

⁵⁴ *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England...* vol. 21, 660-664.

⁵⁵ *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England...* vol. 21, 702-726.

Protestant Association had lost their standing.⁵⁶ The outcome was more dire for many of those involved in the riots. Between 400 and 700 people were killed by soldiers in the course of the riots, a vast majority of these deaths occurring following George III's order for the troops to bypass civil control and fire-at-will. Magistrates and troops arrested over 450 persons during the riots, and 160 went to trial. Juries found a slim majority of those not guilty (85), while the remaining convicted rioters received sentences that ranged from execution (62 sentenced, 25 actually hanged) to imprisonment.⁵⁷ But perhaps the most widespread fallout from the riots was in national and imperial politics.

An Age of Reform (Attempts)

The Protestant Association was just one of many groups organized in the late 1770s and early 1780s that engaged in extensive political lobbying that asserted and/or embodied popular sovereignty. Historians have been careful to not lump together the Protestant Association with the principal reform movement of the time, the County Associations, primarily since some of the PA's motives seem at odds with the progressive, and sometimes more radical objectives of the others. When exploring the County Association (CA) movement, rarely do historians include the Protestant Association in their analysis, unless it is to note the PA's role in discrediting further reform efforts. Occasionally, historians will allow that the PA was in many ways similar to these other associations in their fundamental critiques of the political status quo.⁵⁸ But many fail to

⁵⁶ Green, "The Lunatick Apostle," 348-357.

⁵⁷ Rudé, "The Gordon Riots," 99; Haywood and Seed, *The Gordon Riots*, 7. The exact number of rioters killed is unknown, but most scholars pin a range of between 400 and 700 dead during or shortly after the riots (not including those tried and executed).

⁵⁸ For a range of historiographical interpretations of the connection (or not) between the Protestant Association and the County Associations, see Ian Christie, *Wars and Revolutions*, 135-138; Ian Christie, "The Yorkshire Association, 1780-4: A Study in Political Organization," *The Historical Journal* vol. 3, no. 2 (1960):

appreciate the ways in which the County Associations and the Protestant Associations were cut from the same cloth. Both were rooted in popular sovereignty, either primarily in action (PA) or in advocacy (CA). The Protestant Association's chief grievance was the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act, which it viewed as opening the door to popery. But ancillary to that criticism was the government's treatment of Protestant petitioners. The House of Commons' refusal to take up their petition for consideration, despite the volume of signatures and supporters physically accompanying its presentation, was evidence of a denial of political rights and a perversion of the relationship that the British constitution set between the people and their government.⁵⁹ Though previous groups had had petitions rejected—notably the Olive Branch Petition from the Continental Congress in 1775—the rejection of the Protestant Association's petition happened amid a political discourse that challenged how government operated *vis-a-vis* its constituents and debated the validity of popular sovereignty, and echoed objections raised by American colonists prior to their declaring independence.

Broadly, the County Associations movement's reforms fell under the umbrella of economic reforms. Led by Christopher Wyvill and the Yorkshire Association, and blossoming to include over 40 other County Association chapters across the nation, the "economical reforms" were geared to lessening the tax burden and decrease the national debt that the ministry's ongoing war had foisted onto county property owners. To tackle this issue, the County Associations advocated for changes to the political structures that

144-161; Knights, "The 1780 Protestant petition," *The Gordon Riots*, 56-62; Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*, 167-180.

⁵⁹ Knights, "The 1780 Protestant petition," *The Gordon Riots*, 46-68; Huzzey and Miller, "Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture."

would rebalance power and curb the crown and ministry's ability to buy MPs' loyalty.⁶⁰ Demanding inquiries into the abuse of funds and a reduction in pensions and sinecures, the proposed economic reforms were basic, good government policies that were moderate in nature and reflected the interest of the movement's largely middle-class, landed members.

Within the large network of County Associations, however, were those that pushed more radical reforms to remake and rebalance the relationship between the government and the governed.⁶¹ Radical members of the County Associations, primarily drawing from the more densely populated counties such as Middlesex, advocated for three main strands of progressive political reform in the months surrounding the Protestant Association's petition and the Gordon Riots. The first proposal sought to tackle corruption by making parliamentary elections an annual occurrence. At the time, elections happened every seven years unless the king dissolved Parliament. By making elections annual, the thought was that MPs would be more responsive to their constituencies. The regularity of elections would encourage turnovers and would help to undercut political patronage by making it too expensive to regularly buy seats. Members of Parliament received no salary and as such, those standing for election were either a) independently wealthy, or b) under the patronage of someone who was. While this reform would likely have done little to broaden the socioeconomic diversity of representation, holding annual

⁶⁰ Phillips demonstrates this corruption when detailing the money that George III and his Court spent to secure the election of loyal MPs, and notes that £1000 per month had been diverted from the king's Privy Purse to an election fund. N.C. Phillips, "The British General Election of 1780: A Vortex of Politics," 9-10, 20.

⁶¹ Ian Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: the parliamentary reform movement in British politics, 1760-1785* (London: Macmillan, 1962); Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*.

elections would make it cost-prohibitive for wealthy patrons (including the king!) to buy and control a vast number of seats.⁶²

The second reform proposal would correct the problem of the rotten boroughs—historic constituencies with very few electors which were often easily bought or controlled by a single individual. (Ironically, Gordon’s seat was from the rotten borough of Ludgershall.) This proposal would remedy this situation by creating more parliamentary seats and equalizing constituencies.⁶³ What is interesting about this critique is the similarities it shared with critiques from the American colonists prior to their declaring independence. The notion of “virtual representation” had been used to rebut colonists’ arguments regarding the ability of Parliament to set internal taxes in the colonies.⁶⁴ The Administration’s response that MPs represented all subjects, not merely those in their constituencies, did not satisfy colonists in the 1760s and 1770s, and it was equally unsatisfying to the more radical members of the association movement, particularly those in populous Middlesex county. Adding additional seats would not wholly reform the issue of representation in the broadest, imperial sense. But it would start to correct the imbalance within the nation.⁶⁵

The final reform that radical County Associators proposed was the most democratic—to expand the franchise. At the time, only approximately 17.5% of the male

⁶² Christie, “The Yorkshire Association,” 144-145.

⁶³ John Cartwright, *The People’s Barrier against Undue Influence and Corruption: Or the Common’s House of Parliament according to the constitution. In which the Objections to an equal Representation and new Parliaments once in every year at least are answered: And a digested Plan for the Whole is submitted to the Public* (London: Printed for J. Almon, April 1780), ECCO.

⁶⁴ John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 207-212.

⁶⁵ For a broad exploration over British parliamentary reform relative to representation, see Roger Mason, *The Struggle for Democracy: Parliamentary Reform, from Rotten Boroughs to Today* (Stroud, UK: The History Press, 2015), esp. ch. 1.

population was eligible to vote under British law.⁶⁶ Those within the associations advocating for the expansion of the franchise viewed this reform effort as crucial to tackling the other problems they had identified. Expanding the franchise would compel politicians to be more responsive to more of their constituents—not just the few who elected them or their political patron. This, in turn, would cut down on corruption. Yet this was the most controversial of the reform proposals and not fully supported within the broader movement, for fears that expanding the franchise would enable men to vote who might be under pressure from their bosses or those to whom they owe debts to vote for a particular person.⁶⁷ It was also the most democratic reform, which sparked fears of mob rule by an uneducated, unrefined underclass. Following the logic of virtuous citizenship, a concept not unique to the elite in England but shared by many in the newly independent United States, full political participation was reserved for those men who proved themselves to be respectable and of good character. Often, that was measured in owning property, which was seen as a sign of good character.⁶⁸ Under this theory, expanding the franchise to all adult males circumvented metrics of virtuosity that formed the basis for good governance. Yet radical reformers rejected this theory, and insisted that expanding the franchise restored the nation to its noble roots. As John Cartwright expressed in his February 1780 pamphlet outlining radical reforms, they that “have *no* vote in the electing of representatives in parliament, are *not* freemen, but are truly and really slaves to the

⁶⁶ H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 32. O'Gorman provides a range of 14-25% of the male population could vote (*Voters, Patrons and Parties*, 182).

⁶⁷ This was a concern shared in the Early Republic period in the United States as well, with politicians such as John Adams expressing concerns that broadening the franchise beyond property holders would cut against good government. See Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007).

⁶⁸ J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 47-50.

representatives of those who *have* votes.” If Englishmen were truly freemen as posited in the constitution, then they should be able to vote for their representatives in Parliament. It was the status of being a “*subject* in this realm” that granted their status as a freeman, not any other qualifications (save age, sanity, and criminality).⁶⁹

What is crucial is that the pamphlets, letters, and periodicals supporting the County Association movement’s reforms (both the moderate and more radical elements) rooted their rationale in popular sovereignty. In advocating for annual elections, the *Yorkshire Freeholder*, a periodical published in York in the first few months of 1780, argued that since the desirability of seats in Parliament made candidates hold their electors in esteem, the “more frequently therefore this Power returns to you [the freeholders], the greater must be the Influence you will naturally possess.”⁷⁰ Not only would regular elections make it fiscally difficult for the crown and ministry to keep supporting so many MPs by paying for their elections, but it would also return power to the sovereign people by restoring the proper relationship between the people and their representatives. The author of *The Out-of-Door Parliament* agreed and stressed that the power of the people did not end “when they suffrage to Parliament” and that the “power of the people in an Out-of-door Parliament” provided a further check on the power of the king, Lords, and Commons.⁷¹ This “Out-of-door Parliament” was formed in extralegal organizations—associations, correspondence committees—as well as crowd action that pressed the government to respond to the people via petition and protest. Advocates of the County Association movement’s proposed reforms additionally referenced the treatment of the American

⁶⁹ Cartwright, *The People’s Barrier Against Undue Influence*, 20. Restrictions on sex is implied, though not explicitly exempted as other disqualifiers.

⁷⁰ *Yorkshire Freeholder*, 28 March 1780, Burney Collection.

⁷¹ A Gentleman, of the Middle Temple, *The Out-Of-Door Parliament* (London: Printed for J. Almon, 1780) 30-31, Library Company of Philadelphia

colonies as further proof of the government's corruption and the fact that the status quo regarding the relationship between subjects and their government was imbalanced.⁷² The central role that popular sovereignty played in these advocacy tools links the various, seemingly distinct, challenges to the government's power. Perhaps that is why, in his March 30 letter to John Robinson, George III expressed his concern with copies of the County Associations' "Violent Papers"—what they advocated for directly challenged his power and grasp on Parliament.⁷³

The County Association efforts attracted the attention of Opposition MPs who saw the reforms, particularly the more moderate ones, as a cause they could champion and use to curb the power of Lord North's administration. Edmund Burke introduced a bill for "economical reform" in February 1780, and drew the support of other Opposition members. Burke, in his introduction speech for the plan, used the relationship between the representatives and the people to justify his actions, stating "we are under infinite obligations to our constituents, who have raised us to so distinguished a trust." But he qualified his responsiveness by asserting that he came to support the reforms alongside of, rather than following the lead of, the constituent advocates.⁷⁴ Perhaps this was why Lord George viewed the Opposition members support of these reforms as a craven political move, not born of true commitment (like his own to the Protestant Association). In his May 1780 conference with the king, Gordon shared with George that he did not believe

⁷² A Gentleman, of the Middle Temple, *The Out-Of-Door Parliament*, 21-22.

⁷³ George III to John Robinson, 30 March 1780, British Library, Add MS 37835.

⁷⁴ Edmund Burke, *Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq., Member of Parliament for the City of Bristol, On presenting to the House of Commons (On the 11th of February, 1780) A Plan for the Better Security of the Independence of Parliament, and the Oeconomical Reformation of the Civil and Other Establishments. Third Edition* (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1780), 14-15, ECCO.

Burke and other Opposition leaders to be sincere in their advocacy, and that they “would soon be found to be all shew and paper.”⁷⁵

Though the reform measures were essentially dead in Parliament by late spring, the riots occurred whilst these reform efforts were still circulating in the body politic, and had disastrous effects on the trajectory of any subsequent attempt to revive the reform effort.⁷⁶ At their heart, the reform efforts were about increasing political participation and modifying the British political system so that it was more representative—more “democratical.” In the aftermath of the riots, anti-reform politicians pointed to the mass crowd action as emblematic of what would happen if governmental reforms granted the public direct political power.⁷⁷ Likewise, those in the Opposition-friendly press also blamed the riots for damning the prospects of the other reform movements by casting a shadow on all political associations.⁷⁸ The riots sapped the wind from the reform movements’ sails, stalling for nearly two years any further consideration. When the reform movement resurged in 1782, it was met with hostility again, with reminders as to the dangers of democracy, the potential tyranny of the masses. Reform efforts at the end of the eighteenth century were further damaged by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, and the entrance of the British into war, yet again, with France shortly thereafter. Indeed, Burke’s highly critical works decrying the French Revolution may have been more influenced by his experiences of the Gordon Riots than he recognized.⁷⁹ It would not be

⁷⁵ Lord George Gordon, *Innocence Vindicated*, 2: 24.

⁷⁶ Gould, *Persistence of Empire*, 174; Phillips, “The British General Election of 1780,” 8, 18-19.

⁷⁷ [Richard Tickell], *Common-place Arguments against Administration, with Obvious Answers, (Intended for the use of the New Parliament.)* (London: Printed for R. Faulder, New Bond Street, 1780), HathiTrust; Sir William Jones, *A Speech on the Nomination of Candidates to Represent the County of Middlesex, IX September, MDCCLXXX*, Library Company of Philadelphia.

⁷⁸ *The New Annual Register...for 1780*, 169, 172.

⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, J.G.A. Pocock, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987); Iain McCalman, “Controlling the Riots: Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* and Romantic Revolution,” *History* vol. 84, no. 275 (July 1999): 458-476.

until the 1820s and 1830s that many of the political reforms (though not all) that were advocated for in 1780 would actually be implemented.⁸⁰

While at first glance there does not appear to be many connections between the goals of the County Associations and those of the Protestant Association, the two were intertwined in their very essence—challenging the government and advocating for the government to be more responsive to the will of the people. Indeed, Lord George himself drew this comparison indirectly, noting that while in the House of Commons in the spring of 1780, he regularly engaged with the champions of reform: Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke. Gordon dismissed their support, however, asserting that he thought “they were no real friends to the people” and that he “suspected all along that they were only making horses of Mr. Wyvill and the Yorkshiremen to ride into office upon.”⁸¹ Gordon may have missed the irony that some thought the same about his own relationship with the Protestant Association.⁸² Nevertheless, both the Protestant Association and the County Associations perceived the government as corrupt, whether from improper patronage relationships or from a creeping arbitrary influence—perhaps one and the same. Perhaps most importantly, the Protestant Association and the County Associations were connected because both opponents and advocates of reform linked the failure of the reform movement to the riots. For reform opponents, the riots portended the dangers of the radical ideas and fervor that associationism engendered. That the rioters pursued an arguably regressive policy through dramatic and violent means was enough for reform

⁸⁰ Colley, *Britons*, 334-350; Sean Lang, *Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928* (London: Routledge, 1999); Eric Evans, *Parliamentary Reform in Britain, c. 1770-1918* (New York: Longman, 1999); Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸¹ Lord George Gordon, *Innocence Vindicated*, 1: 11-12.

⁸² [John Stevenson], *A Letter to a Dissenting Minister, Containing Remarks on the late Act for the Relief of his Majesty's Subjects professing the Popish Religion; With Some Strictures on the Appeal from the Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain* (London: Printed for W. Nicoll, 1780), 23-24, ECCO.

opponents to tarnish all reform movements' objectives as being dangerous. For proponents of reform, the riots were a scapegoat on which to pin blame for their failure—it was the actions of a deranged group that damned the reform efforts from a second wind, not a lack of political support for the reform ideas themselves.⁸³

The Protestant Association and the County Associations advocated fixing problems in the British constitution domestically that the Americans had identified as part of the imperial constitution. This suggests that we cannot separate the imperial and the domestic. The Protestant Association had raised the alarm about the government permitting Popery and inviting arbitrary power—the Americans had done similarly in their remonstrances against the 1774 Quebec Act. The County Associations' radical wing objected to unequal representation and sought to restore the proper balance of power between the people and their representatives—the Americans had pressed these issues in their objections to not only the internal taxes imposed by Parliament, but the authority by which Parliament claimed the ability to impose such taxes. While there has been some recognition of the similarities in advocacy between the American colonists pre-independence and the County Associations, factoring in the Protestant Association and the Gordon Riots emphasizes that the people's political disaffection truly spanned the empire and the nation. Considering the Protestant Association as advancing similarly principled arguments as those made by the County Association underscores the former's legitimacy as a popular political movement, not merely a regressive event that undercut further progressive developments. Doing so also links it to a series of shared critiques raised by the American colonists and the County Associations, and emphasizes that

⁸³ [Sir William Jones], *A Speech on the Nomination of Candidates to represent the County of Middlesex* (1780), LCP. Some historians agree with the proponents's assessment that the riots impeded the reform movement. See Christie, *Wars and Revolutions*, 135-138; Philips, "The British General Election of 1780," 8.

multiple groups on both sides of the Atlantic saw significant problems with the operation of the British government and constitution in the late-eighteenth century.

Beyond London: Catholic Relief and Political Crises in the British Isles

By 1780, the British were grappling not only with domestic discontent and political reform efforts and war with their North American colonies, but international threats to the cohesion of their empire. France had joined as an ally to the American rebels in 1778, bringing along Spain into the alliance the next year. The entrance of these two other empires broadened the scope of the war—putting in play territories and colonies in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, South America, and Africa. As the theater of war grew bigger, Britain faced a ballooning war debt and a need for more men and more supplies. With France and Spain poised to invade, British politicians needed to maintain unity and raise defenses for the British Isles. While the British government worked to manage the situation—raising funds through increasing taxes and loans, opening up avenues of enlistment by passing the 1778 CRA in Ireland and England (and attempting to do so, with foreboding results, in Scotland)—the tumultuous moment presented opportunities for other parts of the imperial nation to exert influence, make political gains, or dramatically assert their British (i.e. Protestant) identity. In their own ways, and sometimes in ways seemingly opposite to the methods of the Protestant Association and the rioters, politicians and movement leaders in Ireland and Scotland utilized the imperial crisis to gain more autonomy or assert their (popular) sovereignty.

The most crucial was the case of Ireland. There was significant worry among British politicians that Ireland could go the way of the rebelling North American colonies. Ireland's place in the British empire was complex, but ultimately subordinate to its more

powerful neighboring kingdom, Great Britain. Technically a sister kingdom with its own Parliament and a shared monarch, the British government retained a great deal of power and control over its ostensibly co-equal Irish kingdom. Like the colonies in North America, any laws passed in the Irish Parliament were subject to review, alteration, and rejection, by the British Privy Council. The Irish government, made up solely of Protestant Irish or British settlers, only had recourse to approve or reject any changes that the British Privy council made to their legislation.⁸⁴ For British politicians, facing a growing imperial crisis, the tense relationship with the sister kingdom was another reason for heartburn. Not only was there concern about the Irish merchants and politicians resenting trade restrictions—one of the very things that set off the Americans—but there was a vast, repressed Catholic population on the island.⁸⁵ With the entrance of France and Spain, two Catholic countries, into the war, many Britons feared those nations using their shared religion with the Catholic Irish as a bridge into the British Isles. The British were already anticipating that the French or Spanish would launch an attack from the Atlantic or English Channel. The potential for attack from their neighboring island, with the support of their fellow subjects, provided an additional complication for Britons to worry about—and not without precedent.⁸⁶ But with manpower stretched in fighting across the Atlantic

⁸⁴ Julian Hoppit, “Introduction,” *Parliaments, nations and identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660-1850*, ed. Julian Hoppit (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 7. Poyning’s law, passed in the 1690s and which enabled this practice of British government oversight and control, was modified in 1782 as a result of Irish pressure during the imperial crisis for more legislative independence. For more on legislative independence, see James Kelly, “The Parliamentary Reform Movement of the 1780s and the Catholic Question,” *Archivium Hibernicum* 43 (1988): 95-117.

⁸⁵ The free trade issue was a key source of political pressure, involving a significant pamphlet campaign. See, for example, Francis Dobbs, *A Letter to the Right Honourable Lord North, on his Propositions in Favour of Ireland* (Dublin: Printed by M. Mills, 1780), ECCO; John Hely-Hutchinson, *The Commercial Restraints of Ireland considered in a series of letters to a Noble Lord. Containing an Historical Account of the Affairs of that Kingdom, So far as they relate to this Subject* (London: Printed for T. Longham, 1780), ECCO.

⁸⁶ Thomas O’Beirne, *A Short History of the Last Session of Parliament...* (London: Printed for J. Almon and J. Debrett, 1780), 26-32; R.E. Burns, “The Belfast Letters, the Irish Volunteers 1778-79 and the Catholics,” *The Review of Politics* 21:4 (Oct. 1959), 678-691; Nathalie Genet-Rouffiac and David Murphy, eds., *Franco-Irish Military Connections, 1590-1945* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009); John J. Silke, “Spain and the Invasion of

and defending the homeland, the British had few options to keep their sister kingdom from turning belligerent.

The situation in Ireland was made even more precarious with the decision to send Irish troops to fight in the American theater. As part of longstanding practice dating back to the Williamite War in the late seventeenth century, the king kept a standing army of approximately 12,000 Irish troops to maintain order and subdue any (Catholic) dissent. However, with the need for more soldiers to fight in the Americas, George III moved a portion of his standing army out of Ireland and across the Atlantic, raising concerns among the Protestant Irish and British ministers about Ireland being open to a naval attack from France—and the potential for uprisings by disgruntled (mainly Catholic) Irish. One solution was the organic creation of the Irish Volunteers, which raised quasi-militias/independent companies of between 80,000 and 100,000 to maintain the status quo on the island.⁸⁷ Yet growth of the Volunteers, which were almost exclusively a Protestant organization until the end of the American war, did not entirely solve the problems of the empire.⁸⁸ In the same month that the British Parliament passed the English CRA, the Irish Parliament, taking cues from their British counterparts, began the process of repealing their penal laws.⁸⁹ The act that the Irish Parliament ultimately passed, after months of petitioning for and against and legislative debate, was much smaller than the meager

Ireland, 1601-1602,” *Irish Historical Studies* vol. 14, no. 56 (1965): 295-312; Sudipta Das, *De Broglie’s Armada: A Plan for the Invasion of England, 1765-1777* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009).

⁸⁷ O’Beirne, *A Short History*, 26-32; Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 82-92; Breandan Mac Suibhne, “Whiskey, Potatoes and Paddies: Volunteering and the Construction of the Irish Nation in Northwest Ulster, 1778-1782,” *Crowds in Ireland, c. 1720-1920*, eds. Peter Jubb & Eoin Magennis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 45-82.

⁸⁸ Burns, “The Belfast Letters,” 686-687; for the admittance of Catholics into the Volunteers, see Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, 90.

⁸⁹ Robert E. Burns, “Catholic Relief Act in Ireland, 1778” *Church History* vol. 32, no. 2 (1963): 181-206; *Dublin Journal*, 23 May 1778; *Finn’s Leinster Journal*, 23 May 1778; *Freeman’s Journal*, 23 May 1778. Thank you to Michael Hattem for locating and sharing these newspapers with me.

concessions made in the English CRA. The Irish CRA ultimately repealed a gaveling provision (which required existing Catholic landholders to split inheritance equally among all sons) and permitted Irish Catholics to take long leases on land (rather than own land outright, as the English version permitted).⁹⁰ It also instituted a modified oath of allegiance, enabling Irish Catholics to function more freely in society and, most significantly, to serve in the king's military. While the primary function of the Irish CRA was, as in England and Wales, to raise troops to send to America, undoubtedly a secondary function was an effort to pacify Catholics susceptible to revolutionary rhetoric and grievances from the other side of the Atlantic.⁹¹ Reaction to the passage of the CRA in Ireland was limited in comparison to the response provoked in England and Scotland—perhaps because the concessions in the CRA were so small, but more likely than not because the organization of the Volunteers seemed to serve as a panacea that Irish Protestants would be able to defend themselves from any sort of Catholic uprising as a result of their gaining more rights.⁹²

Efforts to maintain Irish loyalty, such as rolling back some penal law elements, enabled Irish politicians to continue pressing the imperial crisis to their advantage and gain further sovereignty from their sister-kingdom. The empire-supportive Irish and their sympathizers in the British Parliament—including, perhaps surprisingly, Lord George

⁹⁰ Burns, "Catholic Relief Act in Ireland, 1778"; Karen Stanbridge, "Quebec and the Irish Catholic Relief Act of 1778: An Institutional Approach," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 16, no. 3 (September 2003), fn 1. By this time, most Irish Catholics had been disinherited, so few (mainly the wealthy who kept their Catholicism secret or had protestant family hold the title) would actually benefit. Along that line, the ability to purchase land sounds well and good, but you need to be able to raise the funds and years of tenet farming and inability to grow wealth makes that very difficult. Rich Protestant landowners had little incentive to sell land.

⁹¹ Burns, "The Belfast Letters;" Joel Herman, "Transnational News and the Irish Free Trade Crisis of 1779," *Age of Revolutions*, 8 February 2021 (Accessed 18 November 2021), <https://ageofrevolutions.com/2021/02/08/transnational-news-and-the-irish-free-trade-crisis-of-1779/>.

⁹² Burns, "The Belfast Letters," 686-687.

Gordon—considered the economic position of Ireland and its relation to its sister kingdom, Great Britain, as the next avenue to pursue.⁹³ With a downturn in the economy as a result of the war, Irish radicals pressed for the right of Irish free trade with other British imperial holdings.⁹⁴ After a year of agitation, in late 1779 the British Parliament relented and passed a bill that essentially removed barriers on trade between Ireland and any other territory within the British empire. Such an act opened up opportunities for trade and commerce to grow beyond the more mercantilist system the ministry imposed on imperial territories beyond Great Britain—such as those constraining the North American colonies prior to declaring independence.⁹⁵ The Irish were able to further capitalize on their success in asserting more sovereignty over their nation in 1782, when, as a consequence of the North administration’s collapse at the end of the American war, the new Rockingham administration acquiesced to Irish demands for a repeal of the laws gave the English government authority over the Irish legislature.⁹⁶ The imperial crisis opened up avenues for Ireland to eke out some political autonomy from its sister kingdom, gaining some rights that American colonists had agitated for, while also permitting a very

⁹³ Padhraig Higgins, “Consumption, Gender, and the Politics of ‘Free Trade’ in Eighteenth-Century Ireland,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41:1 (Fall 2007): 87-105; Herman, “Transnational News and the Irish Free Trade Crisis of 1779.”

The relations of the two kingdoms within and to the empire is especially interesting considering how some American Loyalists and Britons advocating for conciliation with the rebelling Americans floated the notion of making the American continent a kingdom *a la* Ireland, rather than permitting independence. Ireland sat at a nexus of imperial politics, presented as an example as a step up from colonial status while the Irish themselves saw their status as lesser-than compared to their sister kingdom.

⁹⁴ Herman, “Transnational News and the Irish Free Trade Crisis of 1779.”

⁹⁵ The British government pursued mercantilist economic policies to create a closed economic system across the empire. This policy penalized trade outside of imperial territories and encouraged domestic production in the home country above all other territories. For more on British mercantilism policies and practices, see Steve Pincus, “Rethinking Mercantilism: Political Economy, the British Empire, and the Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2012): 3–34; Cathy Matson, “Imperial Political Economy: An Ideological Debate and Shifting Practices,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2012): 35–40.

⁹⁶ S. J. Connolly, “Kingdom, Crown and Parliament: Patriot Myth and the Origins of the Irish Union,” in *Forging the State: European State Formation and the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707*, eds. Andrew MacKillop and Michael O Siochru (Dundee, UK: Dundee University Press, 2009), 146-47.

limited Catholic Relief Act that appeased the British Government yet limited any disruption to the status quo of Ireland's apartheid state.

While the Irish Parliament relaxed Catholic penalties and pressed their advantage during the imperial crisis, Scotland had an entirely different experience. Likely this response was driven, in part, to the different relationship Scotland had within the empire. With the 1707 unification of the kingdoms of Scotland and England into one, Scotland was represented in the British Parliament that controlled not only domestic policy, but imperial policy as well. As part of the kingdom of Great Britain, it shared in much of the economic benefit from the empire. It therefore had, at least compared to the Irish nation and the colonies, a greater sense of place and representation in the imperial government.⁹⁷ Yet to understand the Scottish response to the attempts to pass a Catholic Relief Act for that nation, it is important to have a general understanding of the longstanding conflict over Jacobitism in Scotland.⁹⁸ Concerns about Catholic plots to retake the British throne were perhaps the most intense in the Scottish nation, where the Stuart pretenders and their allies' (the Jacobites) multiple attempts to reinstall the Catholic Stuart line were foiled by Protestant Britons. These plots and uprisings had left a psychic wound, instilling a more severe paranoia within the Scottish populace and a need to prove their patriotism and

⁹⁷ David Allan, *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century: Union and Enlightenment* (Harlow and London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 8-14; Scotland was able to access more power and prestige through the 1707 unification of the Scottish and English nations, giving Scottish representation (albeit small – 45 MPs and 16 Peers) in a British Parliament. But Scots were still treated quite poorly and with suspicion by the English—especially in relation to lingering fears of Scottish Jacobitism. See also Robert Kent Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism: Opposition to Roman Catholic Relief in Scotland, 1778-1782* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 162-164, 234-239.

⁹⁸ For more on Jacobitism and Scotland in the 18th century, see Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Risings in Britain, 1689-1746* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980); Geoffrey Gilbert Plank, *Rebellion and Savagery: The Jacobite Rising of 1745 and the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Christopher A. Whatley and Derek J. Patrick, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); John Stuart Shaw, *The Political History of Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press, 1999).

loyalty, especially in the aftermath of the 1745-46 Jacobite uprising.⁹⁹ Leading families, especially those with recent Catholic ties, took great pains to publicly and voraciously demonstrate their Protestant bona fides—including the Gordon clan.¹⁰⁰ The psychic scars and need to prove one's Protestantism may explain, to some degree, the intense reaction in Scotland to the potential passage of a CRA for that nation—a reaction that foreshadowed the dramatic events in London just over a year later.

To properly understand the Scottish reaction to a potential CRA, it is important to have a sense of the Scottish political, social, and religious landscape. Despite a veneer of stability, Scottish society in the second half of the eighteenth century simmered with discontent and conflict.¹⁰¹ As Scotland transitioned through industrialization, pockets of resistance to changing political and social order peaked at times.¹⁰² The ascendent middle class, however, asserted their influence to bring order to protest. Increasingly, over the latter half of the eighteenth century, the middle-class co-opted and legitimized collective action through more “orderly” forms: pamphlets, petitions, male-dominated associations. Physical protests, a tactic more common in working-class protests, still attracted middle-class individuals. And middle-class leaders, attempting to demonstrate the popularity or unpopularity of a particular issue, might surreptitiously lean into or encourage this type of physical, ‘disordered’ protest.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 234-239.

¹⁰⁰ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 238-242. Steve Pincus suggested to me that the Gordon Clans' past Catholicism may in some way explain the fervent anti-Catholicism of Lord George, among other family members. Pincus suggested that for many Scots, the suspicion of being a secret Catholic led them to ostentatiously prove their Protestantism, something to which Donovan alludes.

¹⁰¹ T.M. Devine, ed., *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1990), v.

¹⁰² Christopher A. Whatley, “How tame were the Scottish Lowlanders during the Eighteenth Century?” in *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society*, 3.

¹⁰³ Stana Nenadic, “Political Reform and the ‘Ordering’ of Middle-Class Protest,” in *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society*, 65-82.

Nowhere was this confluence of differing class actors uniting in popular protest more evident than in the reaction to a Scottish CRA. Because it repealed a law prior to the 1707 unification, the British Parliament's passage of the CRA in May 1778 only covered England and Wales. A separate bill was necessary to repeal a Scottish law from before 1707. Yet Parliament did not concurrently or immediately pass such a bill—likely because the session was drawing to a close and because the number of Catholics in Scotland was relatively small.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the reason for legislative inaction, with the passage of a version for England and Wales, and in Ireland, leading Scots and religious leaders worried that Scotland was next.

In a trajectory of events that was all-too-familiar, and in essence presaged the events leading up to the Gordon Riots, the campaign against a CRA for Scotland started with publishing pamphlets, creating organizations, and petitioning government—and ended with riots. Yet, even though the Scots were even less represented and enfranchised than their fellow subjects in England, they still used popular means to compel the political apparatus to their will. They, in effect, seized popular sovereignty in a more successful manner than their compatriots in England, resulting in the British Parliament publicly abandoning any consideration of passing a Scottish CRA. That success may have contributed to the beliefs of the English Protestant Association that they would be successful by using the same methods—albeit on a much larger scale. It possibly factored into their decision to appoint as their president Lord George Gordon, a Scot from a key noble family, who became an outspoken supporter of the Scottish CRA protest efforts.

¹⁰⁴ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 167-169. Donovan pegs the number of Catholics in Scotland at the time as around a few thousand, which may have made them a less attractive source of potential military labor. But it's also likely that the MPs didn't realize until part-way through debating the CRA that they would need to pass a separate bill for Scotland, as Lord Advocate for Scotland Henry Dundas pointed out during the debate over the English CRA (*General Evening Post*, 16 May 1778).

Scottish activity to kill any potential Catholic Relief bill started almost congruently with the passage of the English CRA in May 1778. At the time, the Presbyterian Assembly in Scotland was holding its annual meeting when news of the CRA reached participants. As a result, leading ministers started discussing the issue during their meeting, and eventually in public, decrying the actions of the government for the English and Welsh nations, and warning that the British government intended to force such a bill on Scotland.¹⁰⁵ Henry Dundas, the Lord Advocate for Scotland and a high ranking Scottish official in the North Administration, did little to quell their fears or respond to their entreaties when the religious leaders pressed for assurances that no bill would be brought forth. Dundas' weak response was a sign that the British government was inhospitable to their views (and, in fact, he had spoken favorably of a Scottish CRA on the Commons floor). Still, the campaign continued on in the latter half of 1778, with the formation of organizations and committees of correspondence akin to those formed by the American revolutionaries, the publication of pamphlets protesting any sort of Catholic relief, and ultimately collecting resolutions (i.e. petitions) urging no bill for Scotland and to repeal the bill for England.¹⁰⁶

Yet these actions continually failed to produce evidence that the British government was listening or taking the Scottish people's concerns seriously. Frustration

¹⁰⁵ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 10-11. Scottish Presbyterianism is more popularly driven and thus, lends itself to more democratic responses. It is less hierarchal than other forms of Protestantism, especially the Anglican church, and Scots viewed it as a key part of the constitution based on the king's coronation oath. This structure and the religiosity of Scotland in the period makes the Scottish kirk almost as powerful as a state, at least in terms of influencing people's worldview and sense of self. With clergy advocating against repeal and sounding the warning bells of Popery, alongside issues of economic decline and unresponsive government, it created a perfect storm for explosive action. See Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 152-155, 254-256.

¹⁰⁶ Donovan, 52-75; *Scotland's Opposition to the Popish Bill. A Collection of all the Declarations and Resolutions; Published by the Different Counties, Cities, Towns, Parishes, Incorporations, and Societies throughout Scotland, Against a Proposed Repeal of the Statutes, Enacted and For Ever Ratified by the Revolution and Union Parliament, for preventing the Growth of Popery....*(Edinburgh: Printed by David Paterson, 1780) ECCO.

percolated during the fall of 1778, with minor and relatively isolated attacks on some of the few Catholics in Glasgow, and a brief mutiny of Scottish Highland troops in September over impressment (which was quickly, and peacefully, resolved).¹⁰⁷ The tensions persisted, while advocates such as John Erskine, a Presbyterian minister in Edinburgh, continued to publish and preach about the dangers of the Catholic relief.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the government took heed of the warning signs, not to mention the petitioning of Scottish Catholics to give up relief efforts, and abandoned their plans for a Scottish CRA. But the distrust from months of petitioning and pamphletting with no satisfactory response had built up, and the news that the government would not introduce a bill was met by anti-CRA Scots with skepticism and disbelief.¹⁰⁹ The largest anti-Catholic riots in Scotland broke out in late-January and early-February 1779, in Edinburgh and Glasgow primarily, but also, on a smaller scale, in Aberdeen, Dundee, Peebles, and Perth. A small band of rioters attacked homes of Catholic subjects, including Bishop Hay, the Catholic bishop who had advocated for a Scottish CRA and whom anti-CRA protestors viewed as a nefarious figure. While rioters generally confined riotous activities towards overtly Catholic representations (homes, individuals), Scottish politicians suspected of supporting a CRA were also threatened, though not attacked, by the angry crowd. Magistrates and troops, perhaps sympathetic to the crowd's cause, perhaps overwhelmed by the disparate geographic spread of the riotous activity across the city landscapes, did little to quash the riots, and the riots largely came to a conclusion on their own.¹¹⁰ With the pressure valve released,

¹⁰⁷ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 208-210; John Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt 1743-1804* (London: Pimlico, 2001); *Public Advertiser*, 29 September 1778; *Morning Chronicle*, 2 October 1778.

¹⁰⁸ John Erskine, D.D., *Considerations On the Spirit of Popery, and The intended Bill for the relief of Papists in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Printed by Murray & Cochran, 1778) ECCO.

¹⁰⁹ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 23-24.

¹¹⁰ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 24-29.

and the more forceful and assertive announcements that the government was abandoning any sort of relief act for Scotland, came a little clarity, and though the Scottish organizations and leaders stayed engaged in supporting their English counterparts in their protest efforts, violence abated in Scotland. It seemed as though the Scottish campaign of popular pressure through multiple means—pamphlets, petitions, sermons, and yes, violence—had garnered for the Scottish protesters their desired result: a CRA-free Scotland.¹¹¹

Viewed together, the events of the Gordon Riots, the popular agitations over Catholic relief and political autonomy in other areas of the empire, and the rise of the County Associations, all indicate fundamental fractures within the British body politic. These fractures were more than domestic, however, and speak to issues raised in decades prior by American colonials frustrated with Government actions that shifted the balance of political control more firmly towards the Government. Centering the events of the Gordon Riots, we can see in dramatic fashion how precarious the situation truly was—not merely in the outlands of the empire, but in the very heart itself. The riots reenforce that the empire and the domestic were not separate realms, not in eighteenth century Britain, and perhaps not ever. The imperial crisis caused by the rebellion of the North American colonies could never solely be contained across the Atlantic. Not only was this issue a constant matter of discussion within British Parliament, but the issues of governance and rights raised by rebelling colonists would resonate—implicitly and explicitly—with some subjects closer to home. The actions the government would take to quash the rebels

¹¹¹ Donovan, *No Popery and Radicalism*, 8-49.

seeped into seemingly domestic, national spaces. The need for more troops meant the government needed to consider opening up avenues for those typically unable to serve—Catholics—to be eligible for military service. But, for many Protestants, these actions were threatening to the very safety and coherence of the imperial nation, and required that good Protestant Britons compel their government to stop this decline. To prompt their government to respond to their wishes, they pursued traditional avenues for demanding actions from the government—petitioning, protesting—as well as more extraordinary responses—forming paramilitary and extralegal organizations. But when the traditional methods failed, violence appeared to be the only way to compel a response. It was a story of the imperial periphery played out in the domestic center, making plain that the division between the two arenas was arbitrary, at best. And demonstrating that issues of governance, of who held sovereignty, was a fracture that ran through the entire British constitution.

Chapter 2:
“Of Late I Credit Nothing”:
Rumors, Conspiracies, and Collective Sense-Making of the
Gordon Riots¹

The Presumption that the Persons belonging to the Protestant Association were not the Promoters of the late Riots, begins to strengthen a pace, since upon the most credible Information it appears, that the Houses of many of the Persons belonging to that Body were marked as Objects of Destruction.

-*Public Advertiser*, 16 June 1780²

Ben Franklin was behind it. Or maybe it was John Adams. An American, certainly. Or perhaps the French. No, it was the British Ministry, out to amass power and solidify support from a terrorized public. In the aftermath of the 1780 London riots, many people in Britain and America sought someone to blame. (The obvious answer, a discontented public, was insufficient.) The riot was too big. Too many people were involved. Someone else must have had a hand in the week-long riot. These spectacular events had to be more than the explosive reaction of some British subjects to Parliament’s rejection of their petition. Amidst an ongoing war with their American colonists and their perennial enemies the French, maybe the reason for the riots was an external instigator, or a ministerial plot, or a Catholic or Methodist conspiracy. Anything, rather than a domestic manifestation of political discontent.³

¹ Title quotation comes from Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford. In Nine Volumes*. Peter Cunningham, ed. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1866), 7: 384. An early version of this chapter was shared at the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic 2022 Conference. I would like to thank the panel chair and commentor, Asheesh Siddique Kippur, my fellow panelists, and members of the audience for their thoughtful comments and questions.

² *Public Advertiser*, 16 June 1780.

³ As I argue elsewhere, the Gordon Riots were a manifestation of political grievances that shared ideology and rhetoric with the American Revolution. But the ability—or willingness—of people at the time to see this varied. Some of the rumors explored in this chapter helped to make this connection in particular (material) ways, while others reflected the tendency of those crafting the riots’ narrative (politicians, printers, writers) to focus on the domestic issues in Britain (including longstanding religious tensions) and

Times of uncertainty and upheaval are breeding grounds for rumors and conspiracy theories. As people try to make sense of what occurred, an appealing rumor functions to provide the why, how, and who in the wake of the event. The meaning of the localized upheaval takes on greater consequence when people connect it to other events occurring at or around the same time. Rumors can be salacious, a bit of drama to distract from the truth of the situation—especially if one does not like the outcomes or the participants. With the Gordon Riots, the various rumors that circulated took an already dramatic event and added even more intrigue to the story. For those in power or vested in the status quo, rumors had the effect of shifting blame to external enemies, rather than prompt analysis of the underlying reasons that middling- and working-class Britons would participate in a week-long riot. For those outside of power, the rumors they circulated offered an opportunity to undercut those in power and, for some, shift blame away from their own culpability in the riots. Speculating about the suspected perpetrators behind the riots—the Americans and French, the British Ministry, the Catholics or Methodists—provided a useful diversion and alleviated any critical analysis of why rebellions were popping up on both sides of the British Atlantic.⁴

minimize transatlantic connections—material and ideological. That popular narrative is grounded in material reality, but if we only look at who the majority of actors involved in the riots were and their on-the-face demands, we miss the more complex transatlantic connections.

⁴ One of the most powerful elements to rumors is that they lend themselves to the passive voice. “People say” or “I heard” are common in the retelling of rumors. Because of this, a rumor can transmit across space and time with a degree of ease and no single person to hold accountable. But that also makes the historian’s task harder—who is the author or originator of the rumor can be difficult, if not impossible, to discern. So I focus here on who helped to spread the rumor (the letter writers, the speakers, the printers) and why. The why part is not always clear, and so I speculate where necessary as to the political motives that may animate people’s decisions to share rumors.

This chapter analyzes four conspiracy rumors that surfaced following the Gordon Riots that connect, to varying degrees, to the American Revolution.⁵ It explores who spread these rumors and how, and identifies or speculates as to their political goals in doing so. It also delves into the elements of truth that made these rumors so appealingly plausible. In doing so, I argue that what fueled these rumors about the Gordon Riots was their integration of prior political ideologies with the opportunity to scapegoat one's enemy, particularly against the backdrop of the American Revolutionary War. Though the reach of these four rumors varied, for Patriots, Loyalists, and Britons of different political stripes, the rumors that circulated in the wake of the riot seemed to validate their prior political positions.

Key to a rumor's success was its believability. The rumors that circulated in the wake of the Gordon Riots had some semblance of credibility and fit within broader political narratives already constructed prior to the outbreak of the riots. The American rebels and their French allies would stoop to whatever lengths to achieve victory over the British, so why wouldn't they foment a riot in the heart of the British empire? George III's ministers had shown time and time again that they wanted absolute power, so why wouldn't they take as little precautions as possible despite advanced notice, only to sweep in at the end and restore order to a grateful city? Methodists and Dissenters had a history of anti-establishment agitation and of insisting upon the superiority of their worldview. So, why wouldn't their fanatics act out of paranoia against mainstream Anglicanism's

⁵ Rumors also circulated during the riots about potential targets such as Lord North's house or the Customs and Excise offices. For purposes of this chapter, I will focus only on the conspiratorial rumors that circulated post-riots and placed blame away from the rioters and those immediately connected to them (i.e. Lord George). For a look at how rioters used rumors and communication to achieve their goals during the riots, see Hannah Awcock, "Handbills, rumours, and blue cockades: Communication during the 1780 Gordon Riots," *Journal of Historical Geography* vol. 74 (2001), 1-9.

tolerance for Catholic popery? These were enticing rumors that picked up traction and spread orally and in letters both private and public, and in Britain and America. Conversely, rumors of a(nother) Catholic plot were localized primarily in the *Protestant Magazine*, and seemingly gained little traction beyond the magazine's subscribers and some British newspapers. Yet regardless of how far they spread, the rumors that surfaced following the riots built upon the existing political beliefs of the rumor spreaders.

The post-riots rumors that circulated sparked conspiracy theories that were seemingly plausible to both the rumor spreaders and their audiences. While these rumors and conspiracies were likely untrue, that did not mean there weren't kernels of truth to them. Indeed, as the journalist Terry Ann Knopf notes, "falsehood is not necessarily a feature of rumor. The key factor which sets a rumor apart from information is that the report, account, story or allegation is *unverified*."⁶ Sociologist Gary Alan Fine has similarly noted that rumors "are particularly liable to spread when the topic of the rumor is judged to be important and the situation is judged to be ambiguous."⁷ Thus, the validity of the rumors and conspiracies mattered little. They were *plausible* to those who spread and heard them. Part of that plausibility rested on the very permeable nature of the British Atlantic, as historians such as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown. With a number of people from various parts of the Atlantic traversing through and about Britain generally, and London specifically, it seemed quite possible to some British people that they were the true instigators of the riots.⁸ Another part of the rumors' plausibility rested on

⁶ Terry Ann Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, Inc., 1975, rev. 2006), 2.

⁷ Gary Alan Fine, "Introductory Essay" in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumors and Legends*, Gary Alan Fine, Veronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath, eds. (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

⁸ Peter Linebaugh & Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Alison Games, "Migration" in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, David Armitage & Michael J. Braddick, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

ingrained political suspicion and distrust, which had built up over years of government action coded as egregious and tyrannical. As Gary Alan Fine points out, rumors about government corruption “frequently reflect the inchoate disaffection of citizens” and could occasionally be used strategically by opposition groups.⁹ In this way, the rumors that circulated in the wake of the riots built upon perceptions of plausibility based on people’s prior experiences and political beliefs.

Anatomy of a Rumor

The rumors that spread following the Gordon Riots primarily fell into the category of conspiratorial rumors.¹⁰ Such rumors pin the blame on forces operating behind the scenes, rather than on the most obvious responsible party. The rumors about the riots fit within the same mold of conspiracy rumors circulating about Popish plots in the seventeenth century, slave rebellions, and President John F. Kennedy’s murder. Here, Richard Hofstadter’s concept of “the paranoid style” might be apt to help explain why such rumors flourished. As Hofstadter described it, “the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy.”¹¹ Attempting to cope with this *feeling* of persecution, people devise explanations to account for the situation that produced such feelings. Crucially, rumors “allow human beings to cope with the uncertainties of life.”¹² Hofstadter’s concept doesn’t wholly fit conspiracy rumors—

2002); Trevor Burnard, “The British Atlantic,” in *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹ Fine, “Introductory Essay,” *Rumor Mills*, 5.

¹⁰ As opposed to categories of rumors such as gossip or schadenfreude, which one can define by their fleeting nature, informality, and familiarity. See Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: the Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 84–85.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 4.

¹² Rosnow and Fine, *Rumor and Gossip*, 12.

indeed, his model is more expansive—but its core elements are useful. What differentiates the paranoid style and a conspiratorial rumor is scale. Rumors *can* involve large forces working in concert against the government, the community, or a religious movement. But, more often, rumors stay small, contained to a particular group or ideology. Living through the Gordon Riots, either within London or beyond it, produced anxiety that prompted people to entertain and share conspiracy rumors as a means of coping.

Periods of upheaval and uncertainty are breeding grounds for rumors, and there is no more uncertain time than wartime. Wars have the potential to both whip up patriotism and instill suspicion of subversives, both foreign and domestic. Wars can also prompt citizens or subjects to question the government that took the country into war (and their reasons for doing so). Does that make wars more conducive to the spread of rumors? Perhaps. Conspiratorial rumors happen during periods of relative peace, too. For instance, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s trafficked in many rumors and conspiracies to gain traction.¹³ But during times of conflict, drama, and anxiety, people give more weight to conspiratorial rumors due to the surrounding circumstances.¹⁴ Indeed, some of the most infamous rumors and conspiracy theories spread during or in the aftermath of conflict: 9/11 “trutherism” amidst the United States’ war on terror, or the Salem Witch Trials against the backdrop of King William’s War.¹⁵ Amidst time of conflict

¹³ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

¹⁴ Hofstadter, “Introduction,” x; Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, “Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends,” *Diogenes* vol. 54, no. 1 (2007): 21-23.

¹⁵ I would like to thank François Furstenberg for the suggestion of conspiratorial rumors related to the Salem Witch Trials. For the spread of conspiracy theories regarding the 9/11 terrorist attacks, see Noam Chomsky, Gilbert Achcar, and Stephen Roskamm Shalom, *Perilous Power: The Middle East & U.S. Foreign Policy: Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007), 12-17; Martin Randall, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1-18; Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009). For conspiratorial rumors in relation to the Salem Witch Trials, see Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors and Gossip* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Peter

and confusion, rumors offer some sort of explanation by moving blame to someone else, oftentimes people or groups already deemed duplicitous or dangerous.

Further, a rumor is a tool that both the powerful and the powerless can wield. Rumors can seek to undermine power, to bolster power, to disrupt power, or to disempower. All of the rumors that circulated following the Gordon Riots in some way disempowered the actions of the crowd. By pinning blame on particular agitators or groups other than the British rioters themselves, they undercut the agency of the rioters who had targeted symbols of the state, of status, of power. Instead of focusing on who the rioters were and why they rioted (and what message they were sending with their choice of targets), the rumor-spreaders shifted culpability to people they deemed *riotous*—Benjamin Franklin, Catholics, Methodists. Meanwhile, those opposed to the British government used rumors of a Ministry plot to undercut the Ministry's power and support. Anyone can start or spread a rumor. All one needs is an audience willing to entertain it, and to possibly pass it along further.¹⁶ That is how a rumor gains power.

Another element to consider is the mode of rumor transmission. Rumors can spread in a variety of ways: orally, in private correspondence, through published news reports and printed correspondence, and, in the modern age, at lightning speed via the internet. A rumor's life can take many twists and turns, and move any which way, from oral to private letter to public print/broadcast. How much stock to give to a rumor can be assigned by how much credence one gives the source. In modern times, we are unlikely to

Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

¹⁶ I use the term "audience" in accordance with Merriam-Webster's definition, "a reading, viewing, or listening public," (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/audience>). As rumors spread both in print and oral communication, "audience" captures the various agents and methods of transmission.

give much credibility to the rumors that grace the cover of tabloid magazines, but may be more inclined to entertain speculation printed in a respectable newspaper. In the eighteenth century, when information sources were more limited, readers' placed more trust in newspapers. Though not available everywhere, in many urban locations in the United States and in Britain readers had choices as to which newspapers to read or subscribe to. Trusting a printer's judgment, especially when they often went to lengths to explain or qualify the startling or suspicious information in their publication, allowed readers to entertain conspiratorial rumors.¹⁷

Similarly, rumors spread orally or in private correspondence depended upon the trust between the rumor-spreader and the rumor-receiver. One might not believe a stranger at the tavern claiming that certain people were behind an event, but a rumor coming from a faithful correspondent or kinsman or someone claiming to have first-hand knowledge might have greater weight. One might also give someone who claims to have first-hand knowledge of the rumor's subject more credence. As Ada Ferrer, Julius Scott, and Jason Sharples have shown, the rumors that circulated around the Atlantic in the late-eighteenth century by enslaved persons or their enslavers prompted anxiety and efforts to control this spread of information.¹⁸ A relationship of some sort is necessary for rumors to spread. But that relationship need not be intimate—it can be based on a shared community, or identity, or dependency. White refugees from Saint Domingue relayed

¹⁷ Joseph Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 3-6, 10-17; Jordan Taylor, "Now is the Winter of our Dull Content: Seasonality and the Atlantic Communications Frontier in Eighteenth-Century New England," *The New England Quarterly* vol. 95, no. 1 (March 2022): 8-38; Will Slauter, "Forward-Looking Statements: News and Speculation in the Age of the American Revolution," *The Journal of Modern History* vol. 18, no. 4 (December 2009): 759-792.

¹⁸ Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 53-56, 76-82; Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2018); Jason T. Sharples, *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

rumors that “mulattos and white rabble” were the true leaders of the 1791 enslaved uprising in Saint Domingue to white government officials in Cuba, hoping to prompt Spanish action to suppress the neighboring conflict.¹⁹ Similarly, the rumors spread by Britons and Americans about the Gordon Riots depended upon some shared connection between the rumor spreader and the recipient. Trust was key—and trust between rumor-sharer and receiver could be given for a multitude of reasons.

The details of the rumor matter as well. As Rosnow and Fine point out, rumors “spread to persons for whom the content is most relevant.”²⁰ While rumor-spreaders cannot always control their audience—newspapers are not just read by subscribers or paying customers, letters can be intercepted, and whispers can be overheard—it does factor into whether that rumor is spread further, and how it might be received. This is where the plausibility of a rumor factors in. An outlandish rumor might be entertaining for the rumor-recipient to consider, but if the content is implausible it is unlikely the recipient will spread the rumor further. If an audience finds a rumor too farfetched or the content off-putting, that may also stop a rumor from spreading further. Take, for instance, the American/French instigator rumor. As will be discussed later in the chapter, this rumor, while popular in British circles and among Loyalists, received little attention from Patriot letter writers and printers. Likely because they did not find the rumor credible, Patriots limited its spread. A rumor’s content matters—an audience finding a rumor irrelevant or implausible stops that rumor from spreading further among that group. But there can always be other audiences that that rumor finds more receptive and inviting.

¹⁹ Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror*, 45-47.

²⁰ Rosnow and Fine, *Rumors and Gossip*, 59. See also Ralph L. Rosnow, “Rumor as Communication: A Contextualist Approach,” *Journal of Communication* vol. 28, no. 1 (1998): 12-28.

The basic elements to a conspiracy rumor as outlined above give us a better understanding of how the four rumors analyzed below operated. While we may not be able to discern the rumors' origins, we can assess the spreaders of the rumor and infer what they intended to accomplish by passing it along. We can pull apart the methods of transmission, and the parties to that transmission, to see how they shaped and gave life to these rumors. And we can discern how these rumors situated the riots into conspiracies old and new. The rumors that circulated were born from anxiety—anxiety over the scope and scale of the riots; anxiety over how the riots would impact the near future. The rumors that circulated were an attempt by various people of different social (and geographical) locations to assuage some of that anxiety and to shift blame for the riots to someone more suitable in their view.

Rumor 1: Catholic Conspiracy

In the very first article of the very first issue of the *Protestant Magazine*, published over a year after the Gordon Riots, the printers pinned the insurrection on Catholic instigators. The editorial asserted that Papists had “agreed, that to perpetrate acts of violence and rebellion, and cast the stigma on the Protestant Association, was most likely to answer the purpose” in defeating the PA’s petition. The printers sought to detail the Protestant Association’s genuine and honorable objectives and absolve its members of blame for the riots. They did so by sharing suppositions and rumors that Catholics were the true authors of the spectacular violence.²¹ The printers of the *Protestant Magazine* were

²¹ *The Protestant Magazine; or Christian Treasury. Volume 1* (London: Printed and Published for R. Denham, 1781), 1: 5, 8. The authors of the article went on to claim that Catholics were “not content” with undercutting the PA’s petition with violence, that the “noble President of the Protestant Association [Lord George Gordon] must suffer for their acts of rebellion,” and therefore “found means to have him apprehended, and confined for eight months, as a traitor to his King and country” (5-6).

not the only sources of the rumor of a Catholic conspiracy. In a letter to the editor of the *Protestant Magazine*, an author using the pseudonym “W.” recounted that the Protestant Association had printed a cautionary handbill to pass out to members assembled on June 2 warning them of a potential Papist plot:

As there is great reason to believe that a number of Papists will assemble with an intent to breed a Riot among the Protestants, at their intended peaceable and lawful meeting this day, in St. George’s Fields, in the most humble manner to attend their worthy President (Lord George Gordon) with the Protestant Petition up to the Honourable the House of Commons, it is requested that Protestants, who may receive insults from any of those attending for the above purpose, will not themselves resent it, but cause them to be given up to the civil power, with as little confusion as possible (a number of Magistrates and Constables attending for that purpose) in order to their being prosecuted with the utmost severity of the law.²²

The handbill encouraged Protestants gathering with good intentions to remain calm and respectable in the event of Catholic provocation, and to report any such activity to civil magistrates observing the protest. To correspondents to the *Protestant Magazine*, it was a prophecy of how things would unfold. Throughout the first volume of the magazine, numerous writers went to great pains to assert the conspiracy rumor that Catholics were truly behind the Gordon Riots. They were not the only ones. Horace Walpole relayed in a June 4, 1780, letter that “we have a report here that the Papists last night [June 3] burnt a Presbyterian meeting-house,” though he cast doubt on the validity of such rumor.²³ The rumor circulated within British newspapers and more general periodicals as well, with reports of Catholic involvement printed in issues of the *Public Advertiser* and the *General*

²² *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 195.

²³ Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford. In Nine Volumes*. Peter Cunningham, ed. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1866), 7: 382.

Evening Post newspapers and the *Political Magazine* monthly periodical.²⁴ Indeed, the *Public Advertiser* went so far as to link the Catholic rumor together with the French rumor in a column raising questions about the events and perpetrators of the riots.²⁵ In various mediums (insular, private, public), the conspiratorial rumors of Catholic participation in the riots found an audience willing to entertain such a notion.

Similar to the other rumors explored in this chapter, the Catholic conspiracy rumor spread due to its plausibility and ability to fit within prior political belief. Set against the backdrop of the long-standing conspiratorial belief in Catholics working to undermine the Protestant state, Protestant Associators and their ilk could easily subsume the Gordon Riots into the long durée of Catholic conspiracies. Led by fear and paranoia, those who championed (or just entertained) a Catholic conspiracy as the explanation for the Gordon Riots could rest their case on historical precedent and some participation by a few (purported) Catholics. The rumors of Catholic involvement in the Gordon Riots harkened back to centuries of real and suspected Catholic conspiracies. From the Gunpowder plot in 1605 to the Popish plots in the late-seventeenth century, to the Jacobite uprisings in the early-eighteenth century, Protestants had multiple examples of Catholic plots from which to draw historical evidence. What's more, they claimed contemporary proof in the reports about who was arrested or participated in the riots to pair with the rumors they themselves heard and spread. In doing so, those spreading the rumor married some truths with the historical Catholic conspiracy theories that undergirded their entire political belief. As a

²⁴ *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1780; *Public Advertiser*, 20 June 1780; *General Evening Post*, 22 June 1780; *The Political Magazine and Parliamentary, Naval, Military, and Literary Journal, for the Year M,DCC,LXXX, Volume 1*. (London: Printed for J. Bew, 1781), 1: 408, HathiTrust.

²⁵ *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1780.

result, they produced a new head to the conspiracy-hydra to explain the Gordon Riots and absolve themselves and their supporters of blame.

Rumor-spreaders often noted rioters' connections to, or riotous activity within, the Moorfields area of London, to help further their insinuation of a Catholic plot. On its face, the riots in this predominantly Irish and Catholic area of the city might seem to cut against the Catholic conspiracy rumor. After all, Protestants targeting a known Catholic area in response to the government's refusal to repeal the CRA is logical. However, Protestant conspiracy theorists rejected the obvious and insisted upon Catholics persecuting their own to accentuate the Protestant Associators' bigotry and to damage their cause. The author "W."—by far the most explicit and incendiary of the writers in the *Protestant Magazine* to allege a Catholic plot—asserted that the “persons who destroyed the Sardinian Ambassadors chapel, came from Moorfields,” including the leader who “constantly attended mass in the very chapel he had been destroying.” This information was conveyed to the author by “a person of very exalted rank, and is confirmed, in a great degree by other persons of the Popish religion being amongst those, who were apprehended in the chapel, and committed to Newgate.”²⁶ The pseudonymous author went on to accuse Irish Catholics of attempting “a repetition of the massacre of 1641” on June 3, as a means of both retaliating against the Protestant Association and of further undermining them.²⁷ Drawing a link to the bloody sectarian conflict in the mid-seventeenth century to the recent riots, “W.” conveyed to his readers the deep roots of the conspiracy and the lengths to which (Irish) Catholics would go to exact retribution—

²⁶ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 200.

²⁷ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 201. For a wide-ranging analysis of the 1641 Irish Massacre, see the Micheál Ó Siochrú and Jane Ohlmeyer, eds., *Ireland, 1641: Contexts and Reactions* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013);

attacking themselves, in this case, to paint the Protestant Associators as the persecutors. The *Political Magazine* for June 1780 had also floated the idea that Catholics were involved in the riots, implying that they may have been “HIRED for purposes of mischief,” but giving no specifics as to whom had hired them.²⁸ While generally The *Political Magazine* trafficked in the American/French rumor, they still allowed for the possibility that the Catholics were somehow involved—perhaps hired by their fellow Catholics, the French.²⁹

Strikingly, the fact that some rioters were Catholic (or at least purported to be) gave even further plausibility to this rumor. The *Public Advertiser* relayed that a rioter “of the Name of Bryan, a Roman Catholic, who, it is said, was one of the most active in heading the Mobs in the late Riots,” was shot in the Fleet Market. The newspaper went on to report that “Three Men shot in Cornhill likewise prove to be on the same Religion, one of whom appears to be a noted Jesuit.”³⁰ That a rioter was not just a Catholic, but a *Jesuit*—the Catholic-boogeyman for early modern Protestants—played on longstanding Protestant fears over popery.³¹ Another purported Catholic, Patrick O’Conner, reportedly “declared a few hours before his death, that he had received hurt, and was much burnt in setting fire to Mr. Langdale’s house, for which he deserved the severell punishment.” The *General Evening Post* ended his death notice by succinctly noting that O’Conner “was a

²⁸ *The Political Magazine*, 1: 408.

²⁹ Considering different reports of French money and French arms found among the rioters (see below), this perhaps links the Catholic rumors to the French/American rumors together into a super-rumor of sorts. See Daniel Barrington to [Lord Stormont], 12 June 1780, TNA SP 37/20/170-171; *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1780; *Public Advertiser*, 15 June 1780.

³⁰ *Public Advertiser*, 20 June 1780.

³¹ Protestant Britons considered the Jesuits especially dangerous and devious, intent on subterfuge to foment chaos and topple Protestant governments. See Hilary Larkin, *The Making of Englishmen: Debates on National Identity 1550-1650* (Brill, 2014), 125-130, 167-206; Peter Lake, “Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice,” in *Conflict in Early Stuart England, Studies in Religion and Politics*, Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds. (London: Routledge, 1989), 72-106; Evan Haefeli, ed., *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 7-21.

Roman Catholic” to underscore O’Conner’s villainy.³² But beyond the reported Catholic rioters who died during or shortly after the riots, there was at least two identifiable Catholic rioters arrested and tried. Among the records of the Old Bailey Court and Surrey County Special Session, I have been able to identify two potential Catholic rioters amidst the nearly 200 rioters tried in these court sessions. Enoch Flemine was tried and convicted at the Old Bailey on June 28 for disturbing the peace and attacking the home of Ferdinand Schomberg. In the court records, no mention of Flemine’s religion is made, either by those testifying against him, for him, or by himself. Yet “W.” identified him as a “Papist” amidst listing other accused unnamed Catholic participants.³³ Michael Martin was tried and convicted for making on June 5 a “terrible riot, rout, and disturbance...against the King’s peace.” In the first testimony in the court record, Martin was identified by his employer, a shoe-maker, as the head of the mob and a Roman Catholic attacking other Catholics. Martin’s employer apparently called him on this fact during the riot, which Martin did not dispute at that time nor in the trial itself. Martin’s sentence was relatively light (fine of 1 shilling and 3 months imprisonment) compared to some of the other convicted rioters, possibly due to testimony from Martin and other witnesses that he was a reluctant participant.³⁴

It seems strange that Catholics participated in what started out, in part, as an anti-Catholic riot begs the question: why? Such participation gives credence to the Catholic-

³² *General Evening Post*, 22 June 1780.

³³ *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, 28 June 1780, #368, Old Bailey Online; *The Protestant Magazine*, vol. 1, p. 206. There is some discrepancy in spelling of Enoch Flemine’s last name. In court records, it is spelled “Flemine,” while “W.” spells it “Fleming” in *The Protestant Magazine*. But “W.” also identifies “Fleming’s” victim as “Mr. Schomberg,” and noting “Fleming’s” conviction and execution, which matches details from the court record. So despite the two different spellings, of which I’m inclined to go with the court record’s, I’m of the mind that this is the same person.

³⁴ *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, 13 September 1780, #560, Old Bailey Online; *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 201-202.

conspiracy rumor. Yet beneath that surface-level view of the riots were deeper anxieties. As I will argue in other chapters, the riots were not merely about sectarian conflict, but stemmed in part from resentment at the political class for ignoring the voice of the people. It was unlikely, however, that Catholics would be upset about Parliament's rejection of the petition calling for a reinstatement of Catholic penalizations. It was more likely that Catholics who participated in the riots did so at certain points in the week, particularly once the riots turned to attacking political symbols (Lord Mansfield's house, the prisons) and enticing targets (Thomas Langdale's distillery). Catholic rioters may have been caught up in the frenzy at that point, as Michael Martin seemed to have been, joining the mob despite sectarian differences, to plunder the homes and punish the politicians, and to break open the distillery and celebrate retaking some power.³⁵

This brings us back to the whispers and insinuations made primarily in the pages of the *Protestant Magazine*. Correspondents such as "W." shared speculation and made assertions of Catholic rioters in the early days of the riots, on targets such as the Sardinian embassy chapel. The first nights of the riot were decidedly anti-Catholic, with targets ranging from the Catholic chapels at embassies to known homes and businesses of Catholics in areas such as Moorfields. In asserting that it was Catholics engaging in these singularly anti-Catholic riots in these first few nights, "W." and his ilk removed the other plausible alternatives for their involvement (i.e. targeting representations of the state/state

³⁵ Class may also have factored into why Catholic subjects participated in the riots. Historians such as George Rudé and E.P. Thompson have more extensively probed the role that class tensions played in motivating rioters' actions. While I am sympathetic to the role that class may have played in motivating some rioters, I maintain that political considerations such as the role and obligations of political representation, fears over government power, and imperial policies were more crucial in motivating crowd action. For more on the class components, see George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 268-292; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 71-73; Mark Knights, "The 1780 Protestant Petitions and the Culture of Petitioning," in *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Ian Haywood and John Seed, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 46-68.

power, attacking distilleries and pubs to obtain alcohol). They instead planted the seeds that the entire riotous week was part of a Catholic plot from the start, aimed at undermining and stigmatizing the Protestant Association and their petition. This conspiracy rumor finds its audience among those already primed to be suspicious of Catholics. With some identified Catholic rioters to lend legitimacy, Protestant Associators and their sympathizers exaggerated accusations that unnamed Catholics played key roles in the riots, to a receptive audience.

Rumor 2: Meddling Methodists

“It is the Dissenters and Methodists who are secretly blowing up the flame,” Londoner Thomas Irving asserted in a June 6 letter to the merchant John Cruden of New York, a letter printed in multiple Patriot and Loyalist newspapers.³⁶ The Methodist rumor found its way around both sides of the Atlantic, attracting attention from Britons of various political stripes, Loyalists, and—to a limited degree—Patriots. The speculation that Methodists enflamed the riots seemed plausible, especially with leader John Wesley’s outspoken support of the Protestant Association. The rumor also played into longstanding Anglican distrust of dissenting religions and movements, and succeeded in linking the dissenting religious movement with another troublesome philosophy of the time: republicanism.³⁷ The rumor suggesting that Methodists were the agitators behind the riots

³⁶ Patriot newspapers: *Providence Gazette*, 26 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 29 August 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 31 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 18 September 1780. Loyalist newspaper: *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1780.

³⁷ Katherine Carté, *Religion and the American Revolution: An Imperial History* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute/University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 60-72, 208-223; Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 49-66; David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 86-108; Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

sought to dismiss the rioters' grievances with the government, painting the participants as fanatics—just like those troublesome rebels in the American colonies.

The Methodist rumor that circulated in the American newspapers received different degrees of attention and framing from Loyalists and Patriot printers. Comparing the framing and amount of attention given to the Methodist rumor reveals that Loyalists more seriously considered the rumor's plausibility, while Patriots briefly spread the information but did not dwell on it. In the Loyalist *Royal Gazette*, printer James Rivington removed the author and recipient of the June 6 letter from Thomas Irving to John Cruden, while framing it as relaying "some particulars of the proceedings of the mob raised by the Republicans in London," and tying the speculation that dissenters and Methodists were to blame for the riots to republican ideology.³⁸ That message was contained in the full letter itself (as printed in the Patriot newspapers) but the Loyalist printer reiterated the point with an explicit editorial note. The connection between Methodists and nonconforming Protestant religions to republicanism probably did not raise eyebrows among Anglican Loyalists and their British counterparts. But for Patriots who remembered well-known Methodist leader John Wesley supporting the Ministry's coercive measures in 1775, the linking the Methodist rumor to the republican mob in London possibly prompted consideration that they might have a new ally.³⁹ Beyond relaying the information in an initial round of reports, without the emphasis framing provided Rivington's Loyalist newspaper, the Patriot press did not entertain the rumor in a sustained way.⁴⁰ Conversely, the *Royal Gazette* would later publish two letters refuting the Methodist rumors. The two

³⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1780.

³⁹ Carté, *Religion and the American Revolution*, 222-223.

⁴⁰ Patriot newspapers that printed the rumor include: *Providence Gazette*, 26 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 29 August 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 31 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 18 September 1780.

letters rejected the assertion that Methodists were “secretly blowing up the flame” of the riots, claiming that “not one of them was any otherwise concerned in the late tumults than in doing all they possibly could to suppress them.”⁴¹

The publication of these letters denying the rumored involvement of Methodists in the riots reflected concerns held by marginalized faith groups on both sides of the Atlantic. Accusations that they were involved in fanning the flames of the riots would breed further persecutions of their pastors and members. That the *Royal Gazette* printed these repudiations from London was likely to appease those Methodist Loyalists in New York and to draw distinctions between peaceful Methodists and radical Britons and Americans.⁴² For American printers, the rumor of Methodist involvement was enticing enough to circulate to their readers. Though Patriot printers only briefly engaged with the rumor, in doing so they may have entertained the possibility that Methodists might be sympathetic to the Patriots’ grievances. Loyalists, on the other hand, used the rumor to raise the suspicion that Methodists were part of a radical and dangerous republican ideology, and only pulled back when such rumors threatened to alienate Loyalist Methodists.

The notion that Methodists were the true culprits had devotees in Britain as well. British newspapers helped spread the rumor, printing a variety of material that engaged in

⁴¹ *Royal Gazette*, 24 February 1781; these letters were also reprinted in the *Royal Gazette* on 3 March 1781. It is probable that this reprint indicates the seriousness by which the printer took the accusations and the correction of them.

⁴² For more on Methodism in America, see Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism*; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 471-488. Rack notes that there was a significant population of Methodists in New York in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. Methodists were encouraged by their leader, John Wesley, to remain loyal to Great Britain, as he linked “American rebellion with English radicalism” (487).

the conspiracy. From debates in Parliament wherein MPs made claims that the petitioners “were mostly Methodists, and the Methodists in general were composed of the lowest of the people,” to extracts from new pamphlets labeling the petitioners as “fanatical followers of Wesley,” the British press signaled to their readers that there was no distinction between the petitioners and the rioters.⁴³ Both were of a low-class and fanatical status according to this conspiracy rumor, and efforts by the Protestant Association or their supporters to cast the rioters as someone else was folly. Thomas O’Beirne, who had accused the Ministry of a power-grab during and following the riots (more on that below), directly linked Methodists, and Wesley, to the Protestant Association’s petition in a separate, scathing 1780 pamphlet on the Gordon Riots. In his analysis of the lack of reputable clergy signing the petition, he noted “a few, *very few* of the inferior clergy, notorious for methodism, with Westley at their head” were among the petition signatures. He further asserted that “the rest are taken from the very dregs of the people, from the frequenters of tabernacles, and nightly conventicles, from the fanatic followers of Westley and others like him.”⁴⁴ Marking the Protestant Associators as fanatical, lower-class *Methodists* allowed Britons of a certain status yet another scapegoat on whom to blame the riots. In their view, it was obvious that the Methodist zealots turned to riot at the perceived slight against their petition. Their religious fervor, then, enflamed the crowd to actions they otherwise would not have engaged in.

⁴³ *London Courant*, 22 June 1780; *The General Evening Post*, 4 July 1780; see also *London Courant*, 24 June 1780; *The General Evening Post*, 6 July 1780; and *The Morning Chronicle*, 6 July 1780.

⁴⁴ [Thomas O’Beirne], *Considerations on the Late Disturbances by a Consistent Whig* (London: J. Almon, 1780), 13, ECCO. For more on O’Beirne, see James Kelly, “O’Beirne, Thomas Lewis (1749-1823), Church of Ireland bishop of Meath,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://www-oxforddnb-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-20438>.

As with the other rumors analyzed in this chapter, the speculation that Methodists inflamed the riots was not without plausibility. Indeed, the very figure of Lord George Gordon caused some to associate him with Methodism, if not for his religiosity, then for his style of dress and appearance. In a February 1780 letter, Horace Walpole commented on the “new actor” on the political stage to his correspondent, noting that Gordon “dresses, that is, wears long lank hair about his shoulders, like the first Methodists; though I take the modern ones to be no Anti-Catholics.”⁴⁵ The sartorial connection aside, Walpole was mistaken about the anti-Catholicism of the Methodists, or at least of their leader, John Wesley. In 1779, Wesley published *Popery Calmly Considered*, a mostly religious tract—but with broad implications in the aftermath of the CRA’s passage in 1778.⁴⁶ In the pamphlet Wesley refuted many Catholic doctrines, but crucially in the last few pages he laid out the impossibility for Catholic toleration in Protestant Britain. Catholic doctrines forbid Catholics from keeping faith with heretics, aka non-Catholics, Wesley argued.⁴⁷ As Wesley set out, Catholics’ first loyalty was to their church, and if the church’s doctrine compelled them to be intolerant, if not outright hostile, to their Protestant countrymen, then Protestants could never trust Catholics to put country before religion. Therefore it was foolish to permit Catholics access to power (land) or influence (schools), as these were avenues to spread their absolutist ideology. Protestant tolerance of Catholics was not reciprocated with Catholic tolerance of Protestants, because their church doctrine prevented it, Wesley stressed. In the wake of the CRA, this tract reaffirmed the paranoia later echoed by members of the Protestant Association.

⁴⁵ Walpole, *The Horace Walpole Letters*, 7: 328.

⁴⁶ John Wesley, *Popery Calmly Considered*, 2nd edition (London: Printed by R. Hawes, 1779), ECCO. A first edition was printed in the same year, in Dublin.

⁴⁷ Wesley, *Popery Calmly Considered*, 20-24.

Wesley also explicitly supported the Protestant Association's efforts in subsequent publications. In a series of printed letters exchanged with Catholic priest Arthur O'Leary of Dublin in the first few months of 1780, Wesley addressed the advocacy of the Protestant Association directly and lent his support to their cause. He asserted plainly that toleration of Catholics (which he argued that the CRA enabled) was a danger to the safety and liberty of British subjects.⁴⁸ Indeed, Wesley's first letter earned him "a vote of thanks" at the Protestant Association meeting on February 17, 1780.⁴⁹ Wesley's outspokenness, as head of the Methodists, lent weight to the rumor that the Methodists "blew up" the riot's flames. For the persons suggesting a more enlightened, and tolerant, approach toward the Catholic population in England, Wesley's vocal support for the Protestant Association's anti-Catholicism smacked of paranoia and fanaticism.

What the Methodist rumor illustrates was the suspicion of dissenting religions within Britain and in the American Revolution. It was, also, perhaps the most plausible rumor to circulate. While it is nearly impossible to say for certain the particular religious composition of the Protestant Association, John Seed has convincingly argued that dissenting sects made up a significant number of members.⁵⁰ Though this rumor had perhaps the greatest truth to it, whether Methodists and Dissenters intentionally caused

⁴⁸ The letters were compiled into a collection of Arthur O'Leary's works, as well as a pamphlet just containing Wesley's writings on the topic. Arthur O'Leary, *Miscellaneous Tracts: By The Rev. Arthur O'Leary* (Dublin: Printed by Tho. McDonnell, 1781), ECCO; John Wesley, *A Letter to the Printer of the Public Advertiser, Occasioned By the late Act, passed in favour of Popery. To Which is Added A Defence of It, in Two Letters to the Editors of the Freeman's Journal*, Dublin (London: Printed by J. Paramore...1781). The first Wesley letter was also reprinted in *The Protestant Magazine* in 1781, with the editorial headnote "One thing remains, and that is, to reconcile this virulent Poem with the annexed Letter of Mr. John Wesley, in which he has done honour to the Protestant Association, and affirms their Appeal to be written in a stile clear, easy, and natural--the reasoning to be strong and conclusive, and the object or design to be kind and benevolent." See *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 28.

⁴⁹ *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 164.

⁵⁰ John Seed, "Plebian Dissenters and anti-popery," *The Gordon Riots*, 88.

the riots remains a point of debate. They would argue, and did, that they did not—that it was others (Catholics, Americans and/or the French, or perhaps the Ministry itself) who were the true culprits behind the riots.

Rumor 3: The British Ministerial Plot

“Have you faith enough in me to believe,” Horace Walpole wrote to Sir Horace Mann on June 5, “that the sole precaution taken was, that the Cabinet Council on Thursday empowered the First Lord of the Treasury [Lord North] to give proper orders to the civil magistrates to keep the peace,—and his Lordship forgot it!”⁵¹ Amidst the riots, Walpole was outraged that the North Ministry would have such a tepid response to the assembling of a crowd outside Parliament on June 2. Walpole’s outrage would turn to skepticism after the riots had finally been quashed by the king’s forces acting on his orders. Suspicion at the actions of the North Ministry during the riots gave rise to the third set of rumors that spread in the riots’ aftermath. Those opposed to the North Administration circulated rumors that the ministry had reasonable warning that violence could occur and deliberately decided against preventative measures. This rumor rested upon suspicion that the government chose inaction to let the riots get to such a scale that when the Ministry and Crown finally acted to suppress the riots it would engender greater support for them and hurt backing for Opposition members. For those rivaling the North Ministry, the rumors rebutted efforts to cast Opposition members and other political associations as having encouraged, or given comfort, to the rioters.⁵² As members of the Opposition had supported the County Associations earlier in the year (and even earlier versions in the

⁵¹ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 380.

⁵² See Richard Tickell, *Common-place Arguments Against Administration, with Obvious Answers (intended for the Use of the New Parliament)* (London: R. Faulder, 1780), 67; Anonymous to Lord Stormont, SP 37/20/127-129, *State Papers Online*.

American colonies), Ministry allies linked Opposition support of those political associations to the Gordon rioters.⁵³ With an election in the near future, Opposition members and their supporters attempted to use the rumor to sap backing for the North Ministry and stop the depleting of their own members. If they could peel off enough North-supporting MPs then perhaps an Opposition member could rise to be Prime Minister. At stake with this rumor was the very control of the British government. In the political aftermath of the riots, scrutinizing the Administration's actions and inactions sustained the rumor that the Ministry intentionally let the riots grow and spread before swooping in to save the day and engender the thanks and support of the British public.

Perhaps because of a fear of censorship or retribution, this rumor circulated initially within the private letters and conversations of individuals suspicious of or opposed to the British government. James Smith, an American who was forced to flee England because of the rumor about American involvement in the riots, shared his own rumor about the true culprit. The North Ministry was "taking advantage of the impression made by the late riots in their favor, and I believe secretly encouraged for the purpose of throwing an odium on the measurers of Opposition and the spirit of Association," Smith wrote to John Jay.⁵⁴ Similarly, Horace Walpole shared with Reverend William Mason that he was "much more inclined to suppose that a Court plot was engrafted early on the prospect of tumult," noting that "so few or such no precautions were taken after such provoking notice had been given by Lord George Gordon, that it is not very injurious to conclude that a necessity for calling the Army together to suppress an insurrection was no

⁵³ See chapter 1 for the connection, real and alleged, between the County/Yorkshire Association and the Protestant Association.

⁵⁴ James Smith to John Jay, 12 September 1780, *Founders Online*.

very disagreeable opportunity.” Later, he added “This was a moment I have long dreaded! I had no doubt but the Court wished insurrections. It was strong enough *at home* to suppress them, and the suppression would unite *all* the military and militia, and all under one standard, and so I am persuaded it has already.”⁵⁵ Walpole’s emphasis on the government being strong enough “at home” to suppress the riots is telling. Amassing power to use on the home front while in the midst of a war in their rebelling colonies, those opposed to the Ministry were concerned with how the Ministry might use that power. To Walpole and others, it seemed that the Ministry’s inaction in the early stages of the riots enabled the government to increase their overall strength when finally, firmly quashing the mob. The rumor asserted that the Ministry used the pretext of the riots to grow more powerful, and, in the run up to an election called for later that summer, to grow their support amongst the people they had saved from the mob.

While this rumor initially spread in private correspondence and communications, elements of it did make it to print through publication of speeches from Opposition members in Parliament. What was printed, however, was far more veiled than what was spread in private. Likely this was out of fear of retribution—it was dangerous to suggest the king’s Prime Minister might have organized a plot for the government to gain power. Those individuals publicly speaking and printing the rumor had to couch it so that it fit within the normal language of political criticism. Members of the House of Lords shared Walpole’s suspicions, with both the Duke of Richmond and Lord Shelburne both giving speeches in which they gently asserted that the Administration had good reason to suspect riots would occur and did nothing to prevent them.⁵⁶ The suspected nefarious intention

⁵⁵ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 7: 408 (emphasis original).

⁵⁶ *Westminster Evening Post*, 6 June 1780.

behind the government's inaction went unsaid in these speeches, but it is not difficult to read into them. Considering these speeches were also printed by the *Independent Ledger* and the *Norwich Packet*, both Patriot newspapers in America, that readership would certainly be able to read between the lines.⁵⁷

In subsequent months, more publications engaged in these veiled accusations, though often in retrospect upon seeing the post-riots actions of the Ministry. In July 1780, William Jones published a short legal tract exploring the statute and common law basis for suppressing riots, arguing that county sheriffs had enough power through these instruments to raise a *posse comitatum*, and that the use of the standing army and the riot act was unnecessary—and “dictatorial.”⁵⁸ While Jones did not state outright that the Ministry engaged in a conspiracy to undercut the civil magistrates and use the army to suppress the riots, his conclusions echo this concern about the Ministry's actions being unconstitutional. Jones ultimately concluded that the “security, and consequently the happiness, of a free people do not consist in a belief, however firm, that the executive power will not attempt to invade their just rights.”⁵⁹ Jones encouraged his readers to be wary of a government using its power unnecessarily to suppress riots when other instruments are available and just as effective, but less threatening to the safety and liberty of the people. In a published September 1780 speech to the freeholders of Middlesex, Jones reprised this theme, warning of “irregular power in the crown” via military force as

⁵⁷ *Independent Ledger*, 11 September 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 14 September 1780.

⁵⁸ William Jones, *An Inquiry into the Legal Mode of Suppressing Riots. With A Constitutional Plan of Future Defence. Published in July 1780* (London: Printed for C. Dilly, 1782), 9-10, 34-36, ECCO. Jones, a radical Whig, led a civilian group to protect the Middle Temple during the Gordon Riots. See Michael J. Franklin, “Jones, Sir William (1746-1794), orientalist and judge,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://www-oxforddnb-com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15105>.

⁵⁹ Jones, *An Inquiry into the Legal Mode of Suppressing Riots*, 41.

exercised in the riots. He argued that in “less than a week they [the military] operated more forcibly on feeble minds in favour of *pure monarchical authority* than all the speeches and writings of all the courtiers and sycophants could have done in a country.”⁶⁰

Thomas O’Beirne, a fierce critic of the North Ministry, echoed Jones’s concerns in his *Short History of the Late Session of Parliament*, stating that “Ministers greedily seized [the] opportunity” to empower the military to bypass civil magistrates not just in the capital, but in the entire kingdom. “These orders have not yet been formally recalled,” he concluded, warning his readers that the power grab continued well into late-1780.⁶¹ The concerns publicly expressed about the government’s inaction during the first days of the riot mirrored the concerns underscoring the Ministerial plot rumor. While not explicitly stating the North ministry purposefully held back from acting to prevent the riots, as the private iterations of the rumor assert, what was published emphasized what was asserted to be the result of North’s deliberate inaction. Namely, that when the government (as king-in-council) gave permission for the military to fire-at-will on the crowds, it used more force than necessary and engendered the support of a relieved populace. This is largely factual, and thus not as dangerous to print or say publicly. But these speakers’ and authors’ criticisms, couched in political rhetoric, built upon the underlying speculation that the North Ministry intentionally held back support and resources in the early days of the riots,

⁶⁰ Jones, *An Inquiry into the Legal Mode of Suppressing Riots*, 56. While Jones specifically mentions the crown here, it’s important to note that many Opposition members (and indeed many Patriots) saw the North ministry as essentially a puppet of the crown. And technically, the crown did invite North to form a government. Sir Lewis Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, Second Edition (London: Macmillan, 1966), 26-29; Sir Lewis Namier, *Crossroads of Power: Essays on Eighteenth-Century England* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 77-117, 124-140; Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians: The Ford Lectures, Delivered in the University of Oxford, 1951-2* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 31-142.

⁶¹ Thomas O’Beirne, *Short History of the Late Session of Parliament, with Remarks* (London: Printed for J. Almon, and J. Debrett, 1780), 14.

hoping that the disturbance would turn into a large and dangerous insurrection. Even if not explicitly stated, the writers and public speakers raised the question of why the North Ministry needed to take such drastic and unconstitutional action to stop the riots—were they unprepared, or was there something more sinister at play?

The ministerial plot rumor circulated primarily because it fit within prior political conspiracies and suspicions of anti-Ministry Britons and American Patriots. It is highly unlikely that the Ministry deliberately withheld efforts to prevent the riots in hopes that a larger event would necessitate and permit the government to use more expansive powers that would result in greater support from the populace. However, some of the North Ministry's (in)actions could be interpreted as evidence of a plot. As with other rumors about the riots, there were certain factual elements that helped fan the flames of the conspiratorial rumor. For one, Gordon had publicly announced his intentions days prior to the presentation of the petition. On May 30 he stated quite clearly in the House of Commons that he would be delivering a mass petition, accompanied by supporters, on June 2.⁶² The Protestant Association's call for people to assemble and march to deliver the petition was also printed in multiple newspapers on May 29. Critiques of the government's lack of planning, at the least, seemed warranted in retrospect. But more importantly, the government's inaction prior to the outbreak of violence lent itself to rumor and speculation regarding a nefarious ministerial plot which fit within a conspiratorial view that Patriots and anti-Ministry Britons shared. Indeed, perhaps the fact that it rested upon prior conspiratorial beliefs about the British Administration's actions enhanced that rumor's appeal. This rumor fit alongside theories about political corruption and tyranny that

⁶² *Public Advertiser*, 31 May 1780.

preceded American independence and seemed plausible after years of perceived aggressive government policy over the colonies and sinecure and patronage appointments. From the Stamp Act Crisis to the Townshend Acts to the Intolerable Acts, Patriots and anti-Ministry Britons could draw connections to the rumors about the government seeking to grow its power through whatever means available. The rumor fit within the conspiratorial worldview that saw any action that the government took—or did not take—as a means to amass arbitrary power.

Rumor 4: American and/or French Involvement

“It is said that the rioters were in most instances few in number which is true, but not the whole truth,” Daniel Barrington wrote to one of the British Secretaries of State in a June 12 letter. “The most active indeed were lads well train’d by some of Dr. Franklin’s people” and “abetted by French money,” he continued, noting that the lads “were surrounded by a numerous mob of daring villains.”⁶³ By far the most prolific rumor to spread in the riots’ aftermath pinned the riots on Britain’s enemies, asserting that American and/or French agents in London instigated the week of violence. The prevalence and credibility given to this rumor is evident in the different and numerous places in which it surfaced: in private letters and writings, in reports of oral transmission, in government correspondence, and in letters and articles published in newspapers and magazines. The conjecture that Americans and/or the French (and Spanish, on occasion) were responsible for the riots found a wide audience, though the strongest transmitters tended to be American Loyalists and those connected to, or supportive of, the North Ministry. But the rumor was picked up by others as well, including American Patriots, who perhaps saw the

⁶³ Daniel Barrington to [Lord Stormont], TNA, SP 37/20/170-171.

rumor as the British Ministry shifting blame to an external source and away from their government's failures and the fact that their own discontented people had rioted.

Private letters and writings show how the rumor spread between correspondents and the credence they lent it. In a letter to British General Sir Henry Clinton, fresh off his victory capturing Charleston, J.P. Clinton relayed his belief that “there is, I fear, very little doubt, but that it was a scheme formed by the Americans & French to burn down London.” Charles Mellish shared a similar suspicion in his letter to the British general, stating that he had “not a doubt that some American Agents took advantage of the Religious Riots” and shifted the targets to the jails and bank to “ruin Public Credit & throw us into Convulsions.” Ignatius Sancho echoed this rumor in one of his letters, stating “it is said the late terrible riot was on a plan concerted between the French and Americans—upon which their whole hope of success was founded—they expected universal bankruptcy would be the consequence with despair—and every sad concomitant in its train.”⁶⁴ Exiled Loyalist Samuel Curwen shared a similar rumor that pointed to the French as the culprits behind the riots. The rumors were so virulent that they forced James Smith, an American living in London at the time, to surreptitiously sneak out of the city and eventually, out of Britain. As he wrote to John Jay, “An Order of the privy council was issued to apprehend me as the Cataline of the conspiracy and secret Agent of Doctor Franklin to Burn the City.” These rumors facilitated more than a societal understanding

⁶⁴ The anxiety over economic fallout from the riots, allegedly intended by the rumored perpetrators, stems from ongoing concerns about British debt as a result of the war, and the very real attempt by the rioters to attack the Bank of England. The County Association's formation from earlier in the year was in part a response to the debt issue, with concerns about the government's handling of the economy and taxation rates. Many iterations of the American/French rumor built upon this pre-existing economic anxiety and painted the rumored American/French instigators as intentionally trying to ruin Britain's credit. See Eliga Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2000), 164, 168.

as to what happened—they also prompted action by the state. In creating scapegoats of American and French people, whether actually in the city or in the public’s imagination, the rumors permitted Britons and Loyalists to avoid taking seriously the discontent of the British subjects who had rioted. The rumors allowed them to see those subjects as pawns of American and French agents intent on fomenting discord and terrorizing the British metropole. As pawns, the rioters’ very real grievances could be minimized. The framework created by these rumors assumed that the rioters may have had some reasonable grievances, but surely they would not have engaged in such a violent and sustained riot if not for the outside agitators provoking them.⁶⁵

James Smith’s forced flight from Britain is evidence of just how seriously the British government entertained the rumors of American and French involvement. It is no wonder, as officials received multiple letters and reports about American and French agents fomenting the riots. The Secretaries of State Viscount Stormont and the Earl of Hillsborough gathered evidence in the wake of the riots to show American and French involvement. This evidence included letters from political allies, reports from subordinates, and copies of letters from third parties. Some evidence included names—names of the accused, names of those making the reports. Some evidence was anonymous. Though the assertions often lacked attribution or credible evidence, the allegations remained plausible to Ministry officials and their supporters. The evidence collected by the Secretaries of State helped to support and spread the rumor of American and French

⁶⁵ J.P. Clinton to Sir Henry Clinton, 2 July 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library; Charles Mellish to Sir Henry Clinton, 4 July 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL; Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African. In Two Volumes*. (London: Printed by J. Nichols, 1782), 2: 186, HathiTrust; Samuel Curwen, *Journal and Letters of the late Samuel Curwen, Judge of Admiralty, Etc., An American Refugee in England, from 1775 to 1784*, George Atkinson Ward, ed. (New York: C.S. Francis, 1842), 257, HathiTrust; James Smith to John Jay, 12 September 1780, *Founders Online*.

involvement within the highest levels of government. A copy of a letter to Lady Erskine that landed in front of the Secretaries of State recounted a conversation between the unknown author and a woman (Harriet Steward) released from the “mad house.” While there, Steward had a conversation with an “American Woman” that asserted “many Parts of London would be soon in flames.”⁶⁶ This prediction was made before the riots occurred, and made its way to newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic.⁶⁷ In the wake of the riots, it served as confirmation that the Americans were part of a plot to attack the capital city. Other reports shared suspicions and assertions that Americans participated in the riots. One letter from June 12 named “Carpenter a very violent American who came from Boston” was among other names involved in the riots.⁶⁸ Daniel Barrington passed along that he had heard the “most active” rioters were “lads, well train’d by some of Dr. Franklin’s people (at least as I conceive) in the diabolical practice of setting buildings on fire & abetted by French money.”⁶⁹ Having “heard & apprehended that these riots &c were fomented & flamulated by French and American Agents,” John Smyths submitted a report to the Secretaries of State to relay the names of numerous Americans he had encountered in London whom he suspected were spies and agents.⁷⁰ For government officials, the rumors and insinuations that the Americans and French were behind the riots provided both cover for their own failings at stopping the violence and a useful scapegoat on whom to pin blame. Elements of this evidence made their way to the British press—and beyond.

⁶⁶ Letter to Lady Erskine, [17 June 1780?], TNA, SP 37/20/139-142.

⁶⁷ *Morning Post* (London), 21 June 1780; *Royal Gazette* (New York), 4 October 1780; *New-York Gazette*, 9 October 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 11 October 1780.

⁶⁸ TNA, SP 37/20/154; see also TNA, SP 37/20/147-148; TNA 37/21/282-284.

⁶⁹ TNA, SP 37/20/170-171.

⁷⁰ TNA, SP 37/20/193-194.

The rumors of American and French involvement reached an even larger audience via newspapers and periodicals. British publications such as the *Political Magazine* and *Public Advertiser* printed speculations and accusations that Americans and French agents promoted and/or supplied the riots. In the June 14 issue of the *Public Advertiser*, the printer raised a series of questions about the events of the previous week, including wondering why rioters had French money in their pockets and reminding the readers of American efforts to stoke domestic discord a few years prior through the actions of John the Painter.⁷¹ The printer had noted earlier in the issue that “French Spies, and American Emissaries every Day betray themselves having shewing the most mortifying Disappointment, that the Bank has been preserved from Fire, and public Credit from utter Ruin; and that the Kingdom is not involved in the complicated Horrors of Rebellion, and Civil War.”⁷² The *Political Magazine*’s June 1780 issue furthered the spread of this rumor, adding to its composition the idea that word had spread in Europe and in America prior to the riots’ outbreak that “London would soon be laid in ashes.”⁷³ The printer concluded: “These are either the secret agents of France of Spain, and of the Rebel Congress, or weak

⁷¹ *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1780. “John the Painter,” (real name James Aitkin) created havoc by sabotaging Royal Dockyards in 1776. Having spent time in America prior to the outbreak of war, and meeting with American envoy Silas Deane in Paris (who gave tacit support to Aitkin’s plan), Aitkin’s actions were ascribed to an American plot. There’s discrepancy, however, over whether Americans did direct Aitkin’s actions, or whether he did so of his own accord. Regardless, to the British public the link was sufficient enough. See Jessica Warner, *John the Painter: Terrorist of the American Revolution* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004); William Bell Clark, “John the Painter,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 63, no. 1 (1939): 1–23.

The question that referenced John the Painter also reminded readers that “Mr. Samuel Adams, the leader of the rebellion in America, arrived in that city [Paris] a little before the institution of the sworn Committee of Association.” This is, of course, wrong, as it is not Samuel Adams that arrived in Paris, but the perpetually slighted (in his mind) John Adams, Samuel Adams’ cousin.

⁷² *Public Advertiser*, 14 June 1780. Recall that this issue of the public credit and the security of the Bank was raised in the private letters (all of which were written after this newspaper issue), indicating the spread of the rumor from printed publication to private correspondence.

⁷³ This echoes, in very similar language, the information contained in Lady Erskine’s letter within the Secretaries of State’s papers discussed above. We see here, then, a portion of the rumor that spread orally to private correspondence to public print.

wicked or intemperate people, who are deluded by these, our bitterest, most, subtle, and most dangerous enemies.”⁷⁴ This idea of rioters being “deluded” by Britain’s enemies is striking, for it settled blame on the Americans, French, and Spanish even if they did not actually send emissaries to foment the riots. They could merely stoke the flames by deluding Britain’s people. Placing blame on the “weak wicked or intemperate people” under the real or ideological influence of the nation’s enemies, British authorities were absolved of the responsibility for the riots. What this shows is the flexibility of the American and French rumor—it could adapt to shift blame despite evidence that suggests otherwise. These variations gave the rumor a wider distribution and conferred some semblance of credibility to them via repetition.

The claims of American and French involvement found an additional audience in America, with both Loyalist and Patriot printers repeating the rumor for their respective readerships. James Rivington’s *Royal Gazette* reprinted letters in various issues that asserted to his Loyalist readers American Patriot involvement in the riots. “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

⁷⁴ *The Political Magazine*, 1: 408-409. In a later article in this issue (437), the printer is specifically names American ambassadors as spurring on riots. It is worth quoting in full: “It was political associators, the emissaries of France, Spain, and of the rebels in America, who called to their aid our own felons, and not the Protestant Associators who effected this infernal deliver. If ONE Rebel Ambassador Silas Deane, could send us over a John the Painter to burn our Dockyards, our commercial towns, and our shipping in our ports; certainly HALF A SCORE of Rebel Ambassadors, Franklin, Adams, the two Lee’s, Jay, Sayer, Laurens, Carmichael, &c. &c. could by their emissaries, acting under the name of the Protestant Associators, set the cities of London and Westminster in flame...”

The Protestant Magazine volume 1 echoes, and in some cases reprints from *The Political Magazine*, this rumor of French and American instigators. However, they tend to focus more heavily on the French angle and tie it to the rumor they are more interested in circulating: that the riots were a Catholic plot (discussed above). Likely this is because, despite being disappointed in the Americans for allying with the Catholic French, the Protestant Association sees themselves as having many commonalities with the Americans and is more sympathetic to them and their cause. See chapter one for more on this.

bottom of it,” one letter insisted, implying that Benjamin Franklin had a role in the riots.⁷⁵ The intimation that American agents acted in some way to foment the riots was echoed in another letter printed by the *Royal Gazette* on September 9 declaring that it was “probably that these conflagrations [the riots], as well as John the Painter’s originated from Americans.”⁷⁶ In another issue of *Royal Gazette*, the printer included a review of the speech of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, to the House of Lords in which he 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.” This opinion by such an esteemed authority led the reviewer to contend that this 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.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, the *Patriot Pennsylvania Journal* printed this same review a week later, perhaps as a means to demonstrate to its readers that the British blamed the Americans for the riots.⁷⁸ That two printers on opposite sides politically printed the same rumors indicated their malleability. Yet, Loyalist and Patriot printers often borrowed and copied from one another.⁷⁹ The fact that only one Patriot printer reprinted this news likely signals that, by and large, the Patriot printers did not find the American/French involvement credible. Another Patriot newspaper also published rumors about American involvement, but from a slightly

⁷⁵ *Royal Gazette*, 6 September 1780.

⁷⁶ *Royal Gazette*, 9 September 1780.

⁷⁷ *Royal Gazette*, 4 October 1780. A twist on this rumor was printed in the *New-York Gazette’s* 9 October 1780 issue, wherein the “prophecy” of “the burning of London” originated with the French Ambassador at the Hague.

⁷⁸ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 11 October 1780. It is worth noting, that while both the *Royal Gazette* and the *Pennsylvania Journal* printed the exact same review, the surrounding content was not copied. This indicates the printer of the *Pennsylvania Journal* excised just this information from the *Royal Gazette* and that felt it held some value to relay to his readers.

⁷⁹ This practice of Loyalist and Patriot printers borrowing and copying from one another will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

different angle. The *New-York Packet*, for instance, described as “probable” reports that the rioters had freed American prisoners from the destroyed prisons.⁸⁰ This variation on the American involvement rumor seemed to both negate Americans as the direct instigators of the riots, while still permitting some American involvement—as beneficiaries. By publishing such rumors, both Patriot and Loyalist printers exposed a broader readership to connections, whether causal or beneficiary, between the American Revolution and the Gordon Riots. Allegations that American agents fomented the riots, or at the very least that American prisoners benefited from the rioters’ destruction of the prisons, indicated to readers that the riots were connected to the ongoing war. Loyalist printers parroted the rumors to alleviate blame on the British government and the British public. Patriot printers, meanwhile, generally shied away from printing the American instigator rumors and published a version of the rumor that emphasized the liberatory benefits of the riots for Americans imprisoned in London jails. Because the rumors were malleable, both sides molded them to fit their political ideology.

The plausibility of American involvement in the riots was not without basis. Though there is no evidence of an established American spy network (like Washington’s Culper Spy Ring in New York), there were numerous Americans and sympathetic Britons feeding information out of London to Patriots.⁸¹ Adams and Franklin had regular

⁸⁰ *The New-York Packet*, 28 December 1780. According to Peter Linebaugh, this rumor was correct as at least two of the freed persons from Newgate Prison were American or had significant American ties. Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 341.

⁸¹ Washington’s spy ring is well known, and has received substantial attention. Though to date none of this literature has uncovered—or at least written about—any connection to a London plot. For some recent works on Washington’s Culper Spy Ring, see Alexander Rose, *Washington’s Spies: The Story of America’s First Spy Ring* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006); Kenneth A. Daigler, *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014); Bill Bleyer, “George Washington’s Culper Spy Ring: Separating Fact from Fiction,” *Journal of the American Revolution: Annual Volume 2022* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2022).

correspondence with persons in London feeding them newspapers and information on the British government's actions. In addition to men of means with political and commercial connections, like James Smith, other Americans of lesser means were present in and around London. In the months prior to the riots, Secretary of State Viscount Stormont was plagued with reports of American prisoners of war escaping from prisons in the south of England. At Stormont's direction, the government shared descriptions of these escaped Americans, privateers awaiting trial in the Courts of Admiralty for High Treason, with civil magistrates such as Sir John Fielding in an effort to recapture these men.⁸² The 'be on the lookout' notices that went out to magistrates in London indicated the government's belief that these American escapees could very well be hiding out in the metropolis. Little wonder, then, that rumors of American involvement had a whiff of credence to them. Beyond these escaped American prisoners, a number of Americans lived in England during the revolutionary war. These included Loyalists in exile, such as former colonial governor Thomas Hutchinson and his family, and American artists like Benjamin West and John Trumbull. Beyond those professing loyalty to the British empire, or at least neutrality, some Americans supportive of the Patriot cause also remained in England, such as Thomas Digges, though they sought to keep their efforts clandestine.⁸³ The number of

⁸² See, for example, "William Fraser to Sir John Fielding," 28 April 1780, TNA, SP 44/96/52; "William Fraser to Sir John Fielding," 6 May 1780, TNA, SP 44/96/53. Sir John Fielding was the civil magistrate in charge of the Bow Street public office, and would see his home and office attacked by rioters on June 5th.

⁸³ Lewis Einstein, *Divided Loyalties: Americans in England During the War of Independence* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1933, rep. 1969); Catherine M. Prelinger, "Benjamin Franklin and the American Prisoners of War in England during the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1975): 283-289. Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy (*An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) gives some figures of the relatively small number of Americans in England from the mainland colonies compared to those from the West Indies (see chapter 1). Kathleen Chater (*Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009) documents the number of black persons in England and Wales and provides some idea of the number with origins or connections to the North American colonies (and other locales).

Americans in and around London may not have been overly large, but British officials and their supporters imagined it to be significant enough to cause concern. That some of these Americans belonged to the lower, and more dangerous, classes only furthered concerns about the types of activities in which they participated. It fed into the rumors that “American emissaries” and “Franklin’s people” had planted themselves amongst the lower sorts and agitated them to violence.

Some Americans were actually involved in the riots. Though none of the identifiable American men who participated in the riots explicitly linked their participation to the American Revolution, their engagement in riotous activities breathed plausibility into the American agents rumors. Joseph Mountain, a self-emancipated African American from Philadelphia living in and around London in 1780, participated in both the protest at Parliament and in the riots. Although he escaped capture during the riots, Mountain later recalled listening to Gordon’s speech on June 2 wherein Gordon relayed “the manner in which the petition of the injured had been treated by parliament” and that the “mob became greatly inflamed” when Parliament refused to take up the petition. Over the subsequent days, Mountain plundered homes alongside others, until finally being “overpowered by superior force.”⁸⁴ While Mountain escaped arrest and prosecution for his riotous activities, other Americans were not so lucky. Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover, both Black men, were convicted in late June of destroying Newgate Prison. Sentenced to be executed for their crimes, Bowsey and Glover were respited by the king

⁸⁴ Joseph Mountain and David Daggett, “The Singular adventures, &c.,” ([1790?]), 20-22. *Evans American Imprints*. Special thanks to Dr. Kathleen Chater for sharing this source. An interesting note appears on p. 22, which alerts the reader that “Negroes are considered in a different point of light in England, from what they are in America. The blacks have far greater connexion with the white, owing to the idea which prevails in the country that there are no slaves.” The note obscures the nuances of race and social status in a post-*Sommerset* England, but the implication that this American black man had more social acceptance in England, yet still rioted against the British state, is striking.

in exchange for impressment into the military. Both were scheduled to be sent to Africa as part of the British military's protection and control of African trading forts, but seem to have evaded their service requirements.⁸⁵ Documented American participation in the riots accounted for just a fraction of total participants, but lent credibility to the rumors of American instigation.⁸⁶ The involvement of African Americans in the riots further allowed the American instigator rumor to build upon persistent rumors of slave uprisings that plagued the Atlantic. These rumors also trafficked in suppositions of outside agitators prompting conspiracies among enslaved persons to kill their enslavers and overthrow social hierarchies.⁸⁷ With information about these conspiracies circulated around the Atlantic, British subjects could situate the participation of African Americans in the riots against conspiracies from the colonies. On top of the American republicanism and grievances coming home to roost through the riots, now perhaps the dangers of their slave-society colonies seemed to be manifesting as well. While the records are not entirely clear on the motives for the American men to participate in the riots, the fact that they did

⁸⁵ *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, 28 June 1780, #324 (Bowsey) & # 398 (Glover), Old Bailey Online. See also Emma Christopher, *A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts After the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77-79, 119-120; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 288. Linebaugh and Rediker describe Bowsey and Glover as "African Americans" and leaders of the Gordon Riots. While court records for Bowsey explicitly state his American connection in testimony, the records for Glover are do not specifically mention American ties. Linebaugh laid out his work deducing the (likely) American origins for Glover and Bowsey in Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 351-354.

That the three identified American rioters were of African descent is worth remarking on. In the wake of the 1772 *Somerset* decision, which determined that England did not permit slavery within its borders, these men may have joined other enslaved persons who claimed their freedom when stepping foot on English soil. We know that many seamen serving on private and royal ships were of various status (free, hired out, or enslaved), and enjoyed a greater freedom of movement. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 143-173, 211-221; Chater, *Untold Histories*, 77-101; Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 349-350, 355-356.

⁸⁶ Using extant records from Old Bailey Online as well as the *Kalendar of Prisoners to be Tried at a Special Session of Oyer and Terminar and Goal Delivery, To be holden at the Borough of Southwark, in and for the County of Surrey, on Monday, the Tenth of July, 1780* ([Southwark, UK: Charles Eyre, Esq., Sheriff, 1780]), I created a database of 175 persons tried for participation in the Gordon Riots. Of those, I could identify two (Bowsey and Glover) as having origins in North America.

⁸⁷ Sharples, *The World that Fear Made*, 4-5, 12-19.

is remarkable. Perhaps they were moved by Gordon's speech and contempt for Parliament's actions, or perhaps they wanted to strike back against the state for imprisoning their friends. Or maybe they just got caught up in the frenzy of the crowd (many of the accused rioters pleaded this, though few succeeded in convincing a jury to acquit them on these grounds). The presence of Americans, particularly those of African descent, indicates that the rumors of American instigation of the riots were not without merit.

Further, American ties to Britain were commonplace, through commerce, politics, or intimate relations. The ongoing war did not completely undo a century-and-a-half of networks laid across the Atlantic.⁸⁸ With these ties so common, suspicion that someone with American connections might act as an agent of the Americans was not out of the question. No person fit this bill better than perhaps Lord George Gordon himself. Prior to the outbreak of war and to his election as an MP for the pocket-borough of Ludgershall Gordon had served as a naval midshipman based out of Boston and Jamaica in the late-1760s. It was here that he had his first exposure to American grievances, particularly in the hotbed of Boston. He was outspoken in his support for the Patriot cause, both in Parliament and in the publications that he and the Protestant Association produced. Compounding these Atlantic experiences, his stepfather was Staats Long Morris, the

⁸⁸ For some works that explore the different types of ties between Americans and Britons before, during, and after the American Revolution, see David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Sheldon S. Cohen, *British Supporters of the American Revolution, 1775-1783: The Role of the 'Middle-level' Activists* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2004); James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

American Loyalist half-brother of Patriot politician Gouverneur Morris.⁸⁹ In the wake of the riots, the Secretaries of State received reports of Gordon's suspicious American connections. John Temple gave information to Lord Stormont that Gordon had connections to many Americans in London, including one "who was one of the leaders of the mob at Boston that destroyed the Tea."⁹⁰ What the secretaries did with this information is unclear, as it did not show up at Gordon's trial. But that they received it indicates efforts to pin the riots squarely on the Americans—Americans who were involved in the Boston Tea Party and allegedly had the ear of the leader of the mob! Why this allegation stayed within the hands of the Secretaries of State is a mystery, as circulating it would certainly have added more fuel to the rumor's fire. But perhaps that would have inflamed panic and anxiety among the populace, something the British Administration did not want.⁹¹

Ultimately, Gordon's American ties remind us of the multiple links, including both personal and political, that existed between Britain and her rebelling colonies. Gordon's connection to the riots and his emphatic support of American independence is representative of the fact that many Britons had American connections and sympathies. That they would assist the Americans in fomenting a riot in the heart of the empire was extremely plausible.

⁸⁹ Dominic Green, "The Lunatick Apostle: The Life and Times of Lord George Gordon (1751-1793)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2012), 62-82, 94, 49; *The Political Magazine*, 1: 412-414; *The Protestant Magazine*, 1: 137.

⁹⁰ Information of John Temple, 10 June 1780, TNA, SP 37/20/144-145.

⁹¹ As part of the response to the Gordon Riots, the army, under the direction of civil magistrates and military officers, confiscated arms from ad-hoc armed militias that organized to patrol (and suppress) any rioters. The confiscation of arms created an uproar among middle class Protestants seeking to protect their property and selves. This confiscation revealed the British government's fear about the volatility of the situation. See Gould, *The Persistence of Empire*, 173-174.

As many historians have noted, the borders of the British Atlantic were porous. Americans, enslaved and free, Loyalist and Patriot, could be found in Britain prior to and during the American Revolutionary War, despite hostilities. While there is no evidence that agents working at the behest of Benjamin Franklin instigated the riots, Americans were a presence within the nation, and within London, at the time of the riots. This mere fact permitted rumors of American and French involvement in the riots. Combined with prior political beliefs about the “inveterate enemies” (the French) and memory of the Americans’ supposed backing of John the Painter’s attacks just a few years before, the rumors that Americans and the French were behind the riots was entirely plausible. And it made for the perfect scapegoat to absolve Britons of their own culpability in the discontent that produced the riots.

In the wake of the Gordon Riots, people on both sides of the Atlantic and of various political persuasions were eager to make sense of the spectacular event against the backdrop of the ongoing American Revolutionary War. Conspiracy rumors, built upon preexisting political beliefs and experiences that lent them plausibility, provided an answer as to why some Britons took violent action against their fellow subjects and against their government. As outrageous as the rumors seemed, for people spreading and receiving these rumors, there was just enough of a whiff of credibility to help them understand the root cause of the riots. The most obvious answer—that discontented British subjects rioted as a result of Parliament’s refusal to entertain their petition—was insufficient. Something more nefarious had to be at hand—and someone else had to be to blame.

Chapter 3:
“These Surely Are Not the People Who Ought to Have Absolute
Authority Over Us”:
The Gordon Riots as Reaffirmation of the Patriot Cause

Ld George Gordon I think will be the Oliver Cromwell, after all.
He seems the only Man of Common sense, and he begins with
Religion. Burke, Barry, Fox, Conway, &c and all the rest appear
but small Boys to Lord George.

-John Adams¹

Across the Atlantic, the process of independence was messy. For five long years Patriot Americans had been fighting against the British military and their Loyalist neighbors in a war that would turn from an assertion of political rights as imperial subjects to a demand for recognition as a sovereign nation. Yet declaring independence had not divorced Patriot Americans from caring about what occurred in the British empire. Indeed, Patriots gained crucial awareness into what their opponents thought and did by keeping abreast of the political events in Great Britain and Europe. Doing so allowed them to identify potential allies and situations to exploit.² These insights proved useful in helping to keep morale and support for the Patriot cause strong, especially in the wake of defeats on the battlefield and prolonged conflict without a definitive, victorious, end in sight. For Patriot leaders and printers, their interpretation of the events related to the Gordon Riots

¹ John Adams to Edmé Jacques Genet, 20 May 1780, *Founders Online*.

² Of course, interest in news from abroad occurred before the American Revolution. As Jordan Taylor and Joseph Adelman have recently demonstrated, news from abroad (from Britain and wider Europe) was a large component of newspaper content and in demand. I merely emphasize that this demand continued, and perhaps became more necessary, in the wake of declaring independence, as a means to understand how international affairs might impact the course of the war. See Jordan E. Taylor, “Now is the Winter of Our Dull Content: Seasonality and the Atlantic Communications Frontier in Eighteenth-Century New England,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol 95, no. 1 (2022): 8-38; Jordan E. Taylor, *Misinformation Nation: Foreign News and the Politics of Truth in Revolutionary America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Joseph Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763-1789* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

reaffirmed the Patriot cause.³ The riots and related events proved to be malleable in the hands of Patriots, who sculpted the uprising into a narrative to share with their readers and compatriots. The riots confirmed their view that the British government engaged in the arbitrary use of power to suppress and repress subjects at the very heart of the empire, just as the government had done to Americans in the leadup to all-out-war. Using the news of the riots, Patriots highlighted the similarities and differences between the uprising in London and their own experiences in America in such a way as to compel themselves to continue to fight for independence. The riots became a crucial element in Patriot rhetoric, reinforcing the need for independence when securing it on the battlefield still seemed out of reach.

In the years leading up to the week-long revolt that history would label the “Gordon Riots,” American Patriots displayed an interest in British politics and in politicians who showed sympathy with their cause—including, in a move that would appear prescient in hindsight, Lord George Gordon. From his speeches to even just mentions of his name among other Opposition members in Parliament, Gordon’s activities appeared regularly in Patriot newspapers. Their sympathetic portrayal of Lord George allowed Patriots to differentiate the Protestant Association petition and protest from the ensuing riots. But events that were prelude to the riots also helped to shape Patriot interest, especially the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act in England and Ireland (and the Scottish riots in 1778/1779), which sparked similar objections as those

³ On morale during the American Revolution, see Woody Holton, “Morale Manipulation as the Central Strategic Imperative in the American Revolutionary War,” *Journal of the American Revolution* (August 3, 2021), <https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/08/morale-manipulation-as-the-central-strategic-imperative-in-the-american-revolutionary-war/>; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence. Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 352-360; Allen Bowman, *The Morale of the American Revolutionary Army* (Washington, DC: American Council on Public Affairs, 1943).

voiced by some Americans in response to the 1774 Quebec Act.⁴ Patriots viewed Parliament's refusal to address the concerns from the Protestant Association's petition and protests as similar to their own experiences and grievances against the British government. When riots broke out, Patriots walked a tightrope in their reaction to the rioters' underlying anti-Catholicism. The alliance with France and Spain forced Patriots to temper their own anti-Catholic sentiments, forcing them to curb their sympathy with the rioters lest they alienate their Catholic allies.⁵ As such, Patriots expressed outrage at the bigotry and fanaticism of the mob, but reserved their harshest criticism for the British government's response. Patriots were most alarmed by the British government's exertion of power to quash the disturbances that was just shy of formally enacting martial law—something that the crown and Parliament had no qualms employing in Boston via the Massachusetts Government Act. The arrest of Lord George for high treason, the execution of twenty-five rioters, and the hundreds of civilians killed by the military when suppressing the riots confirmed for Patriots that the British government would not hesitate to crush them ruthlessly if they surrendered.

⁴ A strong element to the colonial objections to the 1774 Quebec Act stemmed from anti-Catholic, really anti-Popery, fears. Writers such as John Dickinson decried the Quebec Act as empowering Catholics, whose obedience lent itself to absolutist governance, on the borders of the aggrieved colonies. Among the Quebec Act's many faults, Patriots found the prospect of the Protestant British government appeasing Catholics as a warning sign that the government might just arm those Catholics to fight against their Protestant neighbors. See Maura Jane Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620-1860* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 69-103; Ollivier Hubert and François Furstenberg, eds., *Entangling the Quebec Act: Transnational Contexts, Meanings, and Legacies in North America and the British Empire* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2020), 3-24; Hannah Weiss Muller, "'As May Consist with their Allegiance to His Majesty': Redefining Loyal Subjects in 1774," in *Entangling the Quebec Act*, 47-73.

⁵ American anti-Catholicism did not completely abate with the alliance with Catholic France in 1778. The tenuous tolerance of their Catholic allies forced Patriots to relax some of their anti-Catholic hostilities and rhetoric. Anti-Catholic sentiment also varied by location, with some areas (Newport, Rhode Island, for instance) more tolerant than others due to longstanding social practices. See Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America*, 96-98; T. Cole Jones, "Displaying the Ensigns of Harmony: The French Army in Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1781" *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 3 (September 2012): 430-467; Brendan McConville, "A Deal with the Devil: Revolutionary Anti-Popery, Francophobia, and the Dilemmas of Diplomacy," in *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism*, Evan Haefeli, ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 234-256.

This chapter examines the Patriot newspapers' and prominent Patriots' interpretation of Lord George and the events related to the Gordon Riots, revealing how their representation of Gordon and the riots encouraged sustained commitment to the Patriot cause. Printers' editorial decisions shaped the narrative of those involved in the tumultuous affair, and subtly emphasized parallels and contrasts between events in London and America that resonated with Patriot readers. The writings of prominent Patriots confirm this interpretation, drawing explicit comparisons between the events and figures of the riots and the American experience. The Patriots utilized the Gordon Riots to reaffirm their decision to declare independence. In the Gordon Riots and related events, Patriots found the confirmation they needed that the issues they had with Britain's 'arbitrary' powers was not merely an imperial conflict, but spoke to a rottenness throughout the British constitutional system.

Spreading a Narrative in Revolutionary America

Newspapers were crucial instruments that Patriots used to shape and spread their narrative of the Gordon Riots. As Joseph Adelman has shown, with the outbreak of war American printers became more overtly ideological, sometimes out of necessity. Rather than engage across political lines and feature content from differing political stripes as they had done before hostilities intensified, printers picked a side—sometimes compelled by (or out of fear of) violence, sometimes because of the innate political leanings of the printer. Though Adelman notes that economics trumped politics once sides were chosen, printers' ability to appeal to their readers and secure their subscriptions and financial support depended upon turning out content that appealed to that political side's

sensibilities and ideology.⁶

Patriot printers far surpassed Loyalist printers in number, and while this was likely due to printers' inclination towards the Patriot cause (after all, the Stamp Act threatened their business at the start of the crisis) it was also contingent upon geographical control. While the British military held control of New York City for nearly the entirety of the war, their command over other areas was often temporary or non-existent. When areas such as Philadelphia or Newport were under British control, Patriot printers fled, only to return once the British military abandoned those areas. Loyalist printers, too, faced dislocation and relocation related to which military controlled the area, as will be discussed in the next chapter. But, for Patriot printers, the fact that such vast area was Patriot controlled, or at the least Patriot-friendly, allowed printers to wait out the evacuation of the British military from their home cities. Others never had to contend with relocation at all, as their locations never saw the threat of serious fighting or occupation that prompted some printers to flee. Geography and political ideology helped Patriot printers to retain a great number of active Patriot newspapers throughout the war, including during the period when news related to the Gordon Riots circulated.⁷

American newspapers during the Revolutionary War consisted primarily of the reprinting of stories, letters, and reports cobbled together from other newspapers or from travelers and ship captains arriving at major ports. Modern news practices such as investigative journalism and competition to break the story first were not the imperative for printers during the American Revolution. Rather, the often-limited competition and specificity of the newspaper's targeted audience led to the spread of information as a web

⁶ Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, chapter 5.

⁷ Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 155-160.

across time and space. Letters with copies of foreign newspapers enclosed traveled across the Atlantic between business partners, friends, and family rent by the war, before winding their way to newspaper printers to be mined for relevant or interesting information. Similarly, letters and travelers circulated domestic newspapers throughout the continent, and through a Patriot printers' network that sought the same goal of promoting the cause of independence. Printers extracted stories and information from these other newspapers to pass along to their own readers, an early modern version of "copy-paste" wherein citation was used to underscore truth or doubt about the truthfulness of the information. News spread through repetition and at the hands of printers selecting, retelling, and reshaping the information for their readers' interest.⁸

The onset of war complicated how printers acquired and spread news to their readers. International reporting was a significant component of the revolutionary era newspaper. In addition to reports of battles between foreign entities and foreign events, newspapers recounted British Parliament discussions and debates, and the social activities of important international individuals. Yet newspapers in the United States also were affected by the war occurring around them. Battles, blockades, and shifting control of regions interrupted or delayed newspapers' ability to function and could determine the content they published. These factors similarly affected access to materials necessary for printing: paper, ink, and equipment were at times harder to come by. With the potential for information to be derailed or hindered by material circumstances, the reprinting of

⁸ For more information on printing and the role of print culture in eighteenth century America, see Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, eds., *The Press and the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 4-12; 140-146; Taylor, *Misinformation Nation*, 2-8; Will Slauter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology: How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales – English Edition*, vol. 67, no 2 (2012): 253-278.

news in a single newspaper did not necessarily reflect the linear order of events, but it did reflect the printer's judgment of the importance of that news. Additionally, some printers in particularly geographically connected locations had access to multiple sources, allowing for their newspapers to print different versions of the same story within a single issue. Newspapers of the time did not strive for objectivity, nor were they necessarily concerned with repetitiveness. Rather, the goal of newspapers was to share relevant and enticing news to their targeted readership. With Lord George and the events of the Gordon Riots, Patriot printers had a dynamic story that they deliberately shaped to confirm the Patriot cause.

Through the Patriot printers' sustained interest in the riots and related events, their narrative of the insurrection and relevance to their readers comes into focus.⁹ Patriot printers made editorial decisions about what information to include, framed it with head notes to convey the credibility of the information, and continued to follow the story long after the dust had settled in London. They relayed information to their readers that reminded Patriots of their own experiences under the British government, and hinted at what could happen should Americans lose the war. The message of the printers' narrative comes further to the fore when read alongside private letters from Patriot leaders, who made explicit the Patriot interpretation of the riots and their meaning for American independence.

Crafting the Narrative – The Patriot Cause reaffirmed through British Political Strife

While Patriot printers and leaders could not know that the Gordon Riots would threaten the British government's stability in 1780, their interest in matters and people that

⁹ I have found over 250 issues across 23 different Patriot newspapers printing during 1778-1781 that shared news on the riots or related events. A list of these 23 Patriot newspapers can be found in the appendix.

presaged the riots started nearly two years prior and demonstrated a keen interest in British politics and how they might influence the ongoing war. Of enduring concern was the possibility of the British drawing military recruits out of Ireland, as Arthur Lee expressed in a letter to George Washington in June 1777 wherein he noted that their enemy's "last resort is to the Roman Catholics of Ireland."¹⁰ Lee's suspicions proved correct, as the following year both the British and the Irish Parliaments passed Catholic Relief Acts (CRA) that permitted the enlistment of Catholic subjects who took a modified oath. Patriot newspapers noted passage of these acts by reprinting the debates over the issue of Catholic relief in the two Parliaments.¹¹ Interestingly, the *Pennsylvania Packet* included in a report from London dated July 7 that "several gentlemen and ladies took the oath of allegiance to his Majesty in the Court of Common Pleas, in pursuance of the Act passed Last session for the relief of the Roman Catholics in certain cases."¹² By including the statement about "several" Catholic subjects taking the oath alongside other activities related to the war, the *Pennsylvania Packet* conveyed to its readers a sense that Catholics actually taking an oath of allegiance was part of a British war strategy. John Dunlap, the printer of the *Pennsylvania Packet*, could have easily excised this sentence, but found it relevant and important to include it in relaying what was occurring in Britain, allowing their audience to see that Catholic subjects were quickly taking advantage of the CRA and what that might mean about Britain's ability to keep fighting the war.¹³

¹⁰ Arthur Lee to George Washington, 15 June 1777, *Founders Online*.

¹¹ *Pennsylvania Ledger*, 28 March 1778; *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 August 1778; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 1 September 1778.

¹² *Pennsylvania Packet*, 27 October 1778.

¹³ Printers utilized and depended upon speculation in the eighteenth-century newspapers in their reporting of news and information to their readers. See Will Slauter, "Forward-Looking Statements: News and Speculations in the Age of the American Revolution," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 81, no. 4 (December 2009): 759-792.

Just as the Catholic Relief Acts caught the attention of Patriot printers and leaders, Patriots were intrigued by Scottish agitation against a potential act for that country. But before news of the Scottish riots over a proposed CRA reached American shores, another Scottish incident attracted Patriot attention. “A mutiny of the Highlanders stationed near Edinburgh” first made the issue of the *Exeter Journal* in April 1779. What is of particular note about this report is its comparison of the Highlanders’ actions to that of the Americans:

From the above account it is evident, that even Highlanders can rebel against the government of George the third, and insist upon a redress of their grievances, while the common People of Scotland can abet them, and even *Dunmore* treat them with lenity. Had half the moderation employed upon these Highlanders, been shown to the Americans, in proper time, not merely 500 soldiers, but thirteen provinces, might have been preserved to the British empire.—But then, it must be confessed, that the present age would not have seen, with so much admiration, the glorious rise of a new nation; a nation literally BORN IN A DAY,—on the memorable, day, when independence was declared.¹⁴

The commentary comparing the experience of the Highlanders and the Americans is illustrative of the Patriot press using this news to confirm the grievance underlying their politics. While not always as explicit as in this case, the Patriot press was keen to draw parallels for their readers and point out different treatment where it occurred, reminding them of the mistreatment they had suffered under British rule. While the Highlanders’ mutiny was not necessarily connected to a Scottish CRA proposal, it was not long after that news of Scottish riots explicitly about a potential CRA for Scotland hit the Patriot press. These reports noted Scottish rioters attacking the homes of Catholic subjects, and the efforts of the civil authorities to quell the rioters, but ended their brief reports by

¹⁴ *Exeter Journal*, 6 April 1779; also *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 23 April 1779.

noting that the “Protestant Interest” had “petitioned their representatives in parliament to oppose in the most strenuous manner any bill” that would repeal the Catholic penal laws “as solemnly guaranteed to them at the union.”¹⁵ Subsequent issues reported that the Scottish riots and petitions worked—the Ministry dropped plans for a Scottish CRA.¹⁶ John Adams, posted as an ambassador in France, asserted that the Scottish riots would hurt the British war efforts. “The national Discontent is very great, and Tumults, have arisen in Edinborough and in London,” he noted, positing that “According to present Appearances, they will have Occasion for so many of their Troops to keep their Populace in fear, as to be able to spare few for America.”¹⁷ Samuel Culper Jr. echoed these remarks in a July 15 letter to Major Benjamin Tallmadge, and shared with George Washington, in which he noted that there would be fewer troops from England due in part because “that most loyal of all Countrys, Scotland, has been for some time past in the greatest confusion, said to be occasion’d by a motion made by Lord North for to pass some Laws in favor of the Scotch Roman Catholicks—They have gone so far as to burn that Minister in Effigee.”¹⁸ Adams and Culper Jr. saw in the Scottish riots signs that the British nation was fracturing, and that this inner turmoil would be a benefit for the Patriot cause. What is

¹⁵ *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 4 May 1779; *Connecticut Journal*, 5 May 1779; *Massachusetts Spy*, 7 May 1779.

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 8 May 1779; *Norwich Packet*, 11 May 1779; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 15 May 1779. See also the circulation of a piece by William Harvie, and its response, outlining the threat to the British nation posed by Catholic relief in *Independent Ledger*, 26 July 1779 and *Connecticut Gazette*, 4 August 1779. Harvie’s letter is oddly constructed and its unclear who the response is coming from exactly, but the piece notably references the 1774 Quebec Act as the start of the “only *consistent*, and (we observe it with pain) the only *successful* measure which the present Ministry have adopted.” Patriots greatly objected to the Quebec Act for a multitude of reasons, but concern with their design as a tool for arbitrary power (often linked with the tenants of Catholicism), this explicit reference would likely engender sympathy amongst Patriots even in a post-French alliance period.

¹⁷ John Adams to Samuel Adams, 14 February 1779, *Founders Online*. See also his letter to Richard Henry Lee, 13 February 1779, and to Samuel Cooper, 28 February 1779.

The reference to tumults in London refers to the brief celebratory reaction to the acquittal of Admiral Keppel, an Opposition member who was speciously court martialed for a failed naval battle with France. See Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 122-151.

¹⁸ Samuel Culper Jr. To Major Benjamin Tallmadge, 15 July 1779, *Founders Online*.

striking is that in both the Highlander Mutiny and the Scottish CRA riots, popular action compelled the British government to relent and address the grievances and petitions of their subjects. For Patriot readers, this difference in treatment reminded them that the British government had not afforded their grievances and petitions such fair treatment.

In their efforts to keep note of British politicians who were supportive or friendly to American interest, the Patriot press and Patriot leaders maintained an interest in reporting on the debates of Parliament throughout the war. It is in these debate reports that we first see Lord George Gordon rise from backbencher to a thorn in the Ministry's side. Gordon's name first appeared in a February 1779 issue of the *Pennsylvania Packet*, in which he was linked with notable Opposition members James Luttrell and John Wilkes as having "all reprobated the conduct of the Ministry" in a debate over their execution of the war.¹⁹ Featuring Gordon with other members who had been openly skeptical or critical about the Ministry's coercive efforts and actions to suppress the American rebels indicated to Patriot readers that Lord George was a friend and someone to note. The *New-Jersey Gazette* reprinted Gordon's "*spirited speech*" in the House of Commons decrying and criticizing the Ministry and the King's pursuit of war against the American colonies.²⁰ Gordon's criticism of the Ministry continued in 1780, when the *Connecticut Gazette* and the *Connecticut Journal* both presented his participation in the debate over Ireland in the House of Commons and his comparisons of that treatment with the Ministry's handling of the American colonies.²¹ Lord George further alluded to his sympathy for American

¹⁹ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 11 February 1779.; subsequently reprinted in the *New-Jersey Gazette*, 17 February, 1779; *Independent Ledger*, 8 March 1779; *Connecticut Courant*, 16 March 1779. For other fleeting references to Lord George, see *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 5 October 1779

²⁰ *New-Jersey Gazette*, 23 June 1779; also printed in *Connecticut Gazette*, 8 July 1779; *Independent Ledger*, 12 July 1779; *Continental Journal*, 15 July 1779; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 26 October 1779

²¹ *Connecticut Gazette*, 29 March 1780. A portion of this report, including the statement of Lord George accusing the king of being a papist, was also featured in the *Connecticut Journal*, 29 March 1780; *Massachusetts*

independence, if not his outright support, when he criticized the administration for having “dismembered America from the Crown.”²² By May 1780, Patriot newspapers regularly featured Lord George in their issues. John Adams praised Gordon, asserting that he was “the only man of Common sense” amidst figures such as Burke, Fox, and other American-friendly MPs, and even comparing Gordon to Oliver Cromwell.²³ His comments in the House of Commons were reported alongside key figures such as Lord North, Edmund Burke, and the Marquess of Rockingham. For Patriots, Gordon’s criticism of the government’s handling of the American War and his objections to the British government’s policies regarding Ireland engendered affinity. That Lord George was undeterred by his lack of success repealing trade restrictions on Ireland when faced with a hostile British government only furthered the Patriot press’ esteem for him. Gordon’s motion to repeal “the act declaring Ireland dependent on Great-Britain” and its failure was reported in multiple newspapers.²⁴ Certainly part of the attraction to Lord George was his passionate and radical remarks. The *Connecticut Journal* noted that “the papers of the opposition themselves agree that...[his letters to the newspapers] breathed High Treason.”²⁵ Rascals and radicals sell—even in Revolutionary America—and especially when those rascals shared a common enmity towards those in power.

Spy, 27 April 1780.

²² *Connecticut Journal*, 29 March 1780; *Connecticut Gazette*, 29 March 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 April 1780.

²³ John Adams to Edme Jacques Genet, 20 May 1780, *Founders Online*. Oliver Cromwell, who led Parliamentary forces during the seventeenth-century English Civil Wars that culminated in the abolishing of the monarchy, saw a resurgence in popularity among Patriots during the American Revolution. See Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 102-105.

²⁴ *Independent Chronicle*, 20 April 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 April 1780; *Connecticut Courant*, 2 May 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 4 May 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 10 May 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 16 May 1780. Lord George’s continual motions and speeches regarding Ireland on different dates in Parliament were also covered in multiple newspapers. See *Pennsylvania Journal*, 3 May 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 10 May 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 25 May 1780. Gordon’s championing of Ireland was likely restricted to the Protestant minority which held power in the kingdom.

²⁵ *Connecticut Journal*, 29 March 1780; this same article was also printed in *Connecticut Gazette*, 29 March 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 April 1780.

The increasing attention that the Patriot press gave to Lord George in the second quarter of the year reflected their growing affinity for the outspoken noble. Moving beyond recounting his comments in the House of Commons alongside other noteworthy Members of Parliament, Patriot newspapers included news of Lord George's extracurricular activities, including his involvement with the Protestant Association.²⁶ Gordon's advocacy with the Protestant Association against the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 echoed the efforts of Patriots to rescind detrimental acts of Parliament that precipitated the Revolutionary War. From seeking an audience with the king to organizing meetings and a petition to present the Protestant Association's concerns, Gordon's actions were strikingly similar to the petitions and representatives sent by the aggrieved American colonies.²⁷ The Patriot press' reports of Lord George's efforts deepened the sense of kinship that Patriots Americans had for the noble.

The press' fascination with Lord George and his activities reached a fever-pitch in mid-August 1780, when the first reports of the Protestant Association's petition, protest, and the subsequent week-long riot trickled into American newspapers. Soon the newspapers exploded with reports from across the Atlantic. At least fifteen Patriot newspapers carried the same story initially reported in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on August 16, 1780, which detailed the first three days of the protest and riots.²⁸ Because of the delay

²⁶ *Newport Mercury*, 24 June 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 6 July 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 19 July 1780.

²⁷ For more on the practice and politics of petitioning, including efforts made by American colonists, see James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 18-25, 49-50.

²⁸ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 16 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 18 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 23 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 28 August 1780; *Connecticut Courant*, 29 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 29 August 1780; *American Journal*, 30 August 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 31 August 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 31 August 1780; *Continental Journal*, 31 August 1780; *Connecticut Gazette*, 1 September 1780; *Newport Mercury*, 2 September 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 2 September 1780; *Virginia Gazette*, 6 September 1780.

in the transmission of information due to the technology of the time, a fair number of newspapers reported information on the protest and riots as it was received. This meant that some newspapers reported the entirety of the event—from petition to riots to suppression—in one article while others would recount only portions of the event but in more detail. It was also not uncommon for newspapers to contain two or three different reports related to the riots in a single issue.²⁹ As information traveled from sources in Europe and in the United States, reports within single or across multiple issues of newspapers ranged from mere mentions of an “insurrection” occurring in London to full-scale accountings of the riots.³⁰

The more descriptive accounts generally started their coverage with the Protestant Association’s call for a large gathering to demonstrate to Parliament the support for the petition that was to be delivered on June 2, 1780. Approximately 50,000 men and women joined Lord George to deliver the “Protestant Petition, against the bill passed last session in favour of the Roman Catholics,” the *Pennsylvania Journal* reported on August 16. The accounts asserted that Gordon had good intentions in his call for a large protest to deliver the petition, but that the size of the crowd made it difficult to maintain peace and attracted those who easily perverted the good intentions of the Protestant Association. The Patriot press’ support of Lord George and his cause dulled slightly as the account of the “tumult” continued, with the papers chastising Gordon’s address to the crowd as propelling those

²⁹ Examples of newspapers that had multiple articles on the riots in a single issue include the *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780; *Independent Chronicle*, 7 September 1780.

³⁰ Less detailed accounts can be found in the following newspapers: *Continental Journal*, 17 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 21 August 1780; *American Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 24 August 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 24 August 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 24 August 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 26 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 5 September 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 6 September 1780. More detailed accounts can be found, for example, in *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 August 1780; *American Journal*, 7 September 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 26 September 1780.

assembled to grow more reckless and violent.³¹ As the disturbances continued and grew, the articles reported the House of Commons' June 6 discussion and debate, including the members' reactions to Lord George's assertion that "if the House would appoint a day to discuss the business [the petition], and promote to do it to the satisfaction of the people" then "they would quietly disperse."³² With the House of Commons again declining to address the petition, Gordon addressed the crowd outside of Parliament to share the news that Parliament had refused to act and advising the crowd to "depart quietly."³³ The press' attention to Gordon's activities was largely sympathetic and tended to paint his actions as misinterpreted by the crowd whom, while he used as a political tool, he was also trying to subdue from further destruction. This portrayal absolved Lord George of complete responsibility of the mob's actions, and implied that his principles were valid, even if the actions of the mob were not.

The Patriot press' sympathetic treatment of Lord George continued in their reports of the riots' height, suppression, and aftermath. Though at times the reports were compassionate towards the targets of the rioters, particularly prominent individuals such

³¹ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 16 August, 1780; this same article was additionally reported in *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 18 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 23 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 28 August 1780; *Connecticut Courant*, 29 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 29 August 1780; *American Journal*, 30 August 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 31 August 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 31 August 1780; *Continental Journal*, 31 August 1780; *Connecticut Gazette*, 1 September 1780; *Newport Mercury*, 2 September 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 2 September 1780; *Virginia Gazette*, 6 September 1780.

³² *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780; *American Journal*, 6 September 1780; *Independent Chronicle*, 7 September 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 9 September 1780; *Boston Gazette*, 11 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 14 September 1780. Wearing a blue cockade was originally associated with John Wilkes during his first Middlesex election, and generally represented solidarity for liberty. Protestors with the Protestant Association adopted the symbol to reflect their claim that the government was oppressing them through their enactment of the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. For more information on the symbolism of the blue cockade, see Lloyd I. Rudolph, "The Eighteenth Century Mob in America and Europe," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1959): 455; Arthur H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), ch. 9.

³³ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780.

as Edmund Burke, there was at certain levels a sense of glee at the British experiencing a taste of what the Americans had endured, including the reviled Lord Mansfield.³⁴ Benjamin Franklin certainly seemed to share in this delight, telling a correspondent, “I just now hear, that the Mob have burnt several Houses of the Ministers. If they went no farther, I should be less concern’d at their Extravagancies; as such a Taste of fire may make those Gentlemen sensible of the Wanton malice with which they have encouraged the Burning of Poor People’s Houses in America!”³⁵ But while some, like Franklin, might have seen a bit of schadenfreude in the rioters’ attacks, the Patriot newspapers’ portrayal of the rioters was rather mixed, likely so as to not offend their Catholic allies, the French and Spanish, by showing too much sympathy for an anti-Catholic mob. Stories of the protestors’ actions in the early stages of the week-long disturbance tended to depict those engaged as misguided or stirred into frenzy by the sheer volume of their numbers. As the protest turned to riots, however, the reports were less forgiving, labeling those participating as a “mob” overtaken by nefarious individuals and describing their destruction of symbols of Catholicism or authority.³⁶ Articles frequently noted the destruction of prisons, such as the King’s Bench and Newgate, that were brought down by the sheer force and numbers

³⁴ Lord Chief Justice Mansfield was reviled by American Patriots for a variety of reasons, including his authoritarianism and his ruling in *Somerset v. Stewart* which made slavery illegal on English soil (in a bit of irony, rioters burned Mansfield’s vaunted manuscripts, which likely included the manuscript of his ruling in the *Somerset* case). For more on Mansfield and the “authoritarian-Whig legal agenda,” see Christian R. Burset, “Quebec, Bengal, and the Rise of Authoritarian Legal Pluralism,” in *Entangling the Quebec Act*, 131-162. For American reaction to Mansfield and *Somerset v. Stewart*, see Patricia Bradley, “Slavery in Colonial Newspapers: The *Somerset* Case,” *Journalism History* vol. 12, no. 1 (1985): 2-7; Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 66-80; Matthew Mason, “North American Calm, West Indian Storm: The Politics of the *Somerset* Decision in the British Atlantic,” *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2020): 723-747; David Waldstreicher, *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 21-56.

³⁵ Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, 15 June 1780, *Founders Online*. See also Benjamin Franklin to William Carmichael, 17 June 1780, *Founders Online*; Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Wharton, 17 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

³⁶ For an exploration of the use of the term “mob” and the connotation that word holds, see Wood, “A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution.”

of the crowd and without much resistance from either municipal or military forces. These papers even observed that the Poultry Compter was the only prison the rioters spared, and that it “would have shared the same fate [of the other prisons], if the lord mayor had not ordered the rioters confined there to be released,” demonstrating the weakness of the city government to respond.³⁷

After reporting the actions of the mob and the destruction they wreaked, Patriot printers turned their attention to the British government’s response. The king and his Privy Council, after days of riot and insipid reaction from local officials, deployed troops into the city to suppress the riots. The reported killing of fifty rioters on June 7 and the encampment of 15,000 troops in Hyde Park resulted from the official proclamation ordering the military to fire-at-will to suppress the riots. The troops’ brutal subjugation of the riots demonstrated the extraordinary shift of power to quell the mob from local authority to the authority of the crown.³⁸ Later editions went to great length to distinguish that the proclamation did not, in fact, enact martial law but was an extension of the king’s authority and power, at the behest of the Privy Council, to suppress the riots as the civil magistrates were “either afraid or unwilling to direct the military under the law.”³⁹ Patriot newspapers further explored this argument by reprinting the king’s proclamation in which he ordered the local authorities to take action to suppress and apprehend the rioters.⁴⁰ Making the distinction between an actual enactment of martial law, which required an act

³⁷ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780.

³⁸ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780.

³⁹ *Independent Ledger*, 4 September 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 7 September 1780; *Continental Journal*, 7 September 1780; *Independent Chronicle*, 7 September 1780; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 9 September 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 14 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 14 September 1780; *American Journal*, 20 September 1780; *Connecticut Gazette*, 22 September 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 23 September 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 26 September 1780.

⁴⁰ *Independent Chronicle*, 7 September 1780; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 9 September 1780.

of Parliament and appeared more extreme as it would suspend judicial due process, and the actions the king took might, at first glance, paint the king as having reacted in a measured way. However, to Patriot audiences, this action and the sustained presence of 15,000 troops in the London area reeked of an underhanded extension of power, for nowhere did the articles mention that the king relinquished his control of the military in London back to the civil magistrates. Indeed, John Adam's correspondent, Thomas Digges, suggested that the deployment of troops into the city had made the king the "happiest Monarch in Europe; He is now at the head of everything and I believe at the summit of his wish."⁴¹ In Digges' opinion, the king's intervention into quelling the mob had afforded him the ability to expand and fortify his power.⁴²

The Patriot narrative of the riots that their newspapers sought to disseminate is further illustrated by the letters of prominent Patriots such as John Adams. Writing to Abigail on June 17, Adams related that "London is in the Horrors," before subsequently recounting certain parts of the riots, including the destruction of the prisons and the crowd insulting the "Lords of Parliament." Noting the "universal discontents of the nation" and that martial law was proclaimed and many had been killed or hanged, Adams ended this section of his letter to his wife by stating "[t]he Mobs all cryd Peace with America, and

⁴¹ Thomas Digges to John Adams, 8 June 1780, *Founders Online*. Digges would also share this information and reiterate his opinion about the King's happiness in a letter to Benjamin Franklin, 10 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

Thomas Digges was a shipping agent from Maryland living in England at the time the American War broke out. He acted as a source of intelligence to John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, among others, during the war. For more information on his life, see Robert H. Elias and Eugene D. Finch, eds., *Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges (1742–1821)* (Columbia, S.C., 1982), xxiii-lxxvii.

⁴² In a subsequent letter, Digges would enclose several pamphlets and publications on the Gordon Riots. The continued inclusion of materials examining the riots, including those that provide legal means of suppressing riots, demonstrates the importance Digges thought this event warranted. The difficulty of correspondence and the possibility that it could be intercepted by the enemy further underscored the value placed on these materials and this event. For a list of the enclosed materials, see Thomas Digges to John Adams, 12 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

War with France—poor Wretches! as if this were possible.”⁴³ In a letter written a week later, on June 23, Adams offered further considerations on the riots and their meaning, stating:

These Riots discover Symptoms of deep distress and misery, among the lower Classes of People. The particular Spight against the Prisons is one mark of it. The decided Part they took against the Ministry, shews upon what Ground they stand. It is however a Shocking Scaene. The King seems in a fair Way to the Summit of all his wishes, absolute Power. Martial Law is very agreable to him.⁴⁴

Adams recognized that while there was a “fanatical” aspect to the riots that he disagreed with, there was some semblance of reason to the targets of the riot.⁴⁵ He also observed that the riots furthered the consolidation of power and authority in the person of the king, making the need for American independence even more imperative. This view of Adams’ was further demonstrated by his letter to Thomas Jefferson on June 29, 1780, in which he stated:

Before this reaches you, you will have learned, the Circumstances of the Insurrections in England, which discover So deep and So general a discontent and distress, that no wonder the Nation Stands gazing at one another, in astonishment, and Horror. To what Extremities their Confusions will proceed, no Man can tell. They Seem unable to unite in any Principle and to have no Confidence in one another. Thus it is, when Truth and Virtue are lost: These Surely, are not the People who ought to have absolute authority over Us. In all Cases whatsoever, this is not the nation which is to bring us to unconditional Submission.⁴⁶

In no uncertain terms, Adams asserted that the riots demonstrated why independence was paramount. The insurrection in London had revealed a nation rife with disagreement and a government so unstable that it could not maintain peace without resorting to excessive

⁴³ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁴⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁴⁵ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁴⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29 June 17[80],” *Founders Online*.

measures. The riots reminded Patriots that, should they fail, British control over the American people would be rife with overreach and the suppression of liberty.⁴⁷

With the military empowered to “use their discretion in exerting the force under them, to suppress the riots,” the reports paired coverage on the quelling, capturing, and killing of rioters with the administration’s treatment of Lord George. The Patriot press thoroughly reported his arrest, relaying the Privy Council’s inquest and process used to issue the warrant and Gordon’s confinement to the Tower of London, which they noted involved “by far the greatest in number ever remembered to guard a state prisoner.”⁴⁸ The press’ attention to Lord George did not wither with his confinement to the Tower; indeed the Patriot newspapers continued throughout the fall of 1780 to report in detail his experiences and limitations while imprisoned.⁴⁹ The *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, in their September 4 issue, reported the actions of the organization that Gordon headed, the Protestant Association, in the aftermath of the riot, including their meeting with Lord North and receiving his “approbation” and their advertisement in newspapers disavowing connection with the rioters.⁵⁰ In printing this, the newspapers distinguished between the petition and protest of the Protestant Association and the riots that followed, making a subtle point that if perhaps Parliament had addressed the concerns of the petitioners then

⁴⁷ Indeed, this sentiment is reflected in a later letter to William Lee, where Adams stated, “[t]he Suppression of the Riots, Committees associations Correspondences and all, have given Ministry more giddy Confidence than even the taking of Charlestown.” John Adams to William Lee, 20 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁴⁸ *Independent Chronicle*, 7 September 1780; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 9 September 1780.

⁴⁹ *Providence Gazette*, 13 September 1780; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 16 September 1780; *Boston Gazette*, 18 September 1780; *American Journal*, 20 September 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 20 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 21 September 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 23 September 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 9 October 1780; *Virginia Gazette*, 11 October 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 13 September 1780; *Independent Chronicle*, 14 September 1780; *Connecticut Gazette*, 15 September 1780; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 20 September 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 21 September 1780; *Newport Mercury*, 25 September 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 September 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 27 September 1780.

⁵⁰ *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 4 September 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 12 September 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 28 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 28 September 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 3 October 1780.

there might not have been a situation that gave rise to riots. With the insurrection suppressed, the Patriot press turned to printing articles that dealt with the fallout of the tumults and underscored distinctions between Lord George and the Protestant Association's actions and intentions and that of the rioters.

Patriots were also quite interested in the consequence of the riots on the British government's stability. The insurrection had, after all, resulted in substantial costs in terms of lives, funds, and reputation. The uprising not only caused significant damage to personal and public property, but also embarrassed the government on the international stage. Further, Patriots were watching how the government treated the arrested rioters, and whether the government would exact revenge or justice.⁵¹ To that end, Patriot newspapers reported widely on the twenty-five men and women sentenced to be executed for their involvement in the riot, on top of a total of 458 persons who were killed or captured in the course of the disturbance.⁵² The articles varied in detail, with some including information on those sentenced to execution such as their name and the actions that they were convicted of committing.⁵³ What Patriots thought of the government's response can be gleaned from a letter from Edmund Pendleton, presiding justice of the Virginia court of appeals, to James Madison. Pendleton asked Madison's opinion on news that the British government had advertised the time and place of the execution of the rioters and opined that this action confirmed his opinion that "the despotism adopted at the commencement

⁵¹ Indeed, Edmund Burke cautioned the government to be merciful, fearing that if the government were to act too vigorously in prosecuting and executing rioters, it might spark further uprisings. See Matthew White, " 'For the Safety of the city': The Geography and Social Politics of Public Executions after the Gordon Riots," *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Ian Haywood and John Seed, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 207-208.

⁵² *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 4 September 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 12 September 1780; *Connecticut Journal*, 28 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 28 September 1780; *Norwich Packet*, 3 October 1780.

⁵³ *Norwich Packet*, 10 October 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 11 October 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 18 October 1780; *Independent Chronicle*, 19 October 1780.

of the present Reign had a much more extensive Object than America & was intended to reach the whole Empire.”⁵⁴ An August 18, 1780, letter from Arthur Lee explicitly discussed the government’s repression and punishment of the rioters, noting that “the Insurrection in London had been quelled by killing and hanging under a proclamation of martial Law.”⁵⁵ Lee ended his news of the riots by noting that Lord George had been committed to the Tower. Richard Cranch wrote to Abigail Adams relating information about the riots, noting that many had been killed and others were “hang’d without Judge or Jury.”⁵⁶ That Cranch drew attention to the denial of due process in his short letter to Abigail would have resonated with her, as the denial of due process was a key grievance in Massachusetts.⁵⁷ The interest that Pendleton, Lee, and Cranch had in the outcome and treatment of the rioters might reflect Patriot concerns with what would befall them should Britain prove victorious and squash their revolution. George Washington, who was perhaps the most aware of what might happen should the Patriots lose the war, had a more negative view of the cost of the riots. He lamented in a letter to General Rochambeau that though the ministry “were about taking vigorous measure to punish the Rioters,” he feared that the “tumults will not do more than embarrass” the Ministry and have little effect on the outcome of the war.⁵⁸ While Washington was doubtful of the impact that the riots would have on the battlefield, he nonetheless noted that the British Ministry vigorously sought to punish the rioters, and no doubt knew they would do the same to him and his soldiers

⁵⁴ Edmund Pendleton to James Madison, 8 October 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁵⁵ Arthur Lee to Samuel Adams, 18 August 1780, Samuel Adams Papers, Vol. 14, Library of Congress.

⁵⁶ Richard Cranch to Abigail Adams, 17 August 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁵⁷ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 44-53; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 230-239; David Ammerman, *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974).

⁵⁸ George Washington to Lieutenant General Rochambeau, 26 August 1780, *Rotunda*; Washington echoes this sentiment in a later letter to John Cadwalader, 5 October 1780, *Founders Online*.

should the British win the war.

Patriot newspapers also shared with their readers the estimates of the monetary cost of the riots. The total cost of the damage varied, with some newspapers reporting that damage to both public and private buildings, including the newly rebuilt Newgate prison, totaled 70,000 pounds sterling, with the destruction of Lord Mansfield's house and property alone estimated at 30,000 pounds sterling.⁵⁹ The *Pennsylvania Journal* estimated the damage at "upwards of 1,000,000£. sterling."⁶⁰ The cost of the riots, in monetary, reputational, and casualty terms laid bare the magnitude of the event and its impact on the British government's coffers. It raised the question of whether an already financially strained and isolated British government would be able to continue pursuing such a costly world war. Yet it was also a signal to a Patriot audience of what could befall them should they lose the war. The reports of extrajudicial executions for some rioters and swift trials and execution of other rioters left little doubt of how those associated with the Patriot cause would be treated if Britain prevailed in the conflict.

Patriot newspaper coverage of the riots decreased in October 1780, as the quelling of the riots and the rioters' trials and executions had mostly closed the book on British attention to the event.⁶¹ What newspapers did print tended to focus on the response from British subjects and the British government in the aftermath of the riots. Newspapers featured reports that the government of the City of London had presented an address to the king thanking him for stepping in during the riots.⁶² This public expression of gratitude

⁵⁹ *Independent Ledger*, 4 September 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 7 September 1780.

⁶⁰ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 23 August 1780. This article was also featured in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 25 August 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 August 1780; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 30 August 1780.

⁶¹ Shift in the focus of the British press and public was also a result of the news of the British capture of Charleston reaching London shortly after the riots were stopped. The news of the success was a welcomed diversion by the British nation.

⁶² *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 24 October 1780; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 31 October 1780;

was a tacit approval of the king's extension of power and authority. For Patriots, it reflected the coalescing of support for the government that might quash the internal opposition that had tended to advocate for the Americans. Indeed, some Patriot leaders felt that was exactly what happened, with Adams bemoaning the outcome of the fall Parliamentary elections wherein the Ministry seemed to grow their numbers. Frustrated with the results of the election, Adams, in a report to Congress on October 31, 1780, attributed the gains in seats and power in Parliament by the sitting Ministry to the intimidation of the nation as a result of the Gordon Riots. By concentrating their power, Adams reported, there pervaded a sense of vigor and determination to continue the war.⁶³ This lament was repeated in a December 1780 letter to James Lovell, with Adams bemoaning that the "Committees in England" had been "[f]rightened by the Executions of the Mob."⁶⁴ The riots and the response to them had afforded the crown and Ministry an opportunity to capitalize on fear of rebellion and chaos to leverage compliance to meet their goals.

Throughout 1780, the Patriot press and Patriot leaders were actively engaged in relating information related to Lord George and the Gordon Riots. What was significant about the Patriot newspapers' reports of the riots was the portion devoted to detailing the Protestant Association's protest and asserting the hijacking of the movement by nefarious sorts. Coverage of the petition, the request of parliamentary action, and the subsequent denial held significant similarities to the experiences of the American colonies in the

⁶³ This is disputed. N.C. Phillips asserts that in fact the Ministry's support did not substantially grow in September 1780 election. But others, including those living in the time, did feel that the Ministry's support grew. See N.C. Phillips, "The British General Election of 1780: A Vortex of Politics," *Political Science* vol. 11, no. 2 (1959): 3-22; John Adams to Nathaniel Tracy, 2 October 1780, *Founders Online*; Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain, 1760-1815* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 137-138.

⁶⁴ "From John Adams to James Lovell, 7 December 1780," *Founders Online*.

previous two decades. Prior attempts by American colonists to petition and obtain adequate responses from Parliament met with mixed results, though overall left a large enough portion of American residents dissatisfied with their treatment from the “mother country” to make declaring independence a necessity.⁶⁵ Any doubts that perhaps physical distance between the colonies and the mother country contributed to the discord between the two were pushed aside with the reaction of Parliament to the petition and protest of those citizens proximally closest to them. That Parliament would not even address the concerns—however intolerant they might be—of their closest constituents was, for Patriots, further proof that Members of Parliament were deaf to those they claimed to represent. The government’s inability to quell the riots without turning over more authority and power to the king underscored the belief that Parliament could not and would not act as a check and balance to the king. Yet the decision to forego declaring martial law and suppress the riots through other controversial means pointed out the British government’s highly contradictory treatment of domestic and colonial subjects. Their conduct towards Lord George, who was confined to the Tower and denied pen, paper, and even the visit of his physician, and charged with high treason for his involvement in the petition and protest that gave way to riot, smacked of a government intent on retribution rather than justice. What then, would be the fate of American Patriots should they lose the war for independence? Patriot printers and leaders latched onto these sentiments, providing multiple rationales for Patriots’ continued support of American independence.

⁶⁵ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: Penguin Books, 1776, rep. 2005); Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), chap. 4; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 312-332.

1781: A Triumphant End

At the start of 1781, Patriots had no sense of the importance of the year as a turning point in the war. Patriots achieved a few key victories in the southern theater in late 1780, but there was still no definitive end in sight to the war.⁶⁶ With uncertainty about the outcome of the war persisting, Patriot newspapers continued to report the fallout of the riots in Britain. By doing so, the Patriot press persisted in reminding their readers of the connection between the fight for independence and the riots (and the British government's response to them). In a succinct listing of reports taken from a British ship, the January 3 *Pennsylvania Journal* relayed that "the mob in England had levelled Lord North's house, and several others—Several prisons were opened, and the Americans and other prisoners were set at liberty." Though the report closed by stating "[b]y the channel we received those reports, they at least appear probable," the printer of the *Pennsylvania Journal* gave the information the benefit of the doubt.⁶⁷ Patriot audiences would welcome the report's claim, though incorrect, that the home of Lord North, the head of the British government, was destroyed and that Americans had been set free in the attacks on the prisons. In the wake of news articles reporting on the British state's execution of the London rioters, Patriot readers would certainly welcome news that the riots had freed American prisoners. The publication of this report exemplified the Patriot press' determination to use any bit of information to strengthen the support of their cause, regardless of its potential to be incorrect or its lateness (which they might have interpreted as the British government's attempt to censor damaging information leaving their shores). Patriots' spirits would be buoyed by the brief report that played on their sense of

⁶⁶ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 352-371.

⁶⁷ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 3 January 1781; also printed in *Massachusetts Spy*, 4 January 1781.

schadenfreude.

The Patriot newspapers in the beginning of the year also took a great deal of interest in the fact that both Lord George and Henry Laurens, the former president of the Continental Congress and ambassador captured on his way to Holland, were imprisoned in the Tower of London. “There are now two late Presidents confined in the Tower, viz. Lord George Gordon, formerly President of the Protestant Association; and Mr. Henry Laurens, formerly President of the American Congress,” the *Pennsylvania Journal* first reported on January 10.⁶⁸ The report from London may have sought to diminish the stature of the “American Congress” by equating it to an association, but to Patriot readers the British equation of these two men to each other was yet another sign that American Patriots would be held to a similar standard as those involved in the Gordon Riots. That made following the outcome of Gordon’s treatment and trial all the more imperative. Over a month later, the *Pennsylvania Packet* printed excerpts of a letter from Portsmouth that contrasted the treatment of Gordon and Laurens in the Tower, relating that “[s]everal people now visit Lord George in the Tower, but always in the presence of one of the warders” while “no person whatever will be allowed to even see” Laurens.⁶⁹ Compared to Lord George, who was facing trial for high treason, the British government’s more severe treatment of Laurens indicated how the British government would likely handle Patriots should they lose the war. Granted, Patriots had no illusions that they would not face retribution if the British prevailed. But the clear example that the government’s response

⁶⁸ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 10 January 1781; also printed in *Connecticut Journal*, 1 February 1781; *Norwich Packet*, 6 February 1781.

⁶⁹ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 20 February 1781. Earlier in this same extract, the author notes that Laurens is staying in the same apartments in the Tower that John Wilkes, notorious for his championing of liberty and freedom, and seen by American Patriots as a friend, was confined to during his arrest over fifteen years earlier. Inclusion of this detail would likely be taken by Patriots as a sign of the British government’s view of Laurens and the danger he represented.

to the rioters and Lord George presented, and the harsher treatment for the captured Patriot diplomat, reiterated that point when victory was less than certain.

The juxtaposition of Gordon and Laurens continued in later newspapers, such as the *Connecticut Courant's* March 6 issue, which included ruminations from London over whether Laurens should be tried for treason right below two paragraphs regarding Gordon's satisfaction on being arraigned and his push to expedite his trial. "If deliberate treason, and active rebellion, are crimes against the state," then Laurens "certainly deserves the severest reprobation," the author asserted.⁷⁰ Patriots were already conscious of the rioters' punishments and executions for their involvement in a relatively short rebellion; the greater magnitude of the American rebellion would certainly produce greater punishment and retribution should the Patriots fail to win the war. Patriots saw the comparisons between the linking of Lord George's charges to Laurens as indicative of what Patriot leaders—and perhaps even those not directly involved, but guilty by association—could expect should the British win the war.

Henry Laurens' own journal writings confirmed the Patriot printers' narrative and offered further insight into the encounters between himself and Lord George, as well as the reactions their British jailers had to both men as they were imprisoned in the Tower. Laurens' journal entries verified the Patriot printers' reports that Gordon and Laurens were occupying the same space. Most strikingly, Laurens' entries revealed that he and Gordon had actually had direct encounters that significantly alarmed their jailers. In a December 3, 1780, chance meeting with Lord George on the Tower grounds, Laurens noted that Lord George had asked to walk with him, and though Laurens declined, the

⁷⁰ *Connecticut Courant*, 6 March 1781.

Governor of the Tower had placed Laurens in close confinement as a result. Laurens claimed he was not the transgressor in the incident, but rather “the fault was in Lord George but the Brutal Governor dared not lock him up.”⁷¹ In late January 1781, Laurens recorded that Lord George had sent him a piece of cake, but that the Governor of the Tower was so “wrathful beyond all decency” that he had the warder inform Laurens that he would receive “nothing but through him.”⁷² In an entry for February 8, 1781, Laurens related the rude behavior of the Governor to Lord George as he was being conducted to Westminster Hall for his trial.⁷³

Laurens’ inclusion of Lord George in his journal, written in pencil and reflecting his denial of ink and pen with which to write, demonstrated the significance that both Laurens and his jailers placed upon the two prisoners interacting. With little materials to write with, Laurens determined that his encounters with Gordon and the reactions that they provoked in his jailers were important to record. Additionally, Laurens’ implied comparison between the treatment of Lord George and himself by the jailers reflected the level of danger that was associated with both men, and how that manifested into restrictions upon their occasional interactions. Laurens’ observations dovetailed with Patriot newspaper accounts that—while not directly asserting the interactions between Laurens and Gordon—noted the degree of comparison and concern that British jailers had for the two men. By his own accounts, Laurens could receive and interact with some visitors, which conflicted with Patriot reports of Laurens’ strict confinement. But, overall, his observations on the British jailers’ severe, yet differential, treatment meshed with what

⁷¹ Henry Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens, Vol. 15: December 11, 1778-August 31, 1782*, Eds. David L. Chesnutt and C. James Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 349-350.

⁷² Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 353.

⁷³ Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 353.

Patriot printers were sharing with their readers.

In addition to keeping abreast of the treatment of Gordon and Laurens in the Tower of London, the Patriot press continually reported through the spring of 1781 the judicial twists and turns leading up to Gordon's trial for high treason. From relaying the reasons for the delay in Gordon's indictment and trial to explaining the British government's justification for charging Lord George with high treason, the Patriot press used these reports to demonstrate the government's tactics to pin fault of the riots entirely on Lord George.⁷⁴ Beyond the pre-trial justifications for delays in indicting Lord George and bringing him to trial, the Patriot press focused a great deal of attention on the actual indictment process. The *New-Jersey Gazette*, in late March, featured a comprehensive account of Gordon's indictment, recounting the justice's instructions to the grand jury that included the more liberal definition of high treason and directed them to "give every attention to the circumstances of the case of the prisoner; at the same time remembering the duty they owed to the publick justice of the kingdom."⁷⁵ Within that same day the grand jury had returned with a "*true bill... for high treason.*"⁷⁶ In the ensuing legal discussions between the Attorney General and the justices of the court—including Lord Mansfield, whose house had been ransacked by the rioters—the Attorney General's earlier reported "confidence in [Gordon's] conviction" was underscored by his motion to quickly empanel

⁷⁴ For issues explaining the delay in indictment and trial, see *Norwich Packet*, 2 January 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 8 January 1781. For issues explaining the British government's indictment of Gordon for high treason, see *Pennsylvania Packet*, 20 January 1781, which the British justified because Gordon had led assembled a large and belligerent crowd to serve as the "arms, instruments, array and operations common" in levying war against the king. A less explanatory report of the indictment process also appeared in Patriot newspapers, which primarily listed that it was rumored that a bill of indictment would go to the grand jury in the next term, and that if the bill was found Lord George would be tried in the Court of King's Bench "most probably in the next Hillary Term" (*Pennsylvania Journal*, 14 February, 1781; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 21 February 1781).

⁷⁵ *New-Jersey Gazette*, 28 March 1781.

⁷⁶ *New-Jersey Gazette*, 28 March 1781 (emphasis original).

a jury for trial. The article further revealed that Lord George would not appear in court until the trial—thereby precluding Gordon from any pre-trial appearances or decisions.⁷⁷ Additionally, the article reported the discussion between the justices on the manner of appointing Gordon’s counsel, which deviated from the normal procedure in appointing counsel.⁷⁸ The Patriot press’ attention to the pre-trial court proceedings called into question the supposed impartiality of the British judicial system—an issue that Patriots had raised in response to the 1774 Intolerable Acts that moved trials from Massachusetts to British soil.⁷⁹ The directions to the grand jury, the broadening of the definition of “high treason,” and the deviation in typical proceedings reeked of efforts by the British government to deny impartial treatment.⁸⁰

The *Independent Chronicle* further questioned the British government’s methods and motives by printing a scathing letter excerpt from Paris that criticized the tactics employed by the government in their prosecution against Lord George and the other accused rioters. The letter charged that the sheriff could easily select a jury that would convict Lord George “without the shadow of evidence, or at least with very little of it,” and that “[p]unishment

⁷⁷ *American Journal*, 10 March 1781; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 28 March 1781.

⁷⁸ The report relates that after Mr. Erskine moved, on behalf of the absent Lord George, to have himself and Mr. Kenyon admitted as Lord George’s advocates, Justice Buller asked if “it was usual for such motions to be made, but by prisoners in person at the bar of the court?” Lord Mansfield and the Attorney General approved of the motion, the paper reported. This conversation indicated that Gordon’s absence was unusual.

⁷⁹ See Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 230-231; Jack M. Sosin, “The Massachusetts Acts of 1774: Coercive or Preventive?” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1963): 235-252; T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 52-75.

⁸⁰ Douglas Hay explores the nature of Eighteenth Century British justice in his chapter in *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, in which he details the values placed upon equality before the law (though he notes this value is more in ideology than in practice, particularly when it comes to class), strict adherence to procedural rules, and the importance of property in the determination of capital offenses (Douglas Hay, “Property, Authority and the Criminal Law,” in *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, Ed. Douglas Hay et al (London: Verso, 2011), 17-63). The prosecution of Lord George was an attempt by the British government to demonstrate that no one was beyond the laws, though its methods challenge some of the core values of the justice system. His ultimate acquittal could therefore be seen as adhering to the spirit of the judicial system, despite the government’s attempts to bend elements to fit their goals.

and pardon are become subservient to the caprices and humours of the King and his sycophants, rather than to the good of the state.”⁸¹ Yet as they reported and criticized the sluggish advancement towards trial, the Patriot press also took notice of Gordon’s reported demeanor, recording that he “expressed the highest satisfaction” at the prospect of being arraigned and entering his plea, and that he had even pushed for his trial to start without delay.⁸² Gordon’s desire to start his trial quickly demonstrated to Patriots that he was eager to prove his innocence and dispel the government’s attempt to equate his passion for his cause with treasonous riots. By the end of March, the Patriot press had set the stage for Lord George’s trial, slanting opinion and sympathy in his favor through their framing of the government’s tactics employed against him thus far.

When news of Gordon’s trial reached Patriot printers, their coverage ranged from sparse to comprehensive. Patriot newspapers published the more detailed accounts later in the spring and summer, when more substantial reports of the trial circulated, while the earliest reports captured relayed the most consequential information. The first Patriot newspaper to report on the trial results—the *Pennsylvania Packet* on April 28—printed just a single line amidst a letter extract, relating that the “protestant associations begin to stir a little. Lord George Gordon is acquitted.”⁸³ Subsequent Patriot newspapers were slightly more descriptive, consisting of one paragraph recapping the acquittal and Lord George’s brief speech thanking the jury and decrying the “wicked prosecution” that was reprinted in nine Patriot newspapers, from Massachusetts to Maryland.⁸⁴ This concise recount

⁸¹ *Independent Chronicle*, 19 April 1781.

⁸² *Providence Gazette*, 3 March 1781; *Connecticut Courant*, 6 March 1781.

⁸³ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 28 April 1781. This letter extract was later reprinted in the *Norwich Packet*, 17 May 1781.

⁸⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 2 May 1781; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 2 May 1781; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 5 May 1781; *Maryland Journal*, 8 May 1781; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 9 May 1781; *Norwich Packet*, 10 May 1781; *Providence Gazette*, 12 May 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 14 May 1781; *Connecticut Courant*, 15 May 1781; *Massachusetts Spy*, 17 May 1781.

whetted the appetite of the Patriot press, and over the course of the next month a variety of more comprehensive articles appeared. The *Continental Journal's* May 10 issue devoted one and a half pages to printing the report on Lord George's trial taken from London Papers found on a ship. This article relayed the British government's witnesses' testimony that Gordon's request for large public support for his presentation of the petition to Parliament was intended so that the petition would be taken seriously. The witnesses testified that Gordon asserted that "when his Majesty heard that his subjects were flocking up for miles round, [he] would send his minister to repeal the act."⁸⁵ The government's witnesses' statements showed Lord George's encouragement for the protestors to display their seriousness through their numbers, but the witnesses failed to establish that Lord George had intended the protests to turn violent and into riots. For a Patriot audience, the testimony was evidence of how feeble the government's accusations were in trying Lord George for high treason.

Having heard from the government's witnesses, the Patriot press published the sequel article that recounted Gordon's defense, including his lawyer's compelling statement that challenged the government's assertions and witnesses. Declaring that instigators not associated with "those with whom the prisoner was connected, who went up to the house with their petition, went up in a sober, quiet manner, unarmed, unaccounted, and entertaining no hostile intentions" started the tumults, it would be unfair for Lord George "to be found guilty of crimes which belonged to another."⁸⁶ The second article concluded with the announcement of the jury acquitting Gordon, and exhibited to

⁸⁵ *Continental Journal*, 10 May 1781. This article was also printed in *Connecticut Gazette*, 11 May 1781; *Norwich Packet*, 17 May 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 21 May 1781; *Massachusetts Spy*, 24 May 1781; *Providence Gazette*, 26 May 1781; *Connecticut Courant*, 29 May 1781.

⁸⁶ *Connecticut Gazette*, 18 May 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 28 May 1781; *Massachusetts Spy*, 31 May 1781; *Providence Gazette*, 2 June 1781; *Connecticut Courant*, 5 June 1781.

Patriots that the jury had seen through the government's attempt to equate Lord George's political activities with high treason.⁸⁷ Gordon's acquittal signaled to the Patriots that even the citizens of London saw through the corrupt government's endeavour to escape any sort of criticism for their handling of the riots by pinning responsibility on Lord George. Despite having the heft of the government against him, Lord George was able to overcome the extreme charges because the people were on his side. For a Patriot audience, Lord George's victory was proof that perseverance and commitment to cause could trump persecution.

The *Pennsylvania Evening Post* in May and June, 1781, contained the most comprehensive retelling of the trial of Lord George. Spread across four weeks and six issues, the newspaper reported at length the actions at the trial.⁸⁸ The first issue covered the empaneling of the jury and challenges to specific jurors, the opening statement of the Attorney General which described the actions of the crowd and the riots over the course of the next week, and that Gordon had directed the crowds like an army and used his rhetoric to encourage them to remain resolute in their purpose. The second article continued with the Attorney General's statement, before delving into the witnesses called to testify that Lord George had encouraged the crowd and treated it like an army in order to spur redress from either Parliament or the king, before being cross-examined by Lord George's attorney. The third, fourth, and fifth issues further delved into the testimony and

⁸⁷ The *Freeman's Journal* on May 30 published a fairly descriptive recount of the trial of Lord George in which it spent more time relating the defense's witnesses' testimony validating the defense's claims that Lord George had not intended or called for violence when he asked his followers to show their support for the petition he was submitting to Parliament. See *Freeman's Journal*, 30 May 1781.

⁸⁸ The following issues of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* contain the serial report of the trial of Lord George: 21 May 1781; 22 May 1781; 25 May 1781; 1 June 1781; 18 June 1781; 22 June 1781. Two issues, printed on 4 June 1781 and 9 June 1781 occur amidst the serial article but do not include any portion of this recounting. This may have been a tactic to retain subscriptions interest in the newspaper by delaying the serialized story, or was a result of more pressing news being featured in those two publications.

cross-examination of the prosecution's witnesses, with their evidence that Gordon knew, but did not care, that what he was doing was illegal, and that he fomented the tumults with his rhetoric, an argument challenged by Lord George's counsel. The sixth and final article in the series concluded the testimony of prosecution witnesses and began the statement from Lord George's counsel.

Curiously, the series ends with the note that "Lord G. Gordon's defence will be published as soon as it comes to hand," though a review of subsequent *Pennsylvania Evening Post* issues for the remainder of the year show no such publication.⁸⁹ It was possible that the omission of this sequel publication was because no such detailed account reached the newspaper. Also likely was that more pressing news, such as the Battle of Yorktown in the autumn of 1781, supplanted any imperative to continue the story of the acquittal of Lord George in the face of the victory at Yorktown and the commencing of peace negotiations. Despite this, the comprehensive attention that the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* paid to the prosecution's portion of Lord George's trial still reflected the intensity of the Patriot press' interest in the government's methods in trying Gordon. The attention to how the prosecution shaped their case, what their witnesses testified to, and how the defense challenged those witnesses revealed to Patriots what could be expected should they lose the war and face trials by the British for high treason. The extent of the coverage also showed the degree to which the government would resort in holding someone accountable for riots—or rebellions. In addition to the twenty-five rioters previously tried and executed for lesser charges than high treason, the government sought to make an example of the figurehead linked to the riots. Should the Patriots lose the war, they would certainly face

⁸⁹ *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 22 June 1781.

similar, if not worse, persecution.

The Patriot press' interest in Lord George and the riots did not end with the reports of his acquittal. Lord George's continued presence in Patriot newspapers in the latter half of 1781 represented the ability of persons of conviction to rise above persecution by a corrupt government. Post-trial articles explored Gordon's continued relevancy to British politics and the reaction of British society to Lord George. Articles and letters from London, some associated with the British elite, were printed in Patriot newspapers to exhibit the British elite's efforts to minimize the government's loss at trial. The *Pennsylvania Packet* printed a letter to a "gentlemen of the navy" that asserted that "you cannot conceive with what indifference the matter [Lord George's acquittal] has passed over, except with his immediate partizans: indeed there might be prudence in it, for government had discreetly collected a pretty body of troops around the metropolis."⁹⁰ The government's desire to maintain peace was also evident in a June 28 article in the *Pennsylvania Packet* that explained that a significant number of troops were on ready alert in and about Westminster on the days of Lord George's trials, to "quell any disturbance that may happen."⁹¹ A letter from Lord Huntington reprinted in multiple Patriot newspapers contended that "[i]t is suggested that government did not wish to convict Lord George Gordon, for fear of offending the Scotch fanatics," thereby pinning the failure to convict Lord George as a political decision to retain peace.⁹²

While some letters sought to diminish the reaction to Gordon's acquittal, others announced that at the news "the bells were immediately set a ringing and the evening was

⁹⁰ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 May 1781.

⁹¹ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 28 May 1781.

⁹² *Pennsylvania Packet*, 12 June 1781; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 13 June 1781; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 20 June 1781; *Norwich Packet*, 28 June 1781; *Providence Gazette*, 30 June 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 2 July 1781; *Massachusetts Spy*, 5 July 1781.

concluded with illuminations, fireworks, and other demonstrations of joy.”⁹³ This variety of post-trial articles held different tenors and subjects, but all demonstrated that the reaction of the elite in British society was to downplay the results of the trial, while the common people celebrated Lord George’s acquittal. The Patriot press used these reactions to further enshrine the idea that those British in power were out of touch with the other segments of British society. Further, they sought to minimize the British government’s loss in Gordon’s trial, asserting that it was their deliberate intention to lose (so the masses would not revolt), rather than weakness on the government’s part. As much as the government had utilized legally questionable power to suppress the mob, they remained fearful of stirring up the discontented among their subjects as evidenced by their positioning of troops around London lest the mob re-form. For Patriot readers, the reaction of the government to station troops nearby was more telling than the excuses given by the elite to absolve them of their loss at trial.

The *Pennsylvania Journal* published the debates from the House of Commons over the strengthening the civil magistrates as a result of the military being called out to suppress the riots. During this debate, members argued about the legality of the military being deployed into London, with one member, Mr. Sheridan, asserting that “moderation had prevented the Sovereign from availing himself of an opportunity...if his Royal breast had been capable of harbouring a design hostile to the liberties of his people.” This member further went on to assert that the decision to charge Lord George with high treason, when the other rioters were charged with mere felonies, was a “very dangerous tendency, to construe one crime into another, and make a riotous meeting a levying war against a

⁹³ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 29 May 1781. This was further confirmed in an article in the *Newport Mercury*, 9 June 1781.

king.”⁹⁴ Sheridan’s assertions were challenged by others, but the *Pennsylvania Journal* found them important enough to print. The Patriot press’ inclusion of these arguments was sure to strike a chord with Patriots who doubted whether the British constitution truly constrained the king’s power and the government’s willingness to conflate dissent and riots with treasonous actions.

Patriot printers retained their interest in Gordon’s activities throughout 1781, paying attention to the support Gordon received from devotees and friends upon his acquittal.⁹⁵ The encouragement expressed in public letters and in monetary donations perhaps explained Lord George’s return to politics following his trial, which caught the attention of the Patriot press and furthered their narrative of Lord George being a principled man committed to his ideology. Multiple Patriot newspapers printed copies of an advertisement published by Lord George to the “Worthy Liverymen of the City of London” in which he stated:

PERMIT me to solicit the favour of your vote and interest to be your representative in Parliament in the room of Mr. Alderman Haley, deceased. Should I be so happy as to meet your approbation, you may depend on my exerting myself in the House of Commons, in support of your civil and religious liberties, according to the principles laid down at the Reformation and Revolution.⁹⁶

At the same time as reprints of Lord George’s advertisement circulated, the *Pennsylvania Journal* printed his September 7 letter to Lord North, in which Gordon requested Lord North’s assistance in presenting a book to the king that outlined the Church of Scotland’s opposition to the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. A postscript to the letter added the

⁹⁴ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 30 June 1781.

⁹⁵ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 14 July 1781; *Boston Gazette*, 10 September 1781; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 29 May 1781; *Newport Mercury*, 7 July 1781; *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, 1 September 1781; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 8 December 1781; *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 December 1781.

⁹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, 1 December 1781; *Providence Gazette*, 8 December 1781; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 19 December 1781; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 20 December 1781; *Connecticut Gazette*, 21 December 1781.

suggestion that the king's response to the book, which should conform "to the principles established at the time of the reformation and of the revolution," would "calm the minds and dispel the apprehensions" of the some 20,000 men involved in the Protestant Associations.⁹⁷ The response from Lord North, printed in the *Pennsylvania Packet* and the *New-Jersey Gazette*, succinctly instructed that Lord George "must present [the book] at the levee" and offered no assistance, confirming the dismissal that Lord George continued to receive from those in power.⁹⁸ Lord George putting himself forward as a candidate after being charged—though acquitted—with high treason was itself remarkable. Doing so while referencing the same ideology that got him into trouble initially, while also attempting to yet again leverage his mass of supporters to exact his political goals, served as inspiration to Patriots to remain steadfast in their convictions. Rather than be cowed by the British government, Gordon continued to pursue his objective of overturning the 1778 CRA. Patriots could emulate his commitment to cause, if not his zealotry.

Patriot leaders and the Patriot press found reaffirmation in their cause through the events of the Gordon Riots. In a period when the end of the war seemed elusive, and victory was most certainly not in sight, the Gordon Riots provided a necessary narrative to push on. Through the events preceding, during, and following the riots, Patriots saw their own experiences reflected back to them. They saw a government resistant to the petitions and protests of their citizens. They saw the anger produced by that dismissal of British rights. Terrifyingly, they saw a government take extreme action to quash that anger and seek retribution in the aftermath. While not exactly aligned, the similarities were

⁹⁷ *Pennsylvania Journal*, 12 December 1781.

⁹⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet*, 13 December 1781; *New-Jersey Gazette*, 26 December 1781.

enough for Patriot leaders and printers to construct a narrative of the riots that confirmed their cause and reminded fellow Patriots of what was at stake. In a letter to Samuel Huntington, the President of Congress, John Adams summarized it best:

The total and absolute suppression of the Tumults in London, and the triumphant success of Clinton beyond their most sanguine Expectations, has now given them such Exultation and Confidence, that the People of America will dethrone the Congress and like the Israelites demand a King, that they now think of nothing but unconditional submission, or at least of delusive proffers of terms which they know the majority of the People in America will not agree to, in order to divide Us, make a few Gentlemen Apostates, and some Soldiers deserters.⁹⁹

The Gordon Riots had a profound effect on the psyche of American Patriots. The results of the riots was all the proof they needed as to the stakes of the war. If belief in their cause was not enough to see them through, then fear of the outcome should they lose was a powerful motivator. In the ever-malleable Gordon Riots, Patriots found a reminder-in-miniature of what they had endured, and what could still possibly befall them should they fail to be successful in winning independence.

⁹⁹ John Adams to the President of Congress, 23 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

Chapter 4: “No Safety but in Those to Whom the Powers of Government Are Committed”: Loyalists and the Gordon Riots¹

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.

-“Extract of a letter from a Gentleman of distinction in London”²

“Governor Hutchinson is dead,” John Adams gleefully reported to the President of Congress, sharing with him the news about the Loyalist former governor of Massachusetts who was exiled in London. Adams listed a variety of potential causes for his death, but first and foremost was “the late popular Insurrections” that had broken out in London in early June.³ Benjamin Franklin agreed, writing to William Carmichael that “Governor Hutchison is said died outright of the Freight” produced by the riots.⁴ Adams and Franklin’s speculation was not without basis, as Hutchinson’s son, Elijah, indirectly linked his father’s death and the riots in his diary entry. Elijah noted that his father, who had been in declining health in the weeks prior, had “conversed well and freely upon the riot in London the day before,” and other topics on the morning of June 3, but upon

¹ A version of this chapter originally appeared in my 2015 Master’s thesis. This chapter contains many modifications and expansions upon ideas originally presented as part of that work. Versions of this chapter have been shared at the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era (CRE) 2021 Virtual Conference and at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies 2021 Fellows Workshop. I would like to express my thanks to the many readers and commentors who engaged with my work in these venues, including Dr. Jason Sharples at the MCEAS Fellows workshop and my Loyalism studies roundtable co-panelists at the CRE conference. Portions of this chapter appears in the *Selected Papers of the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era 2021-2022*. I thank the editors and reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on that work.

² *Royal Gazette*, 6 September 1780.

³ John Adams to the President of Congress, 17 June 1780, *Rotunda*.

⁴ Benjamin Franklin to William Carmichael, 17 June 1780, *Rotunda*.

entering his coach to leave, the former governor fainted. He died a short while later.⁵ We may never know whether the Gordon Riots actually caused Hutchinson's death. It is striking, however, to consider the fact that one of the most prominent Loyalists refugees died while mobs terrorized the city. During his time as lieutenant governor and then as crown-appointed governor of Massachusetts, Hutchinson had repeatedly faced mob vitriol and violence for his actions supporting Parliamentary and crown supremacy during the Stamp Act controversy in the 1760s.⁶ Yet in the safety of the mother country, mob violence had found Hutchinson again. This time, the outcome was death, not exile.

Thomas Hutchinson was not the only Loyalist impacted by the London insurrection. News of the riots circulated in 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 ebb and flow of the war did not definitively point towards victory for one side or the other. In a year that brought Loyalists signs of hope, Loyalists added their own interpretation to the news of the London riots that further bolstered their belief that the British would be victorious at home and abroad. It was a useful addition to their broader narrative, suggesting similar experiences between Loyalists in America and Britons in London. British subjects at the heart of the empire had suffered the same terror from aggrieved fellow-subjects that Loyalists had endured for over five years. Yet the government prevailed in reasserting order in London, strengthening the nation to guard against the manifestation of dangerous revolutionary ideas that challenged the relationship between the governed and the government. This interpretation of the riots was compelling

⁵ Thomas Hutchinson, *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson...Comp. from the Original Documents Still Remaining in the Possession of His Descendants* Vol. 2 (Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1886), 2: 353-354, HathiTrust; Elisa Hutchinson Diary, Egerton Collection, British Library, Egerton MSS 2669.

⁶ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

to Loyalists who longed for the end of war and a return to normal. With accusations circulating of Patriot agents' involvement in the riots and observations highlighting the similarities between the Patriots' and the rioters' rhetoric and ideology, the tumults were not evidence of dysfunction in British society, but rather the result of the transatlantic circulation of dangerous democratic ideology that threatened to disrupt Britain's well-ordered empire.⁷ The triumph of the British government over such threats, along with their battlefield victories, was proof for Loyalists that the government would succeed in squashing the Patriot rebellion.

While historians of Loyalists and Loyalism have done remarkable work demonstrating the diverse rationales and motives for Loyalist activities, alliances, and beliefs, they have largely neglected the impact that the Gordon Riots had on Loyalists' morale.⁸ Most Loyalist historians have, until recently, overlooked the Loyalist interpretation of the Gordon Riots. Brad A. Jones' recent book explores a geographically expansive Loyalist response to the Gordon Riots, situating it within their reaction to the Franco-American alliance and revealing Loyalists' understanding of the government

⁷ Many of the Loyalist writers and printers asserted a "republican" or "democratic" nature to the rioters behavior. These terms were used somewhat interchangeably to mean an ideology that prioritized popular rule (i.e. popular sovereignty), harking back to the interregnum period in English history. See Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 14-38; Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 95-109, 229-232.

⁸ Some works that explore Loyalists' motives and perceptions include: 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); Mary Beth Norton, *The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); Jim Picuch, *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); Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*.

response to the riots as a positive sign for the Loyalist/British course in the war.⁹ My work augments and builds on Jones' work, adding a more detailed look at how Loyalist printers and writers constructed that interpretation, while also fleshing out the complexities that the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act (CRA) added to Loyalists' anti-Popery ideology.¹⁰ To determine the shape and message of the Loyalist narrative of the Gordon Riots, I examined Loyalist newspapers primarily from New York, South Carolina, and Georgia. I also compared the articles about the Gordon Riots in these newspapers with articles from Patriot newspapers. My comparison reveals that, despite often sharing source materials (British newspapers and each other's), the differences between what Loyalist printers included and excluded compared to Patriot printers underscores deliberate attempts by both factions to utilize the news of the riots for their own political cause.

Loyalists were outraged at the threat that the mob posed to the order and stability of British society and the British government.¹¹ While this threat might provoke fear or concern about the government's weakness, measures such as a decline in Loyalist enlistments does not bear out that fear. The British military's capture of Charleston in May

⁹ Brad A. Jones, *Resisting Independence: Popular Loyalism in the Revolutionary British Atlantic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Jones, *Resisting Independence*, 176-198. Jones' work touches on the role of the Gordon Riots and anti-popery 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) to within the rebelling 13 colonies or those exiled from these colonies. While I am sympathetic to Jones' expansive definition of Loyalists (he includes subjects in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Scotland, as well as New York), 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. Further, Jones' exploration of Loyalists' embrace of anti-popery rhetoric and ideology following the Franco-American alliance does not grapple with how they square the passage of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act. Jones states that no Loyalist newspapers in the areas he studied covers that action, but I have found reports of both the English and Irish Catholic Relief Acts in the *Royal Gazette*.

¹¹ Cognizant 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 (including Native allies or those of African descent) 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.

1780 produced an increase in Loyalist enlistments in provincial units and increases volunteers with Loyalist militias. The Loyalist-British victory at Camden in August, around the same time as news of the riots started circulating in the rebelling colonies, produced a further surge of enlistments. If the Loyalists felt any doubt about the stability or strength of the British government stemming from the riots, we might expect to see a drop in Loyalist support via military service. But that did not occur.¹² My reading of Loyalist newspapers and writings suggests that Loyalists viewed the Gordon Riots and their aftermath as yet another confirmation of the British government's strength and righteousness. Together with victories in Charleston and Camden, the quashing of the riots in London bolstered Loyalists' certainty in the government's ultimate victory and reaffirmed that Loyalists had chosen the just, and winning, side.

As the epigraph at the opening of this chapter attests, the Loyalist press presented to their readers the suggestion that the British government had become more resolute and the British populace more supportive through the experience of the riots. This chapter explores the portrayals and methods used by Loyalist printers to promote a specific interpretation from 1778 to 1781 of events and people connected to the London riots. Drawing on newspapers from British-occupied regions, certain themes become apparent and offer an alternative reading of the events from that of the Patriot press. The newspapers produced in these regions often fell under the influence of British military officials. To contextualize the Loyalist printers' narrative, I examine some of the letters and correspondence of Loyalists, both in the rebelling colonies and in exile in Britain to situate both the individual understandings and interpretations of the riots as well as

¹² Picuch, *Three Peoples, One King*, 178-199, 228-229; Wayne Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 204.

broader understanding of the politics that surrounded the riots. Loyalists living amidst Patriots had to be very careful about what thoughts and opinions they communicated among allies and family, lest their communications fall into the wrong hands and provoke retribution.¹³ This produced a self-censored silence born from fear in the extant letters and materials of Loyalists living in the rebelling colonies during the war. As such, I incorporate accounts from Loyalists in exile, who were relatively safer to express their thoughts and opinions. In pairing Loyalist newspaper accounts with the correspondence, diaries, and political tracts of individuals such as Samuel Rogers, William Smith, Joseph Galloway, Samuel Curwen, Thomas Hutchinson, and others, we can glimpse how the riots fit into a Loyalist ideology about the causes and dangers of American revolutionary ideology. These sources, coupled with the Loyalist newspapers, reveal how Loyalists interpreted the riots to be confirmation that the British government would prevail both at home and in the colonies.

Loyalist Writers of the Riots

Loyalist writers, printers, and their allies all had to make sense of the news related to the London insurrection before they could interpret and understand the impact of the riots on their own situation. In their effort to understand and process the information traveling from across the Atlantic, their circumstances helped shape their perspective and the narrative they would craft. When we examine who produced the Loyalist narrative—and where—we can elucidate how influential Loyalists interpreted the riots to fit within their own ideology and circumstances. These Loyalist writers and printers squared their

¹³ For more on threats to Loyalists that compelled them to self-censor, see Claude Halstead Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution* (New York: Peter Smith, 1929); Robert M. Calhoon, “Civil, Revolutionary, or Partisan: The Loyalists and the Nature of the War for Independence,” in *Tory Insurgents*, 204-217; Norton, *The British-Americans*, 7, 14-16, 24-28.

experiences and hopes against news related to the riots, and took from the riots a message that encouraged Loyalists to stay the course.

As discussed in chapter 3, newspaper printers in British North America relied on a variety of sources to construct the news in their papers. Most heavily borrowed from other newspapers—which they sometimes did and sometimes did not credit. Sources of information also came from the networks that both Patriot and Loyalist printers created, including connections with ship captains and mariners, prominent individuals in positions of power or authority, and individuals coming into the print shops to share news and/or conduct business. While the contingencies of war could disrupt some of these networks, they nevertheless persisted and new networks developed. Loyalist printers continued to reprint material from other newspapers, including Patriot newspapers that they could obtain from contacts behind enemy lines. With the capture and control of certain ports by the British Royal Navy, the continuation of transatlantic shipping—both military and civilian—allowed for news to travel in the form of newspapers from Britain, public/private letters, and individuals. Loyalist printers adapted their general practices of news creation and circulation to the times and circumstances.¹⁴

Further, Loyalist newspapers' very existence and duration was tied to the occupation of British forces in the region, which “provided a necessary semblance of normality in towns under British military and administrative control.”¹⁵ They also informed residents of British military victories and announcements from commanders and

¹⁴ Joseph Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks: The Business and Politics of Printing the News, 1763-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 3-11, 139-169; Jordan E. Taylor, *Misinformation Nation: Foreign News and the Politics of Truth in Revolutionary America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022), 1-8.

¹⁵ Janice Potter-MacKinnon and Robert M. Calhoun, “The Character and Coherence of the Loyalist Press,” in *Tory Insurgents*, 127.

civil administrators, and “provide[d] a forum in which loyalists could lambast their patriot enemies.”¹⁶ The Loyalist newspapers’ dependence upon the control of the region by the British military had the consequence of limiting the number of Loyalist newspapers in existence. While Loyalists existed in cities and areas outside British military occupied locations, they did not control the print shops in those areas. Indeed, the story of James Humphreys, Jr. and the *Pennsylvania Ledger* may be particularly illustrative. Humphreys started his Loyalist paper in 1775, but facing harassment from Patriots in Philadelphia, he left the city in 1776. When the British occupied Philadelphia in late 1777, Humphreys returned and resumed the publication until the British military evacuated, Humphreys leaving with them.¹⁷

Loyalist printers’ reliance and connection to the British military may have shaped not just where they printed, but also *what* they printed. The contingencies of war affected the supplies of material necessary for printing. Everything from paper, ink, machinery, and information was, at times, difficult to come by. Leadership in the British military recognized, however, the importance of newspapers and information in shaping public opinion, and subsidized Loyalist printers through contracts, making up for subscription losses, and stabilizing the market for news.¹⁸ Loyalist printers’ publication of military successes and announcements were certainly aimed at the population of the area to reinforce confidence and support of the cause—including members of the military stationed in the region. It was possible, and perhaps probable, that Loyalist printers sought

¹⁶ Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” *Tory Insurgents*, 127.

¹⁷ Timothy M. Barnes, “Loyalist Newspapers of the American Revolution, 1763-1783: A Bibliography,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 83, no. 2 (1974), 232-233; Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, esp. Chapter 5.

¹⁸ Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 158-162.

to appease British military leaders and members in their coverage of the London insurrection. Many of the articles in Loyalist newspapers discuss the deployment of troops into London to quash the riots and restore order. Newspapers further reprinted speeches and addresses praising the king for his use of the military to restore peace, emphasizing support for military action. Considering the ongoing mutually beneficial relationship between the British military and Loyalist printers, the coverage of the riots in Loyalist newspapers may have been another chance for Loyalist printers to reassure their multiple readerships about the strength of the British government and military.

From 1778 to 1781, Loyalist newspapers operated for some period of time in Pennsylvania, New York, Georgia, and South Carolina.¹⁹ Of the ten Loyalist newspapers active in the years covered by this study, I have found articles about the Catholic Relief Acts, Lord George, the Gordon Riots, and/or their fallout in six.²⁰ Yet not all were printing regularly during this time, as Loyalist newspapers' ability to function was impacted by infrastructure concerns and proximity to battles. As a result, newspapers in areas under longer British control, such as New York City, were more prevalent compared to newspapers printed in areas under siege during the particular campaigns of the war. Despite these limitations on Loyalist newspapers, the papers that were actively printing offer insight into Loyalist and Patriot printers' differences in interpretation and utilization

¹⁹ A list of Loyalist Newspapers actively printing about the riots and related events/individuals is included in the appendix. The date range reflects the year in which the CRA was enacted (1778) through the years of protest and riots (1779-1780) to the final year of attention to Gordon Riots related events, the trial of Lord George Gordon in 1781.

From here, *The New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* will be referred to as *The New-York Gazette*, while the *South-Carolina and American General Gazette* will be referred to as the *South-Carolina Gazette*.

²⁰ Timing is the primary explanation of this occurrence. Three newspapers from Philadelphia (*Pennsylvania Evening Post*, *Pennsylvania Ledger*, and *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette*) all ceased publications or ceased to be operated by Loyalists by May 1778, when the British military left Philadelphia. A majority of news about Lord George and the Catholic Relief Act (which wasn't passed in England until May 1778) circulated in the US later in the year and into subsequent years.

of the riots.²¹

James Rivington and his *Royal Gazette* (New York) was by far the most prolific publisher on materials related to the Gordon Riots, with issues related to the insurrection featured in over 30 issues. This is not entirely surprising, as Rivington was the “Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty” and as such would avidly print materials on behalf of the military leadership in the occupied city.²² While his involvement as a spy with the Culper Spy Ring has come to light more recently, his newspaper demonstrated strong Loyalist bona fides, perhaps as part of a cover for his clandestine activities.²³ 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 perception that he was a dogged Loyalist. That also meant that his newspaper would need to appeal to a Loyalist readership—military and civilian alike—by continuing to reflect their interpretation of events and values. The events of the Gordon Riots thereby gave Rivington a way to perform as a Loyalist, a performance that

²¹ Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” *Tory Insurgents*, 127; Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, chap. 5. In addition to contemporary events that impacted the ability to print, loss of newspapers due to inadequate archiving or other factors could account for the small number of newspapers still in existence. For more information on the British military’s southern campaign, see Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 352-364.

²² Rivington proudly displayed his status as “Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty” in his masthead, which also included the royal coat of arms.

²³ 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). For more information on James Rivington as a Loyalist printer, see Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America with a Biograph of Printers & an Account of Newspapers* (New York: Weathervane Books, 1970), 478-480, 508-511; Robert M. Calhoun and Timothy M. Barnes, “Moral Allegiance: John Witherspoon and Loyalist Recantation,” *Tory Insurgents*, 321-22; Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 161-163

necessitated that he convey an interpretation that Loyalists would accept and find useful.

While Rivington was the most active Loyalist printer reporting on the Gordon Riots and associated events, other Loyalist printers demonstrated similar commitment to interpreting the riots in a way to give Loyalists hope and confirm their values. The Robertson brothers, James and Alexander, printed variations of “royal gazettes” in New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, and at various times and in various locations held British government printing contracts during the war.²⁴ Hugh Gaine, who in the early years of the war attempted to stay neutral and print for both sides, ultimately published more Loyalist-leaning, albeit moderate, materials in his *New-York Gazette*. Gaine’s embrace of moderate loyalism is interesting, considering that he was New York’s official printer for numerous years prior to the outbreak of war.²⁵ John Wells Jr., printer of the *South-Carolina Gazette*, had commanded a Patriot militia during Sir Henry Clinton’s siege of Charleston, but the capture of the city by the British and the “opportunity to maintain a more comfortable political position” led to Wells operating the *South-Carolina Gazette* as a Loyalist paper.²⁶ Despite their differences, each of these printers published accounts of Lord George, the riots named for him, and their aftermath. In their publications, these printers conveyed an interpretation of the insurrection as both a horrific demonstration of the danger of the rebels’ ideas and rhetoric, and confirmation of the strength and

²⁴ Carol Sue Humphrey, “James Robertson (1747-1816), Loyalist printer and journalist,” *American National Biography*, 1 Feb. 2000 (Accessed 1 Apr. 2022) <https://www-anb-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0100785>.

Adelman discusses the various movements of the brothers in relation to the British military, especially when faced with Patriot harassment and threats of violence. See Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 163-164.

²⁵ For more on Hugh Gaine, see Marion Barber Stowell, “Hugh Gaine (1726-1807), printer-editor and bookseller,” *American National Biography*, 1 Feb. 2000 (Accessed 1 Apr. 2022) <https://www-anb-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1602557>; Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” *Tory Insurgents*, 127; Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 160.

²⁶ Barnes, “Loyalist Newspapers,” 235.

superiority of the British government.²⁷

Loyalist writers' private letters range in terms of their reaction to the riots, though those that discuss the riots confirm Loyalist printers' interpretations. The circumstances of the war and the writers' geographical location played a large part in the details that Loyalist writers were willing to commit to paper. For those residing in the American colonies amidst rebelling and vengeful Patriots, expressing joy or fear over the London riots might prompt a Patriot reprisal should the letter fall into the wrong hands.²⁸ Those few Loyalists in America writing to their loved ones, friends, or business partners therefore took risks to commit their reaction to the riots to paper. Loyalists who felt more secure in their safety, either due to their exile in England or the power of their correspondent, could (and did) express their thoughts on political development. Of the various writings I assessed of Loyalists remaining in the rebelling colonies, I could only find one Loyalist letter—from William Smith, former Provost of the College of Pennsylvania—that explicitly discussed and drew meaning from the Gordon Riots.²⁹ While having a different experience from Loyalists who remained in the rebelling colonies, perhaps our best understanding of Loyalists' interpretation of the Gordon Riots comes from memoirs and letters of Loyalists in exile in Britain. Despite no longer living in the rebelling colonies, these individuals had experienced the upheavals in the years prior to and during the early

²⁷ For more generally on Loyalist printers, see Barnes, "Loyalist Newspapers." See also, Alderman, *Revolutionary Networks*; Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Print in America*; Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, "Character and Coherence."

²⁸ Retaliation might include loss of property, imprisonment, or banishment. For a list of the laws enacted to suppress Loyalists, see Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in the American Revolution*, Appendix C.

²⁹ William Smith's letter's location is also quite interesting. It is within the Henry Clinton papers (William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan), as part of a miscellany collection. It's addressed to a mysterious "Madam," but it possibly could have Clinton's mistress, Mary Baddeley, who lived with him in New York during the war (O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 238). This perhaps explains why Smith felt comfortable committing his thoughts to paper, because the recipient was intimately close enough to the highest-ranking British military official.

stages of the war, and were steeped in the Patriot rhetoric and ideology that precipitated declaring independence. Exiles like Samuel Curwen, an Admiralty Judge from Massachusetts, and Thomas Hutchinson and his family offer a window into how Loyalists squared the events of the London insurrection.

In addition to the few writings on the riots from Loyalists in America and in exile, the writings to and from comrades within the British military can help us further triangulate how Loyalists understood the insurrection. General Sir Henry Clinton, the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, who had returned to New York from his conquest of Charleston, South Carolina, received ten letters written in June and July, 1780, from family and associates in London alerting him to the riots.³⁰ These letters may be part of the source base of information upon which Loyalist printers based their reports, helping to inform their interpretation and craft their message to a Loyalist and military readership. While it is unsurprising that friends and family would alert the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces to domestic situations that could impact the war, the significance of Clinton receiving this information is more pronounced considering his relationship with the Loyalist community in New York. Though Clinton was dubious of bringing Loyalists into the military, he nevertheless strove to retain their support and protect them from rebel retaliation.³¹ The riots, which featured notably in a number of letters to Sir Clinton, were almost certainly discussed in his conversations with fellow officers and Loyalist civilians. At the very least, it is plausible that the news of the event invited discussion between Clinton and his officers as to the impact this affair could have on the military. The

³⁰ Henry Clinton papers, William L. Clements Library (WLCL henceforth), The University of Michigan. Letters can be found in vols. 106-110, 112, and Miscellaneous.

³¹ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, chap. 6.

possibility of those discussions spreading beyond Clinton and his associates and making their way to the press is not out of the question.

Creating a narrative is as much about who creates and how, as it is about what the narrative is. The Loyalist influencers, printers in particular, but also people in positions of power or privilege, encountered the news related to the riots from a distinct sociopolitical location. Their experiences, their worldview, and their potential gains all factored into how they interpreted what the events surrounding the insurrection meant for the empire and for themselves. When spreading that interpretation to other Loyalists, they actively took part in a project to reaffirm the Loyalist cause by situating the riots as a symptom of dangerous Patriot ideas and rhetoric, and emphasizing the British government's response as just and celebrating the restoration of proper order to London.

A Sign of Danger, A Sign of Hope – The Loyalist Narrative of the Riots

Loyalists' interpretation of the Gordon Riots was derived as much in what they did not print as in what they did. Both Patriot and Loyalist newspapers used each other as sources, as well as using accounts from newspapers from London, letters shared with the printer, and information from ships' captains and crew.³² While using Patriot newspapers as sources for information, Loyalist newspapers found different messages and lessons from the upheaval that had occurred in London. The editorial decisions over what was included and excluded, therefore, reveals the narrative that printers wanted their readership to grasp. By examining how Loyalist writers portrayed the people and events

³² This is especially evident in the title of articles that appear in the newspapers, where reference was made to the source of the information as context, for example "Extract from Rivington's Royal Gazette" from the *Massachusetts Spy*, 21 September 1780, or "From the Pennsylvania Gazette, August 23" from the *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780. For more on the printers' sources and framing of the news, see Taylor, *Misinformation Nation*, 5-7; Adelman, *Revolutionary Networks*, 5-6.

connected to the London riots, the Loyalist narrative comes into focus. Though Loyalist newspapers were fewer in number than Patriot newspapers, the Loyalist press still shaped the narrative of the event and presented the riots as an example of the dangers of republican ideology—the very same ideology espoused by the Patriots. Further, Loyalist newspapers framed the response of the British government as being just, appropriate, and demonstrative of the superiority of the British system of government. The result was the underlying message to their readership to stay the course and that victory was at hand. For if the British government could suppress the riot and resist challenges to its authority, then surely it would be able to overcome the rebellion in the colonies.

Starting in 1778, Loyalist newspapers published news of British activities that ultimately ended up as prelude to the 1780 riots. Loyalists likely saw these reports of the British political developments, including passage of the 1778 CRA and the response it provoked, as reflective of the dynamics of British politics that could impact the course of the war. Early reports contained brief mentions of Gordon's actions in the House of Commons and speculation that, if a new government was formed by the Opposition, he would have a role.³³ News of passage of the Catholic Relief Act for England, and later Ireland, also circulated, with emphasis on the acts' limited and tolerant nature.³⁴ Framing the English and Irish CRAs in such a manner was necessary as the Loyalists grappled with the Franco-American alliance. In perhaps the most dynamic riots-related Loyalist publication in 1779, Hugh Gainé printed an anonymous letter in his supplemental to the August 2, 1779, issue of the *New-York Gazette*, which vehemently decried the Patriot alliance with the Catholic French. Complaining that this alliance opened the door to

³³ *Royal Gazette*, 14 February 1778; *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette*, 6 March 1778; *Royal Gazette*, 8 July 1778.

³⁴ *Royal Gazette*, 12 August 1778; *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1778.

“receive popery” in British America, the author praised the superiority of the British constitution for preserving liberty in comparison to the American Congress’ lack of divided power, asserting that the “American Congress have ordered matters so that they are vested with absolute power—they can turn the collected strength of the community against any individual, or to any object they please.”³⁵ This supplemental emphasized how the Franco-American alliance revived the issue of Popery in the rhetoric and ideology of the American Revolution. Loyalists could root their decision to remain loyal to the British Protestant empire in this turn of events.³⁶ Additionally, the passage reasserted the superiority of the British constitutional system, which prevented abuses of power—particularly from popular, or democratic, sources. To Loyalists, that system had permitted an enlightened British government to pass laws for limited Catholic toleration, without wholly embracing Popery as their Patriot foes had done.

The letter from this supplemental raised a pointed anti-Popery critique of the Patriot alliance with Catholic France, despite the British government’s own Catholic toleration actions. The dissonance produced by this position perhaps explains why Loyalist newspapers neglected to cover the 1779 anti-Catholic Scottish riots. Patriot newspapers did report on the Scottish riots, reports that Loyalist printers and readers would have been able to access.³⁷ The lack of any mention of the Scottish riots (which had the effect of quashing the passage of a Scottish CRA) was perhaps an attempt to downplay the British government’s push to pass Catholic relief in the empire. By not sharing that such an act was intended for Scotland, the Loyalist press limited the extent of British Catholic

³⁵ *New-York Gazette*, 2 August 1779.

³⁶ See Jones, *Resisting Independence*, 165-175.

³⁷ See chapter 3 for a discussion on the Patriot press coverage of the Scottish riots in 1779.

toleration compared to the embrace that the Franco-American alliance indicated. Ignoring the Scottish riots further demonstrated Loyalist printers' resistance to covering news that might portray the British government in a negative light. While Loyalists had portrayed the English CRA as limited and rational, the mere proposal of a similar act had provoked a violent, anti-Catholic backlash in Scotland. As a result, the British government relented and scrapped the Scottish CRA, demonstrating weakness in the face of popular agitation that might shake confidence in the British government. The Scottish riots, which were small-scale and quashed quickly, were easy to ignore—the same could not be said with the dramatic riots in London just a year later.

One of the most striking ways in which the Loyalist press differed from the Patriot press was in the treatment of Lord George Gordon. To the Patriot press, Lord George had been a figure of interest and respect since mid-1779, with multiple newspaper articles recounting his participation and arguments in Parliamentary debates. In the months leading up to the reports of the outbreak of the riots, the Patriot press revered Lord George for his needling of the ministry in Parliament and his efforts to lessen Parliament's control over Irish trade and commerce—which he and the Patriots saw as demonstrably similar to parliamentary maneuvers preceding the American rebellion.

Unsurprisingly, the Loyalists viewed Lord George in a very different light. While Gordon's name appeared first in Loyalist newspapers stateside, these papers gave his actions considerably less attention. The first Loyalist newspapers to mention Gordon, the *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette* and the *Royal Gazette* in 1778, merely listed his name among many other opposition politicians who might be appointed to cabinet positions in a shake-up of

the government (that never came to pass).³⁸ Gordon resurfaced briefly in 1779 in Loyalist reporting on House of Commons debates that linked him with opposition figures such as Charles James Fox, John Wilkes, and James Lutterel.³⁹ After these brief mentions, Loyalist newspapers ignored Gordon until July 19, 1780, when the *South-Carolina Gazette* printed a brief mention of Gordon's unsuccessful attempt to use parliamentary procedures to stop Lord North's tax raising measures from going forward.⁴⁰ These first appearances of Gordon's name in the Loyalist newspapers were over four months after the Patriot press had begun to print detailed accounts of his actions within and outside of Parliament, and indicated Loyalists' opinion of his relative significance. That a paper such as the *Royal Gazette*, which often reprinted articles from Patriot newspapers, had not featured Lord George or his advocacy clearly demonstrated the editorial decision making of its printer, James Rivington. As a member more aligned with the opposition and sympathetic towards Patriot grievances, Loyalists hardly identified with Gordon's outspokenness.

Gordon's omission was continued in the *Royal Gazette's* first account of the riots on August 23, 1780. The first reports of "a commotion having arisen in London" merely mentioned that the insurgents were "headed by a noble Lord, brother to a noble Duke," but did not identify either figure by name.⁴¹ The ambiguity of which noble lord was leading the insurrection fit with the Loyalist newspapers' tendency to diminish the prominence of Lord George in British politics, likely because of his outspoken criticism of the British government's handling of the war.⁴²

³⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 14 February 1778; *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette*, 6 March 1778.

³⁹ *Royal Gazette*, 20 February 1779; *Royal Gazette*, 26 June 1779.

⁴⁰ *South Carolina Gazette*, 19 July 1780.

⁴¹ *Royal Gazette*, 23 August 1780.

⁴² See Dominic Green, "George Gordon: a biographical reassessment," in Haywood and Seed, eds., *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge

Yet the identity of the “noble Lord” did not remain obscure for long. The August 26 edition of the *Royal Gazette* included two different reports on the riots and their fallout, the first of which mentioned Lord George explicitly and labeled him a “mad man” who should be “put in a straight jacket” for his part in kindling the violence.⁴³ This theme of Gordon’s madness would become a trope critics and even those sympathetic to him would associate with Lord George throughout his life. Even prior to the riots themselves, his behavior elicited accusations of madness, with exiled Thomas Hutchinson commenting in his diary in early 1780 that Gordon “behaved like a madman” for reading aloud an over one-hundred-page pamphlet on Irish affairs during a parliamentary debate.⁴⁴ Pennsylvania Loyalist William Smith echoed this accusation of insanity when writing about the riots in a letter from August 24, 1780. Smith opined that the riots would “I suppose, soon evaporate in smoke, as their leader, Lord George has in some of his late speeches in parliament rather discovered marks of insanity.”⁴⁵ Smith’s information likely was drawn from Patriot newspaper accounts, as they printed speeches from Lord George in their publications in Philadelphia. That Smith found the specific information relevant and drew his conclusions about Gordon’s sanity despite his sources likely being Patriot newspapers demonstrates how Loyalists read and interpreted events to suit their worldview. Labeling the participants and leaders as insane, moreover, reflected rhetoric and concerns across

University Press, 2012), 246-249.

⁴³ *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1780. A word for word version of this report appeared in numerous Patriot newspapers on or after August 26. What is striking is that the Patriot newspapers identified the extract as coming from letter from Thomas Irving of London to John Cruden, the commissioner of sequestered estates, in New York whereas the *Royal Gazette* omitted this information. The contextualization that the Patriot newspapers gave this extract framed it as being from the viewpoint of the British/Loyalists and therefore differentiated it from Patriot opinion; while the lack of contextualization on the *Royal Gazette*’s part presented the extract as conforming with Loyalist interpretations of the events and those involved. For Patriot newspapers with this same extract, see *Providence Gazette*, 26 August 1780; *Maryland Journal*, 29 August 1780; *Massachusetts Spy*, 31 August 1780; *Independent Ledger*, 18 September 1780.

⁴⁴ Hutchinson, *Diary and Letters of Thomas Hutchinson*, 330;

⁴⁵ William Smith to “Madam,” 24 August 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL.

the political spectrum about the sanity of actions during the American Revolution. As historian Sarah Swedberg argues, “men and women deployed the language of insanity to create boundaries between those considered friends and those considered enemies.”⁴⁶ Loyalists had painted Patriots as madmen in the lead-up to independence, and it appeared that now London had to contend with a man infected with that same madness.⁴⁷

Loyalist printers also noted Gordon’s age and political ideology in their attempt to explain the events of the Gordon Riots. In the same August 26 issue of the *Royal Gazette*, a second article relayed information from a letter from London explaining that “the young Lord, who headed the Republican Mob in London, had been seized” and was being held in custody.⁴⁸ Though denied explicit reference, this brief passage made two important conjectures to the Loyalist readership: that Gordon’s age—he was twenty-eight at the time of the riots—may have had some influence on his actions, and that the mob was republican. The association of youth and republicanism reflected Loyalist criticism of the Patriots for their petulance and attempt to upset the proper social order.⁴⁹ Through both direct and indirect mention, the Loyalist press had begun crafting Gordon’s portrayal in ways that diminished the legitimacy of his concerns and could be used as a parable of what would befall those pursuing the Patriot agenda. The shared madness of Lord George and the Patriots for pursuing ideology that was dangerous and paved the way for mob rule contrasted with Loyalists’ ideology that embraced calm, considered, and ordered societal

⁴⁶ Sarah L. Swedberg, *Liberty and Insanity in the Age of the American Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 4.

⁴⁷ Swedberg, *Liberty and Insanity*, 77-105.

⁴⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1780.

⁴⁹ For more on the Loyalist criticisms of Patriots as republican, petulant, and ungrateful, see Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” *Tory Insurgents*, 128-149; Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, 18-22.

structures.

Loyalist newspapers' subsequent reports of Lord George built upon this portrayal in carefully crafted ways. In a nearly full-page recounting of the riots, the *Royal Gazette's* September 2 issue attributed the source for its reporting, in large type font at the beginning of the article, as being "From the Pennsylvania Gazette, August 23."⁵⁰ Clearly identifying the source as a known Patriot newspaper assuaged any inherent sympathy towards Lord George and his intentions, implicitly attributing such sympathy as connected to Patriot ideology.⁵¹ This attribution would also explain the relatively soft criticism that was levied at Lord George later in the article, when his conduct "rather abetted the mob than endeavoured to appease them" by informing the crowd of what was happening in the House of Commons.⁵² The article criticized Gordon for not having the foresight that his speeches and appeals to the crowd would morph into violence, an unintended consequence of his zeal for his convictions. Loyalists, however, interpreted this criticism as ironic considering that Patriot beliefs and demands had enflamed hostilities and provoked war. When they were finally suppressed, would Patriots also try to claim that their leaders had not foreseen the tumult that their incendiary language and beliefs would bring about? Loyalists were skeptical of Gordon's claim that he did not intend for his

⁵⁰ *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780.

⁵¹ An interesting point of contention arises from the subtitle to the *Royal Gazette* article, which reads "*The following intelligence is taken from English Prints found on board the Mercury Packet, Capt. Dillon.*" In the fourteen Patriot newspapers I found that printed a portion or all of the same story, none of them mention English newspapers as the source of the information. Most, including the earliest Patriot printing I found, attribute the source as from an "Extract of a letter from Toulon," (e.g. *Pennsylvania Journal*, 16 August 1780; *Providence Gazette*, 2 September 1780), while others give no attributing information (*Virginia Gazette*, 6 September 1780). The inclusion of the subtitle by the *Royal Gazette* may be an attempt to confirm that the incredible riots did in fact happen, despite the suspect source that could benefit from (false) reports of London tearing itself apart. The seemingly conflicting title and subtitle alerted the Loyalist readership that the events did occur, but that they readership should be aware of Patriot bias in the depiction. For more on the use of headings to convey particular messages to readers, see Taylor, *Misinformation Nation*, 6-8, 67-86.

⁵² *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780.

rhetoric and activities to propel the mob to violence, and the Patriot press' inclusion of criticism of Lord George only furthered Loyalists' opinion that the Patriots were hypocritical for not recognizing the inherent similarities between Gordon's actions and their own.

Lord George remained a presence in the Loyalist newspapers after the most sustained period of detailed reporting of the riots from late August through mid-September. However, while Patriot newspapers were interested in all news about Gordon in the subsequent months—from the process involved in arresting him for high treason to his treatment in the Tower of London—the Loyalist papers were more restrained in their printing of Gordon's treatment following the riot. The *New-York Gazette's* September 4, 1780, issue contained two separate mentions of Lord George, both of which reported, amidst news that rioters were being tried and executed, that Gordon's trial was set to commence.⁵³ The succinct treatment of Lord George was echoed in New York's *Royal American Gazette's* October 10 issue, which related (incorrectly) only that “[t]he trial of Lord George Gordon had commenced, and it was imagined the issue would be known in a few days after the Hope sailed.”⁵⁴ The Privy Council's examination of Lord George was placed in the same article following the king's proclamation deploying the military to restore order, juxtaposing the display of power by the king with the cowing and arrest of the figurehead of the riots.⁵⁵

The *New-York Gazette* and the *South-Carolina Gazette* further asserted Gordon's

⁵³ *The New-York Gazette*, 4 September 1780. These succinct mentions of Gordon's trial being set to commence were also echoed a month later in the *South-Carolina Gazette*, 4 October 1780, and 7 October 1780.

⁵⁴ *Royal American Gazette*, 10 October 1780.

⁵⁵ *Royal Gazette*, 16 September 1780.

relationship to the riots in a November article which referred to “Lord G. Gordon’s mob”—thereby assigning him responsibility of all their actions. This reference was included in a report about a loyal address given to the king that had irritated the “republicans.”⁵⁶ An explanation of the government’s rationale for indicting Lord George with high treason, “under the clause in the act of levying war against the King,” was printed in a November issue of the *Royal Gazette*, with an issue later in the month explaining the legal reasons for the delay in his trial.⁵⁷ By the end of 1780, the Loyalist press had presented Lord George as a Patriot conspirator and as embodying ideals that could sew discord in society while also highlighting the necessity for and praise of the British government’s actions to restore and maintain order.

The Loyalist version of Lord George was not the only difference in interpretation between the Loyalist and Patriot press. The content and breadth of newspaper coverage of the riots underscored Loyalists principles and allegiance to the British crown.⁵⁸ The first Loyalist article on the riots, printed in the *Royal Gazette*, succinctly relayed the major events of the riots. Attributing its information to reports from passengers recently arrived in New York, Rivington concluded by admitting that there might be errors in the details but that the newspaper would endeavor to correct them when possible. Ending the article in such a way revealed Rivington’s skepticism about the scale and seriousness of the riots.⁵⁹ The *Royal Gazette*’s second article on the riots confirmed the spectacular news from the prior issue, reporting about the “mob raised by Republicans in London” by extracting information from an unattributed June 7 letter. In this article, the author ended his account

⁵⁶ *The New-York Gazette*, 6 November 1780; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 29 November 1780.

⁵⁷ *Royal Gazette*, 4 November 1780; *Royal Gazette*, 18 November 1780.

⁵⁸ Potter-MacKinnon and Calhoun, “Character and Coherence,” *Tory Insurgents*.

⁵⁹ *Royal Gazette*, 23 August 1780.

of the riots by expressing pleasure that the “*popular resentment is directed full as much against many of the Leaders in opposition, as against the Ministry.*”⁶⁰ While in the first of the *Royal Gazette*’s August articles, Rivington conveyed his doubts about the veracity of the claims, in the second article he relayed relief that the rioters aimed their ire at both the Ministry *and* Opposition. The possibility of exaggeration or incorrect information lessened the potential for Loyalists to lose faith in the British government, while also helping to assert that however large the disturbance was, it did not seek to replace the Ministry with the Opposition.

With more information circulating to confirm the spectacular riots did in fact take place, Loyalist printers continued to mediate the truth for the information they passed along to their readers. The September 2 issue of the *Royal Gazette* made it emphatically clear in its printing that their report had been taken from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 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 by Rivington to give credence to the incredible story while also absolving any criticism of the British government as the result of Patriot bias.⁶¹ The report began by detailing the Protestant Association’s mass protest and delivery of their petition. Loyalists would attribute to Patriot bias the article’s excuse that the size of the crowd, and not their purpose, made the crowd too difficult to maintain the proper decorum and led to its devolution into violence and destruction. This article’s sympathetic treatment, however, was tempered by lines

⁶⁰ *Royal Gazette*, 26 August 1780.

⁶¹ *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780. For more on the discrepancies on this subheading, see n.17 above.

admonishing the crowd for its impediment of what should be “dearer to every Englishman, the freedom of debate in parliament” that Loyalists would have attributed to the British press. 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.⁶²

To Loyalist readers, the statement reflected the very concerns they had about the dangers of the democracy that they believed was at the heart of the Patriot cause.⁶³ It was not the tyranny of the crown or government that was a threat to the liberty of a people, but that of the democracy under the sway of a zealous leader or fanatical idea. Indeed, in his letters the exiled Samuel Curwen made a striking observation that linked the rioters to the ideology and organization of the American Patriots. Curwen’s July 15 letter to William Pynchon recounted the rioters’ attack on Sir George Saville’s house, noting that his 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.”⁶⁴ Curwen’s comparison of the rioters

⁶² *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780.

⁶³ Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, 25-36; 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.

⁶⁴ Samuel Curwen, *Journal and Letters of the Late Samuel Curwen, Judge of Admiralty: An American Refugee in England, from 1775-1784*, George Atkinson Ward, ed. (New York: C.S. Francis, 1842), 256, HathiTrust. Emphasis mine.

to the sons of liberty is telling—in his mind, both groups violently asserted their cause in a fervor of misguided “patriotism.” Curwen’s connections were mirrored in a speech from Colonel Roberts to the House of Commons, printed by the *Royal Gazette* in 1781, which placed blame on the Opposition for both the rebellion in America and the riots in London. In his speech, Roberts claimed that the Opposition had “by art and clamour within doors, and with the assistance of a large party, inspired with republican principles without doors, been the authors of all our misfortunes.”⁶⁵ Linking the rebellions both in America and in London dovetailed with Loyalists’ analyses, particularly as they shared the theme of the dangerous spread of subversive ideology. 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 and Opposition ministers spurring on the war.

The danger of the crowd confirmed, Loyalists turned their focus to the actions of the British government to restore peace and order to the anarchic city. In doing so, Loyalists emphasized the government’s strength and the legality of its actions. In reaction to the “lawless proceedings of the mob,” the Privy Council had met on June 5 to encourage the king to “instantly issue a proclamation” to quell the mob and bring to trial and make an example of those instigating the disturbances.⁶⁶ In the *Royal Gazette’s* account, the government met the continued violence of the mob with the legal, though undefined, use of power to suppress the insurrection (though no mention was made of ordering troops to fire-at-will on the crowd). This resolution was less clear-cut, however, in the account of the *South-Carolina Gazette*, which printed a forceful assertion that the king and his Privy

⁶⁵ *Royal Gazette*, 25 July 1781.

⁶⁶ *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780.

Council had stopped short of declaring the more devastating and rights-stripping martial law. “Had Martial Law taken place, a Provost Marshall would have been appointed, whose authority supersedes all law, the Courts would have been shut, and publick Proclamation made to apprise every person of so momentous an alteration in the situation of life, liberty, and property,” the paper related.⁶⁷ Whether the king utilized martial law or not, the important point was that the government was successful in restoring order. The *Royal Gazette* reported that detachments of the military were brought into London to disperse the mob, while the *South-Carolina Gazette* highlighted the king’s post-riots address to the House of Lords and the Lords’ praiseful response.⁶⁸ With the encampment of the military in Hyde Park and St. James’ Park and swift suppression of the mob, and an appropriate and limited use of force to do so, the government proved its strength and righteousness. Loyalist newspapers, in detailing the government’s actions in response to the riots, sought to remind their readers that the British government remained stable and capable in the face of threats abroad and at home.

This reassurance of the British government’s power and ability was reflected in the letters to Sir Henry Clinton, which may have made it into Loyalist newspapers operating under the protection and support of the British military, such as the *Royal Gazette* and the *South-Carolina Gazette*. In a June 24, 1780, letter from Earl Charles Grey to Clinton containing enclosed newspapers giving details about the riots, Grey specifically noted that the riots “occasioned Martial Law to be proclaimed,” a contrast to the reports in the *South-Carolina Gazette*.⁶⁹ A letter to Clinton from Richard Cox, dated June 26, 1780, similarly

⁶⁷ *South-Carolina Gazette*, 13 September 1780.

⁶⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 2 September 1780; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 13 September 1780.

⁶⁹ Earl Charles Grey to Sir Henry Clinton, 24 June 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL, 106:17. For more on the debate of whether the king enacted martial law, see chapter 1.

shared the details of the riots and the destruction they caused. Cox stated that the news of Clinton's conquest of Charleston "raise[d] our spirits," while the city was under threat from the mob, a sentiment echoed by most letters sent to Clinton about the riots.⁷⁰ The letters also demonstrated the similarities between American Loyalists and British subjects to seek motivation from across the Atlantic to continue the war. While Loyalists found it in the power of the British government to suppress the rebels in London, British subjects reveled in the optimism provided by the conquest of Charleston. Loyalists viewed the British government's quashing of the riots as the triumph of order over anarchy, and the inclusion of the legal rationale to use a proclamation rather than martial law as confirmation of the justness of the British government. The crown and Privy Council worked together to restore order to London, and to Loyalists the prevailing of the British government over the agitated rebellion offered hope that the same would happen in America—just as Charleston provided hope to the British under mob attack.

The Loyalist press diverged further from their Patriot counterparts in their coverage of the rioters' capture, prosecutions, and sentences. Whereas a number of Patriot newspapers had printed facts about those tried and executed for their participation in the riots, perhaps in an effort to humanize them, the Loyalist newspapers tended to emphasize the swift and severe punishment of the convicted rioters to reinforce the consequences of this rebellious behavior and the danger it posed to the ordered and safe society.⁷¹ The *New-*

⁷⁰ Richard Cox to Sir Henry Clinton, 26 June 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL, 106:23. For other letters to Clinton noting the news of Charleston boosted spirits, see William Fraser to Sir Henry Clinton, 27 June 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL, 106:39; [Unknown] to Sir Henry Clinton, 19 July 1780, Henry Clinton Papers, WLCL, 112:37.

⁷¹ The interest in the trials may also be a deviation from usual printing practices and reflect both Loyalist and Patriot continued interest in the outcome of the Gordon Riots. In my perusal of newspapers, while primarily looking for Gordon Riots related materials, I have yet to encounter reports in these newspapers on other trials of non-prominent people. No regular reports about the happenings at the Old Bailey. Even in the aftermath of the Admiral Keppel trial, in which there were limited riots, I have yet to see any reports

York Gazette's first issue to report about the trials—which also happened to be the first issue of this newspaper to discuss the riots in any form—contained the information within two separate, brief updates about the affairs in London. “A great many offenders in the late riot, are daily apprehended who will be tried and made a proper example of by way of attonement to an injured nation,” the newspaper reported in one article; while another in the same issue stated “[t]he trials of the rioters have already commenced and many of them will be executed.”⁷² The orderly judicial proceedings to which these two articles attested conflicted with an eye-witness report from Loyalist Samuel Rogers in his June 9 letter to his business partner, Joseph Taylor. Rogers relayed starting on June 7, the military “fired without scruple, at every party of Rioters they met with & have killed in different places & times about Seventy on the spot.” More shockingly, Rogers reported that “several others have been hang’d to day,” conveying that the military engaged in extrajudicial hanging.⁷³ But while Rogers shared these details privately with his business partner, nothing of the sort made its way into Loyalist newspapers. Such information would have undercut the notion of the British government and its agents acted legally.

The Loyalist press instead focused on repeating the message that the British government fairly prosecuted the rioters involved in the riots, seeking justice, not retribution. The *New-York Gazette* printed a fairly detailed recount of the sentencing of the convicted rioters, including listing their names and what they were convicted of doing during the riots.⁷⁴ This article began by relating the judge’s speech to the convicts, in which

about trials for those rioters (whereas the trial and acquittal of Admiral Keppel did make some North American newspapers).

⁷² *The New-York Gazette*, 4 September 1780.

⁷³ Samuel Rogers to Joseph Taylor, 9 June 1780, Lovering-Taylor Families Papers, Box 2, General Correspondence 1780-81, Library of Congress.

⁷⁴ *The New-York Gazette*, 18 September 1780.

he chastised them for their endangerment of “the peace, the property and even the lives of many of the inhabitants of this city, and rendered it more like a town delivered into the hands of the enemy to be sacked and pillaged, than one that remained under the authority of a well ordered Government.”⁷⁵ To ensure the safety of the community, “examples should be made for the preservation of their peace in the future,” the judge asserted. The themes that the judge used in his sentencing of the convicted rioters resonated with the Loyalists. Such egregious actions threatened the safety of the public and the ability of the government to function and required severe punishment.

Indeed, Samuel Curwen echoed this feeling in his August 4 diary entry, when he “walked forth to view the ruins” from the riots, commenting that on his return to the inn where he was staying he was “filled with honest but fervid indignation, which ought to warm the breast of every peaceable well wisher to order, laws, safety, and the rights of individuals.”⁷⁶ Curwen’s writings coincided with the judge’s speech to the convicted rioters and the message that Loyalist printers across the Atlantic would construct: the riots were an affront to order, part of the same ideology as the most fervent Patriots. With the Patriot rebellion similarly threatening the safety of society and the structure of the British Empire, punishment of the rebels after the resolution of the war would be the only way to ensure peace in the future. Loyalists viewed the trial and sentencing of rioters as the likely template for Patriots following the conclusion of the war. Certainly once the British military was successful in snuffing out the rebellion, trials and executions of those rebels involved in key positions or committing egregious acts against Loyalists would provide justice and

⁷⁵ *The New-York Gazette*, 18 September 1780.

⁷⁶ Curwen, *Journal and Letters*, 261.

prevent further acts of violence and rebellion.

While *The New-York Gazette* centered its reporting on the riots to the punishment of those involved in the event, other Loyalist newspapers emphasized the unflappability of the British government and the support it received from the British public in the wake of the riots. The *South-Carolina Gazette* featured a letter from the City of London expressing its “most sincere and perpetual thanks” for “paternal care shewn” to the city in suppressing the riots, thereby affirming the approval of the civil government of the king’s extension of power.⁷⁷ 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 nation, “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-sympathizing Britons to protest the measures, but instead resulted in “the thanks of the great city.”⁷⁸

This message was echoed in the *Royal Gazette*’s October 14 issue, wherein a summation of news from the packet ship and its captain led the printer to report that “the nation was restored to perfect tranquility; the hands of Government greatly strengthened, and the King’s behaviour has covered him with HONOUR, his Majesty is now more than ever the delight of his good subjects.”⁷⁹ The *New-York Gazette* continued this theme by

⁷⁷ *South-Carolina Gazette*, 18 October 1780.

⁷⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 6 September 1780.

⁷⁹ *Royal Gazette*, 14 October 1780.

printing an address from some 1700 London inhabitants thanking the king for his protection “at a time when our lives, property, and everything dear to us, were in such danger, from the violence of the most outrageous banditti that ever existed.”⁸⁰ This address commended the king for his constraint and moderation in the execution of the law and demonstrated that the king had the support and approval of his subjects in his extension of power. The Loyalist newspapers provided their readership reason to continue supporting the British government by printing letters and articles that emphasized the firmness of and public support for the British government.

The Loyalist press portrayed the strength of the British government by highlighting the crown and Parliament performing their constitutional roles in response to the riots. Rather than see Parliament as having caved to a power-hungry monarch, as the Patriot press had, the Loyalist press relished in the cooperation between Parliament and the crown as each performed their constitutional duties. These articles emphasized the division of power between the executive and legislative functions that Britons and Loyalists contended made their constitution superior. For instance, the *Royal Gazette* and the *South-Carolina Gazette* printed the king’s late June address to the House of Lords after the riots had been suppressed, in which the king stated that the level of violence so overwhelmed civil authority that he found himself “obligated, by every tie of duty and affection to [his] people, to suppress” the insurrection “by the most effectual and immediate application of the force entrusted to [him] by Parliament.”⁸¹

The *Royal American Gazette* printed in its October 26 issue the speech of Lord

⁸⁰ *New-York Gazette*, 23 October 1781.

⁸¹ *Royal Gazette*, 13 September 1780; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 13 September 1780, 16 September 1780.

Loughborough on the laws related to rioting and property destruction, which stressed the fairness of British laws towards the guilty and innocent alike. Loughborough ended by arguing “there cannot be a greater proof of the excellence of that Constitution, than by administering its benefits to all men indifferently.”⁸² By printing various speeches from government officials and bodies acting justly and legally, the Loyalist press reminded their readers of the strength and superiority of the British constitution. For Loyalists, the British constitution was perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to remain loyal. The stories that the Loyalist press featured showed the British government to be stalwart, cooperative, and impervious to threats against its power and authority while also fairly treating its subjects. Coming through the insurrection in London, reestablishing order, and returning to the routine operations of state was proof positive that the British government was superior because it was measured and guided by a just constitution.⁸³

In one similarity with the Patriots, Loyalist printers also referred back to the English Civil War to draw meaning from the riots. But while Patriots drew positive parallels and connections, the Loyalists were far more concerned with the chaos and disorder from that time. The October 14, 1780, issue of the *South-Carolina Gazette* printed an article from London that compared the recent riots to those in the “fanatical days of Cromwell,” asserting the necessity of remaining vigilant against “embers” that could ignite the country into chaos.⁸⁴ This caution reveals that, despite the overall hope that Loyalists

⁸² *Royal American Gazette*, 26 October 1780. Alexander Wedderburn was ennobled as Lord Loughborough in June 1780 and made Chief Justice of the Common Pleas. Before his elevation to peerage, Wedderburn was the Attorney General, and advised the king, as part of his Privy Council, to order troops to fire-at-will to suppress the riots. He also was a staunch hawk in terms of the American War. See Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004), 102-103.

⁸³ For more on Loyalists and the British constitution, see Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, 116-118.

⁸⁴ *South-Carolina Gazette*, 14 October 1780.

felt about the strength of the British government, there remained some level of persistent fear that the government was not strong enough to withstand the challenges both domestically and imperially. Using English history as a guide, Loyalists knew that Cromwell and his “fanatical” supporters had won, and that England was briefly a republic. Constitutional monarchy returned, however, and was strengthened further in the Glorious Revolution. Still, it was necessary to “guard against the same poisons” which “have already discovered themselves still more virulent.”⁸⁵ It was not enough to simply continue forward while basking in the recent successes of the government. The article served as a reminder: the British government was strong, but it was not impervious.

As the story of the riots moved into 1781, the Loyalist press asserted the British government’s superiority through their coverage of the trial of Lord George for high treason. The Loyalist press carefully relayed the most pertinent information about the government’s prosecution of Gordon, emphasizing adherence to the legal process for a man who fomented an insurrection. From the onset of the year, Loyalist printers were more deliberate than their Patriot counterparts in their approach to Gordon and his impending trial. A *New-York Gazette* article from February 19, 1781, merely related that a “Bill of Indictment was found by the Grand Jury,” while a January 13, 1781, article from the *South-Carolina Gazette* contained slightly more information on the issuing of a bill of indictment for high treason against Gordon and related the arraignment process.⁸⁶ The *South-Carolina Gazette* article, which would later be picked up by Patriot newspapers, established for the Loyalist readership that due process was being afforded to Gordon.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *South-Carolina Gazette*, 14 October 1780.

⁸⁶ *New-York Gazette*, 19 February 1781; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 13 January 1781.

⁸⁷ This article was reprinted in the following Patriot presses: *Norwich Packet*, 1 March 1781; *Independent Chronicle*, 8 March 1781; *Independent Ledger*, 9 April 1781.. Further, the *New-Jersey Gazette*’s March 28 article

The *Royal Gazette* in New York further demonstrated this fair treatment of Lord George while imprisoned in the Tower, noting that he had the “liberty of walking where he pleases,” even if continually accompanied by a guard.⁸⁸ Loyalists witnessed this freedom of movement for someone charged with such a significant crime as further proof of the fairness of the British justice system. Yet the *Royal Georgia Gazette* also noted that, while fair in process, the significance of the charge against Lord George resulted in the government creating a “special commission... under the great seal of Great Britain for the purpose of trying Lord George Gordon.”⁸⁹ This article signaled to Loyalists that the British government was serious in pursuing justice for the riots.

The Loyalist printers’ attention to the pre-trial process and imprisonment of Lord George differed sharply from their coverage of the trial itself. The Loyalist newspapers were some of the first newspapers in America to print the news of Gordon’s trial and acquittal. But whereas many of the Patriot newspapers relished the details of the trial, the Loyalist press was restrained in their recounting of the trial and outcome—if they did so at all. The *Royal Gazette* first reported the news of the verdict on April 25, relating that “the Jury, after an absence of three quarters of an hour, pronounced his Lordship *not guilty*,” after which Lord George thanked the jury and contended that it had “been a wicked prosecution.”⁹⁰ Loyalists would have found Gordon’s lack of humility unsurprising for the

printed a more comprehensive version of this report, including the directions from the justice to the grand jury and the legal discussions following the indictment that revealed atypical legal proceedings in the appointment of Gordon’s lawyer. That the *South-Carolina Gazette* printed the first and more limited report would be read by a Loyalist readership differently from that of a Patriot readership with the different contextualization of the treatment of Lord George by the British justice system.

⁸⁸ *Royal Gazette*, 17 January 1781.

⁸⁹ *Royal Georgia Gazette*, 1 February 1781. For more on the seriousness of “Special Commissions,” see Douglas Hay, “Property, Authority, and the Criminal Law,” *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*, Douglas Hay, et. al., eds (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 31-32.

⁹⁰ *Royal Gazette*, 25 April 1781.

“madman,” and perhaps similar to the hubris displayed by Patriots in pursuing independence. The *Royal Georgia Gazette* gave an even more concise report of the trial, distilling the event into one sentence: “The trial of Lord George Gordon for High Treason came on at Westminster Hall on Monday morning the 4th of February last, and next morning, at five o’clock, the Jury gave their verdict ‘*Not Guilty*.’”⁹¹ The *South-Carolina Gazette* appears to have not even reported the trial of Lord George, let alone the verdict.⁹²

By far the most comprehensive of the Loyalist newspaper accounts of the trial was that of the April 30 *New-York Gazette*, which spanned a column and a half describing the arguments put forth by the Attorney General and Gordon’s counsel.⁹³ Significantly, this account related the government’s attempt to link Lord George to the riots that ensued from his actions and rhetoric. Gordon’s counsel refuted the charges by accusing the Attorney General of “illiberal conduct” in his prosecution.⁹⁴ The article weighted favor towards the government by implying that their case was based upon more solid evidence whereas Gordon’s defense resorted to undercutting the conduct and character of the prosecution.

Loyalist newspaper coverage of the trial concluded on May 30, when the *Royal Gazette* printed an excerpt from a speech of one of Gordon’s attorneys, in which the “great and venerable Magistrate” The article praised Lord Mansfield and complimented him for “without adverting to the partiality, not unjustly imputed to men of our country, a man

⁹¹ *Royal Georgia Gazette*, 26 April 1781. (emphasis original)

⁹² Though the newspaper did not print any article on the trial or verdict of Lord George, the *South-Carolina Gazette* did feature an article in its July 4-7 edition that specifically mentions featuring news from the Philadelphia papers from June, when many papers were printing about the trial and the verdict. This indicates a deliberate decision not to report on the trial outcome.

⁹³ *New-York Gazette*, 30 April 1781.

⁹⁴ *New-York Gazette*, 30 April 1781.

whom any country might be proud.”⁹⁵ Publication of this praise by the defense counsel reaffirmed the fairness and impartiality of the British justice system, and countered Patriot claims from years prior about the inability to receive a fair trial in Great Britain. Mansfield, after all, had been a victim of the riots. To have then presided justly over the trial of the person accused of fomenting the riots proved to Loyalists the impartiality of the British judicial system. The Loyalist newspaper coverage of the trial and acquittal of Lord George was in sharp contrast to that of the Patriot press. Though more concise, the articles affirmed the Loyalists belief that the British justice system was fair, treating even a rabble-rouser such as Lord George with due process.

Post-trial coverage in the Loyalist press waned even more than the diminished attention by the Patriot press, although Lord George did make occasional appearances into 1782.⁹⁶ Yet while the Loyalist press’ post-trial coverage of the aftermath of the Gordon Riots was certainly limited, the framing continued to cement the narrative of the fairness of the British government and the continued support it received from its citizens.⁹⁷ For Loyalists, this was a message that resonated as they came to grips with the loss at Yorktown and what the future might hold for them. Whether they would remain or leave America, Loyalists hoped that the British government’s fairness would be reflected in their treatment when the British negotiated peace with the American Patriots.

⁹⁵ *Royal Gazette*, 30 May 1781.

⁹⁶ Loyalist newspapers were also diverted by coverage of the Battle of Yorktown and other skirmishes in the South. But their lack of attention to Lord George or the Gordon Riots aftermath also reflects the parallel desire of the British and Loyalists to move past the events and towards the completion of the war. For examples of Gordon’s appearance in Loyalist newspapers in 1782, see: *Royal Gazette*, 23 January 1782, *Royal Gazette*, 6 March 1782; *Royal Gazette*, 17 August 1782.

⁹⁷ Some of the post-trial Loyalist issues that continue this narrative include: *Royal Georgia Gazette*, 20 September 1781; *Royal Gazette*, 25 July 1781.

A Useful Story

The Loyalist newspapers framed the Gordon Riots and Lord George to encourage their readership to remain committed to their ideology. By emphasizing the British government's ability to overcome the rioters through legal means and the judicial process that afforded the rioters and Lord George due process, the Loyalist press championed the excellence of the British nation. The ability to weather the events of the riots and come out victorious was a premonition of the British government's ultimate success to do the same in the American colonies. With the capture of Charleston, the spread of the military in the South, and news of General Arnold's defection, the suppression of the riots was yet another example of momentum turning in favor of the British and Loyalists.

The Loyalists' interpretation of the Gordon Riots differed significantly from that of the Patriots. The event confirmed Loyalists' analyses of the disruptive and transportable potential of dangerous ideas that challenged structures of power and authority. Yet the event also demonstrated the British government's strength and resoluteness. Loyalists were reassured by the ability of the different components of the British government, the crown and Parliament, to band together to suppress the riots, restore order, and then return to business as usual. Coupling this perception of the riots and their aftermath with news of the British military's conquest of Charleston and the defection of Patriot General Benedict Arnold gave Loyalists reason to hope for the swift and victorious conclusion to the war. The government appeared to be on the path towards definitive victory, and its ability to weather challenges to its authority domestically proved that it would withstand and triumph over the rebels in the colonies.

In a 1780 pamphlet printed prior to the London insurrection, 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.”⁹⁸ 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 and 1781. 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. Though Loyalists’ hopes would ultimately come to naught by the end of 1781, Loyalists used the government’s suppression of the riots in London and victories on the battlefield to maintain morale and commitment in the midst of a drawn-out civil war. Loyalists crafted a narrative of the Gordon Riots that further confirmed their shared experiences with other British subjects, verified the dangers of the Patriots’ republican ideology, and reaffirmed their conviction that their choice to remain loyal to the British empire was right and prudent.

⁹⁸ 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, HathiTrust; 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.

Chapter 5: Diplomatic Encounters: Timing, Power, and the Gordon Riots

My thoughts were soon distressfully occupied by the account, which met me, of the riots and disturbances in London by what was called Lord George Gordon's mob, which all but quite extinguished my hopes of success in the very outset of my business.

-Richard Cumberland¹

Information about the Gordon Riots influenced perceptions, decisions, and events beyond the British metropole and Anglo-Atlantic spaces. European allies and adversaries also had to reckon with the Gordon Riots and how the turbulence in London would shape the course of the war. While Londoners recovered from the week of riots, word of the insurrection seeped into the diplomatic spaces around the Atlantic. News of the riots spread to the Spanish court where "secret" negotiations were set to start between the British and Spanish, and to the French court where American John Adams waited at the pleasure of his French allies to make his mission known. In the shared space between the French navy and American residents off the coast of Newport, Rhode Island, news of the riots was used by a French printer to prompt his French readers to better understand and appreciate their American allies. As the news of the riots spread to these diplomatic zones, diplomats absorbed and utilized the riots in their dealings with allies and adversaries.² The

¹ Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland. Written by Himself. Containing An Account of His Life and Writings, Interspersed with Anecdotes and Characters of Several of the Most Distinguished Persons of His Time, With Whom He has had Intercourse and Connection*, vol. II (London: Lackington, Allen & Co, 1807), 2: 35.

² I take a more expansive view of diplomacy and who qualifies as a diplomat in this chapter. Diplomacy occurred not just in the official spaces with government appointed individuals (what we might think of as official, or "high" diplomacy), but also in borderlands and shared spaces, where peoples of different cultures interact and practice "de facto" diplomacy. This latter framework borrows works that study Indigenous-settler encounters, as well as borderland studies. But I posit that this type of diplomatic engagement of ordinary people also occurred amidst war between peoples of allied nations encountering, and fighting alongside, one another. See Timothy John Shannon, *Iroquois Diplomacy on the Early American Frontier* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Tom Arne Midtrød, *The Memory of All Ancient Customs: Native American Diplomacy in the Colonial Hudson Valley* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Ned Blackhawk, "The displacement of violence: Ute diplomacy and the making of New Mexico's eighteenth-century northern borderlands," *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 4 (2007): 723-755.

riots created new factors for diplomats to consider in both newly formed and ongoing foreign engagements. For John Adams during his time in France, the riots created a window of opportunity to influence British politics. For Richard Cumberland, embarking on his secret negotiation to get the Spanish to pull out of the war, the riots became an obstacle to achieving his purpose. And for the French military stationed in Newport, Rhode Island, the riots presented an opportunity for insight into their allies and a shared bond over a common enemy.

Power was central to the workings of diplomacy. Realities and perceptions of power influenced the relationship between diplomatic actors. European diplomacy in the 18th century operated under the “balance of power” theory, which held that states self-regulated from becoming too powerful, lest other states join together to challenge its position.³ While this theory provided guidance for states vis-à-vis one another on the world stage, the relative power between parties filtered into the engagement of the states’ diplomats during negotiations. But basing state relationships solely on power can easily lead to armed conflict. Diplomacy, as H.M.A. Keens-Soper and Karl W. Schweizer write of diplomat François de Callières’ influential theory of diplomacy, rests on diplomats’ “mutual recognition of reciprocal interests.”⁴ Seeing one’s competitor as sharing mutual interests prompts states to seek alternatives to war to manage conflicts. Yet while Callières’ observations and suggestions animated states’ approach to diplomatic engagement, power

³ For more on this theory, especially as it manifested on the eve of the American Revolutionary War, see Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 13-25. Dull explains that “power” is comprised of many components, but most important is the strength of a state’s military (army, navy, ability to raise or hire troops), and access to resources to sustain itself and its military. Power waxes and wanes, and prior military conflicts (and results) factor into the recognition of where states rank in terms of power.

⁴ H.M.A. Keens-Soper and Karl W. Schweizer, “Diplomatic Theory in the *Ancien Regime*,” in François de Callières, *The Art of Diplomacy*, eds. Keens-Soper and Schweizer (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. for Leicester University Press, 1983), 32-33.

differentials between nations still colored the practice. Diplomats therefore had to have a keen eye on power differentials and “reciprocal interests” in order to navigate what each side could ask, demand, offer, and acquiesce. Diplomats from two relatively equal-powered states could engage in ways that diplomats from vastly different-powered states could not. In the case of the diplomatic engagements relative to the American war happening around and following the Gordon Riots, the riots permeated the power differentials in interesting ways. In the Spanish-British case, the riots helped to shape the power differentials by weakening the position of the British envoy. In the case of the Franco-American engagements, the riots produced a disagreement that reiterated that France was the stronger partner at the French court, while in the American theatre of war the disturbances helped to engender friendliness between the French officers and their American hosts. The news of the riots intersected with these delicate diplomatic engagements, prompting powerful diplomats to make decisions that ultimately affected the war.

Equally crucial to the equation of diplomacy is timing. The timing of the Gordon Riots was essentially what disrupted and created opportunities in the diplomatic engagements occurring during the American Revolutionary War. That the riots occurred *when* they did, and that the news of those riots came *when* it did, intersected with diplomatic engagements at particular moments. For some diplomats, the riots’ timing was frustrating. For others, the riots came at an opportune time. (In John Adams’ case, he felt both excited and frustrated by the opportunity created by the riots, and squandered by the French foreign minister.) In different ways, in different locations and between different diplomats, the Gordon Riots shaded the ongoing and nascent interactions and negotiations. In doing so, they produced tantalizing what-ifs over which frustrated diplomats could ponder.

The following three vignettes illustrate how the Gordon Riots manifested themselves in various diplomatic areas related to the American War for Independence.⁵ The riots proved to be malleable as news of them filtered out beyond Britain, allowing different actors to interpret and use the riots to shape or hinder relationships. If the Gordon Riots impeded the “secret” negotiation between the British and the Spanish, they produced a political moment for the Americans to meddle in the British elections—if France would have allowed it. If the riots created an opportunity that caused division between American and French diplomats, they produced a window for French soldiers to understand and create cohesion with the Americans where the French were stationed. That the Gordon Riots seeped into these crucial diplomatic zones demonstrates their importance beyond the British nation, or the Anglo-Atlantic world, and prompts us to consider the riots as a factor in the course of the American Revolutionary War.

A Playwright at the Spanish Court

His secret mission was perhaps the worst kept secret of 1780.⁶ Lord Hillsborough, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, had appointed Richard Cumberland—playwright and secretary to Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the American Department—for a clandestine mission to engage the Spanish court in negotiations to pull out of the war. The possibility of this off-the-books negotiation stemmed from the

⁵ I focus here on three diplomatic spaces where the Gordon Riots seem to have the most consequential influence on diplomatic engagements and relationships. But I have found evidence of the Gordon Riots popping up in other diplomatic spaces, including letters to the British ambassadors in other European locations (such as Venice and Portugal), as well as British government officials writing about how the attacks on the Sardinian and Bavarian embassy chapels might strain relationships. I hope to explore these diplomatic fallout in future work.

⁶ For example, see William Carmichael’s Notes on John Jay’s Conference with Floridablanca, 2 June 1780, *Founders Online*; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 19 July 1780; Francis Dana to John Adams, 8 September 1780, *Founders Online*; John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 99, 23 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

activities of an Irish Catholic priest, Thomas Hussey, who through his connections with both the Spanish and British courts, conveyed to Germain (via Cumberland) that the Spanish were open to a separate peace. The trustworthiness of Hussey, who was trained in Spanish monasteries and appointed chaplain at the Spanish embassy in London, was questionable.⁷ While he professed to his British contacts that he was sympathetic and on their side, he owed patronage to Spanish nobles, including the King of Spain, who paid for his education in Spain.⁸ Yet the British officials still trusted him—or at least felt they could use him. If the Spanish were open to pulling out of the war, despite their obligations under the Family Compact to the French court, then it was worth a try.⁹ If it was all a ruse, well, the British could use the negotiations to stir tension between Spain and France. But the British could not entirely trust Hussey, with his dubious connections and Catholic religion, to solely handle the secret negotiations. Hence, Richard Cumberland, who had government officials as patrons and having enough of a public image that his traveling abroad would not, theoretically, arouse suspicions, was charged to meet with the Spanish

⁷ For a fuller biography of Fr. Thomas Hussey, see Martin Murphy, “Cloak without Dagger: Dr Thomas Hussey, 1746-1803” *Recusant History* vol. 19, no. 1 (1988): 80-94. Murphy details Hussey’s operation as a something of a known double agent, but one that both sides (British and Spanish) hoped to use against one another. Strikingly, Cumberland seemed to trust Hussey, and indeed was on friendly terms with him at the start of the venture. But as the negotiations wore on, and as Hussey seemed to try to stage manage all the players, Cumberland grew disillusioned. Shortly after his return to Britain, Cumberland penned the play *The Walloons*, in which a meddling priest orchestrated the intrigue. Cumberland denied that his “Father Sullivan” was based on Fr. Thomas Hussey, but Hussey and others saw through the denial.

⁸ Murphy, “Cloak without Dagger,” 80-81.

⁹ The Family Compact, a treaty between the Bourbon monarchs (France and Spain, but also other minor Bourbon-headed countries like Naples), stipulated that an attack on one country in the compact was to be treated as an attack on all, and stipulated mutual aid and support. As such, France expected Spain to fight in the war against the British along with the Americans. Spain reluctantly did so. Though they lacked a strong military and were concerned that the American independence fight could inspire their own colonies to declare independence, Spain saw an opportunity to lessen British power and regain former territories then controlled by the British. For more on the Family Compact and Spanish motives to joining the war, see W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Eighteenth-Century Spain 1700-1788: A Political, Diplomatic and Institutional History* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 102-105, 129-139; Larrie D. Ferreiro, *Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It* (NY: Penguin Random House LLC, 2017), 115.

to hash out a deal.¹⁰ Cumberland and his family traveled to Portugal for “health reasons,” and waited in Lisbon for Hussey, who had gone ahead to seek the Conde de Floridablanca’s acceptance of the British emissary and assist in the process of negotiation.¹¹ Cumberland and his family arrived in Portugal in mid-May 1780 and received word that Floridablanca permitted their entry into Spain in early June. After a ten-day journey through Portugal and Spain, he arrived at the Spanish court in Aranjuez. The players were in place to start the show.¹²

While Cumberland was due to start the secret negotiations, John Jay, the American ambassador was waiting in the wings for the right moment to hit his mark. Jay and his pregnant wife had traveled to Spain earlier in the year. Floridablanca permitted him to enter the country, though held off officially recognizing Jay as an ambassador.¹³ Jay was purposeful and delicate in his meetings with Floridablanca, hoping to secure a stronger commitment from Spain to the United States directly. From an American standpoint, a stronger alliance would keep the pressure on Britain and hopefully raise much needed funds and materiel to continue the war, not to mention further cementing recognition of American independence by a powerful empire. Yet while Jay had his own agenda in

¹⁰ Richard Cumberland’s relevance and government patronage is perhaps reflected in his internment in Westminster Abbey in Poet’s Corner.

¹¹ José Moñino y Redondo, Conde de Floridablanca, was Spain’s chief minister and minister of foreign affairs. For more on Floridablanca, see Ferreiro, *Brothers at Arms*, 78-81; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Eighteenth-Century Spain*, 134-136.

¹² Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 51-63; H.M. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 310-314; Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Eighteenth-Century Spain, 1700-1788*, 134-136.

¹³ Floridablanca’s refusal to afford official diplomatic status to Jay stems from Spain’s tenuous position vis-à-vis recognizing the United States’ independence. Spain had only entered the American Revolutionary War through their treaty with France. They never officially formed an alliance with the burgeoning United States, and indeed did not recognize the U.S.’s independent existence until the conclusion of the war. Spain did provide money and arms to the U.S., but not out of a desire for their independence but as a means to undermine Britain. In helping to force Britain into a weaker position, Spain hoped to regain territory and status on the world stage. Keeping the U.S.’s appointed ambassador, Jay, in the wings allowed Spain to taunt and put pressure on Britain’s ministers to agree to Spain’s terms.

meeting with Floridablanca, so did Floridablanca in meeting with Jay, and as a shrewd negotiator, Floridablanca did not hesitate to play all sides to gain the best advantage for Spain. That included letting Jay know that Britain's unofficial-official ambassadors, Cumberland and Hussey, were in the country.¹⁴ Floridablanca informed Jay that he expected to negotiate with Cumberland over exchanging prisoners, and "possibly others of a different nature" but promised to keep Jay informed along the way.¹⁵ Floridablanca would take a similar approach in his talks with Cumberland, suggesting that Spain was sympathetic to both sides, and perhaps could be a conduit for peace.¹⁶ Yet the timing was crucial for all parties engaged in this diplomatic dance. For Jay, knowing that his tentatively treated with his enemy added stress to his mission. If Britain managed to pull Spain off the stage, the play was over. For Floridablanca, if he could manage this delicate *pas de trois*, Spain might end up with everything they wanted (primarily Gibraltar back) without conceding much (i.e. not encouraging their own colonial holdings to rebel). For Cumberland, if he could entice the Spain away from the Americans, then he would have crafted the perfect climatic ending.

Jay need not have worried. The secret negotiations were doomed to fail almost from the start. First, preliminary terms had to be agreed to between Cumberland and the Spanish court before actual negotiations could begin.¹⁷ Hillsborough forbade Cumberland to even start discussions with the Spanish court unless Spain agreed to exclude the return

¹⁴ "William Carmichael's Notes on John Jay's Conference with Floridablanca, 2 June 1780," *Founders Online*.

¹⁵ "William Carmichael's Notes... 2 June 1780."

¹⁶ Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 60-61.

¹⁷ Setting preliminary terms for negotiation before actually negotiating was a common practice for diplomatic engagements, even secret ones. In the case of Cumberland's mission, the settling of these terms (what topics would be on the table for discussion) happened through correspondence before Cumberland was invited to physically come to court and meet with Floridablanca in Aranjuez. See Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 56-59.

of Gibraltar (and Minorca, though less important) from negotiations.¹⁸ The Conde de Floridablanca, the Spanish Secretary of State, refused to take Gibraltar off the table. Through a careful—intentional—misreading of Floridablanca’s letter inviting Cumberland to court, Cumberland decided to forge ahead with negotiations despite the Spanish Secretary not explicitly excising Gibraltar from the list of things to negotiate. Yet, despite the very real and very wide gap between the two parties, Cumberland did not fault the calcified positions each side had on the return of Gibraltar as the reason negotiations would ultimately fail by the end of the year. No, Cumberland wrote, it was the news of the Gordon Riots that “all but quite extinguished my hopes of success in the very outset of my business.”¹⁹

At the first diplomatic meeting between Cumberland and Floridablanca on June 19, 1780, (just 10 days after the riots had concluded), Floridablanca opened their talks by informing Cumberland about the riots in London. According to Cumberland’s memoir, Floridablanca relayed to Cumberland “the downfall of London; king, ministers and government whelmed in ruin, the rebellion of American transplanted to England.”²⁰ Floridablanca went on to convey his skepticism at treating with Cumberland under such circumstances, suggesting that the riots would be the “extermination of the ministry,” implying that Cumberland’s authority to negotiate was in doubt.²¹ Floridablanca’s

¹⁸ Britain had taken control of Gibraltar, a commercially and militarily valuable peninsula on Spain’s southern coast at the entry way to the Mediterranean Sea, during the War of Spanish Succession in the early 18th century. Spain formally ceded the territory (along with the island of Minorca, also captured during the war) to Britain in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. Spain long desired to regain the territory, and attempted to do so in 1727 and then again during the American Revolutionary War, but was unsuccessful (though they did regain Minorca in the 1783 peace treaty). Gibraltar remains a British territory as of 2023. See Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Eighteenth-Century Spain 1700-1788*, 38, 61-64, 132-139.

¹⁹ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 35.

²⁰ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 37.

²¹ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 37-38.

intelligence came from the Spanish ambassador to France, which Cumberland (at the time of hearing the news) ascribed it as being exaggerated.²² Cumberland asserted to Floridablanca that the riots would be quashed, and that the British Ministry would prevail, but he did so knowing his “over-confidence and presumption” might prove false and undercut his credibility.²³ Still, it was a risk he was willing to take, as he had no reports from his government to rebut the information that Floridablanca was sharing with him. Within a few days, his presumption would prove right. Yet to start off the secret negotiations on such a note seemed ominous to Cumberland. In his 1782 report, read by the British king and later published in Cumberland’s memoir, he pondered the effect that the news had on the Spanish king, and how the moment “was decidedly in my favour” as “the Spanish nation was anxious for peace, and both court, ecclesiastics and military professedly anti-gallican.”²⁴ In Cumberland’s view, the recent victory by British Admiral Rodney over the Spanish fleet laying siege to Gibraltar also helped make the timing of the negotiations beneficial to the British.²⁵ But the “fatal news of the riots” washed away the higher ground Cumberland thought he had.²⁶ Whatever advantage he had coming into the meeting was sapped by the uncertainty that the riots produced in the Spanish court.

Considering the riots-related news that circulated in the Spanish court and public, it was not all that surprising that Floridablanca hesitated in treating with the British representative. Vizconde de Herreria, the Spanish minister at the Hague, sent a June 15, 1780, letter to Floridablanca relaying intelligence about the riots in Britain. In this letter,

²² Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 38. Cumberland would in his memoirs reflecting on the event come to see the reported information as “faithfully given without exaggeration” (35).

²³ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 38.

²⁴ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 36. See also Richard Cumberland Papers on Negotiations with Spain 1780-1781, British Library, Add MS 28851, folios 11-12

²⁵ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 36.

²⁶ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 36-37.

Herrera relayed that he was awaiting news of “the results of the tumult that has manifested in London.”²⁷ In a postscript to the letter, Herrera added more information he had received before sending the letter. This postscript contained details about the riots, including that Lord Mansfield’s house “has been burned with all of its belongings” and that troops had pushed back rioters from their attack on the Bank of England.²⁸ Herrera concluded that “things appeared worse than before,” and that the British people’s anger was manifesting against their government.²⁹ Herrera’s post-script was partially right. British troops (along with John Wilkes and Lord George Gordon) repelled rioters at the Bank, but rioters had not burned down Mansfield’s house. Rather, rioters had ransacked Mansfield’s home, and taken furnishings, books, and manuscripts into the street to fuel a bonfire, but they had not burn the building itself. Floridablanca would not have known that from Herrera’s letter. Instead, the information Herrera passed along embellished the already large-scale riots, emphasizing the danger and threat that the riots posed to the British government. With intelligence like this from Herrera, Floridablanca was bound to enter discussions with the British emissary with doubts about the strength and certainty of the government that Cumberland represented.

The news of the riots, and the uncertainty of their outcome, spread beyond the foreign affairs network of the Secretary of State. The June 23, 1780 issue of the *Gazeta de Madrid* contained a detailed recount of “the terrible confrontations” in England “as a result

²⁷ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, Archivo General de Simancas Estado 6372 (Antiguo), No. 181-182. I would like to thank Sabrina Gonzalez and Paul Iglesias for their assistance in translating this letter from Spanish to English.

²⁸ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, Archivo General de Simancas Estado 6372 (Antiguo), No. 181-182

²⁹ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, Archivo General de Simancas Estado 6372 (Antiguo), No. 181-182

of a mutiny by the people of London.”³⁰ The article went on to describe the primary events of the riots, including the mass protest to deliver the petition, the attacks on Catholic properties and embassy chapels, the assaults on judges and politicians and their homes, and the attempts of the troops to stop them. The article repeated the derogatory narrative of the British elite, stating that the 40,000 protestors that gathered at St. George’s Field and marched across the Thames and down to Parliament were “men from the most vile and miserable class of people.”³¹ Yet the article also castigated the British government for its inability to curb the crowd’s disorderly conduct. It included criticism that “the Ministry exposed them to insults” by not having troops at the ready considering that the Ministry had, with impunity, allowed for the prior year associations to form “of 40 to 50 thousand men from the insignificant class...which would obviously result in excesses and disorder.”³² The *Gazeta de Madrid* article implied that the British government failed to adequately prepare for the “excesses and disorders” connected with the development of political associations. This was, then, a problem of the structure of the British state and the weakness of its ministers, which permitted such associations to form.³³ The article reaffirmed this message when relaying what Lord George said to the crowd to disperse

³⁰ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97. I would like to thank Sabrina Gonzalez and Paul Iglesias for their assistance in translating this article from Spanish to English. The *Gazeta de Madrid* printed under the patronage and control of the Spanish court, and primarily used French sources for its news. Will Slauter, “The Paragraph as Information Technology: How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales – English Edition*, vol. 67, no 2 (2012): 269.

³¹ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97.

³² Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97.

³³ Comparatively, the Spanish structure of government was much more centralized, with King Carlos III practicing “benevolent despotism” as a means to control his people in order to “bring his people what he believed was their happiness” (W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, *Spain Under the Bourbons, 1700-1833: A Collection of Documents* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973), xxviii-xxix). For more on the structure of the Spanish government leading up to the Cumberland-Floridablanca negotiations, see John Lynch, *Bourbon Spain, 1700-1808* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989), 247-328; Pablo Sánchez León, *Popular Political Participation and the Democratic Imagination in Spain: From Crowd to People, 1766-1868* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 29-90.

them on June 2: “*Sons and daughters the whole country is unruly: thousands of Protestants arrive from all parts to sustain our petition. You have a benign sovereign who recognizes our rights and will give order to his Ministers to conform with them.*”³⁴ The statement to the crowd revealed not only that the outrage of the crowd was widespread (“whole country”) and “unruly,” but that the leader of the crowd believed that the king sided with them and would order his government to comply with their demands. This was not a powerful government that commanded their country; rather, it was at the mercy of their subjects.

Indeed, the article demonstrated this by reporting, wrongly, that following riotous activities at embassy chapels and Sir George Saville’s home, the British Parliament “accepted” the Protestant petition and “that the Act in favor of Catholics will be revoked.”³⁵ As a result, the rioters attacked the jails, Lord Mansfield’s home, and the Bank of England in celebration. The *Gazeta de Madrid* reduced their rioters’ “general cry” to “*Death to Papists: cease the influence of the Crown, respond to our petitions and associations: make peace with America and continue the war with France and Spain; if you choose the contrary we will take everything to blood and fire.*”³⁶ The demands the *Gazeta de Madrid* attributed to the insurgents, after they had (reportedly) achieved the repeal of their hated Catholic Relief Act, revealed to Spanish readers the rioters’ real motives and goals and their perceived power. The democratic demands of the crowd included peace with the Americans while continuing the war with Papist France and Spain. To Spanish readers, these demands showed a British society turned upside down, with the masses (“now at 100,000”) commanding those at the head of government to do their bidding.

³⁴ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97. (Emphasis original)

³⁵ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97.

³⁶ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97. (Emphasis original).

What is most fascinating, and most revealing, are the concluding paragraphs to the article, which explain why Floridablanca was so hesitant to treat with Cumberland. The concluding paragraphs portrayed the riots as unending and the government as teetering on the brink of collapse. The article conveyed that troops pushed back an attack on the Bank of England on June 8, killing 30 persons and injuring 60 more; “nevertheless, nothing could contain them [the rioters].”³⁷ The British King had “received warnings that in the Provinces they have discovered similar commotions,” indicating that the violence had spread beyond the metropole. The government “was resolved to defend its own dignity,” and had “promulgated an order abolishing all civil authority and establishing martial law” in order to do so.³⁸ Yet, at the time the information was received by the newspaper, the British government’s success in quashing the mob remained in question. The article ended powerfully, noting that “Lately 6,000 more men have entered; with that reinforcement there is a body of 24,000 [troops]; but at this hour it did not appear as if it would be enough to quiet the Capital.”³⁹ The *Gazeta de Madrid* raised the possibility that the British government would fail to control the violence spurred on by the crowd’s demands illustrated earlier in the article. By concluding the story with an unknown ending, *Gazeta de Madrid* left Spanish readers, including those in the Spanish court, with uncertainty about the status of the British capital. It is no wonder that Floridablanca seemed reluctant to treat fully with Cumberland with this report about the riots circulating.

Ultimately the news of the British government’s suppression of the riots reached the Spanish court and Cumberland. Though he tried to push the negotiations forward after

³⁷ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97.

³⁸ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97. The debate over whether the British government enacted martial law was covered in chapters, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

³⁹ Library of Congress Foreign Copying Program, State Papers Vol. 209 folio 96-97.

receiving this news, Cumberland felt “the minds and understandings of those, with whom I had to deal, were not easy to be cured of alarms once given, or prejudices once received.”⁴⁰ The riots had cast a pall on the negotiations at their very start, and, despite their conclusion and the survival of the British government, in Cumberland’s view the Spanish ministers were alarmed by the occurrence. Reflecting upon his entire diplomatic experience, Cumberland believed that “no moment occurred so favourable to the business I had in hand, as that of which ill-fortune had deprived me in the very outset of my understanding.”⁴¹ Negotiations would continue for eight months, though no progress was made. The sticking point—Gibraltar—remained unresolvable. With the British government refusing to even entertain a return of the territory to Spain, and Spain refusing to commit to pull out of the war without it, there was nowhere for negotiations to go. Despite the optimism with which Cumberland started his mission, he quickly found himself spinning his wheels. In February 1781, Hillsborough recalled Cumberland and ended the secret negotiations. Cumberland and his family returned to Britain, where Cumberland returned to his employment with Lord George Germain and the Board of Trade until political reforms in 1782 eliminated his position.⁴² Hussey, for whom the British government had lost all use, settled in Brussels to escape the watchful eye of the British government.⁴³ The experience left a mark on Cumberland, who channeled it into his playwriting. In 1782, he premiered the play *The Walloons*, which featured a scheming priest, Spanish and French intrigue, and support for Catholic toleration. Cumberland’s

⁴⁰ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 39.

⁴¹ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 39. Though negotiations had bogged down by the end of August, Hillsborough only recalled Cumberland in February 1781. See Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 61-63.

⁴² Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 2: 172-178. Cumberland returned broke from his posting as a diplomat, the compensation he received only partially covering his costs. Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 64.

⁴³ Murphy, “Cloak without Dagger,” 86.

characters navigate relationships with one another, while being manipulated by “Father Sullivan”—perhaps an indication of the distrust Cumberland grew to have about Father Hussey and his activities.⁴⁴ While there was no mention of a riot—Gordon’s or analogous—the theme of Catholic toleration underlies the drama and proves to be one of its messages (along with being wary of meddling priests). If Cumberland’s “secret” mission was less than a success, he at least could creatively channel his experience into a new dramatic production.

Many scholars have wrongly written off Cumberland’s opinion on the impact of the Gordon Riots on the secret negotiations.⁴⁵ These scholars will grant that the riots did not help the negotiations, but place the failure of the negotiations on the chasm between Spain and Britain over what could be negotiated, or question their willingness to genuinely negotiate. Cumberland’s belief that the riots damned the negotiations at the start, in these scholars’ view, was merely a tactic to deflect from his failure. But Cumberland truly felt at the time and shortly thereafter that the riots badly damaged the negotiations at a critical moment, and not just later in his life. In a July 5, 1780, letter to Lord Germain, Cumberland wrote “I forbear to attempt a description of what I have felt upon the intelligence of your dreadfull Commotions in London; I am anxiously a-waiting a confirmation of the happy prospect which has open’d upon me the State of Affairs on the 13th of June, at which

⁴⁴ Stanley Thomas Williams, *Richard Cumberland: His Life and Dramatic Works* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1917), 187-189.

⁴⁵ Works that consider Cumberland’s view, but ultimately dismiss or downplay it as the reason for the failed negotiations include Morris, *The Peacemakers*; Williams, *Richard Cumberland: His Life and Dramatic Works*, 175-176; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Hussey-Cumberland Mission and American Independence: An Essay in the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931), 72-75. Other diplomatic histories that do not even mention Cumberland’s view of the riots’ impact on his negotiations include: Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution*; Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*.

period my Intelligence stops.”⁴⁶ Cumberland’s letter hinted at his lack of knowledge about the outcome of the riots, and how the news of them left him at a loss of words. In a subsequent letter to Germain on August 4, Cumberland provided even greater detail about the effect that the riots had on his mission: “The Intervention of the Riots was critical ag[ain]st my business. A communication of their issue from authority would have been a very useful Exhibit.”⁴⁷ By late September, Cumberland was further convinced about the effects of the riots, writing to Germain that “After a long Negotiations with the Minister of Spain, we are convinc’d that he Politicks of this Court have been greatly warp’d by the late Events in favour of their French Connections.”⁴⁸ Beyond his contemporaneous letters, in a 1782 report on his secret mission to Lord Shelburne, Cumberland advanced his argument that the riots marked an early death knell of the negotiations. In fact, many of the passages in his 1807 published memoir are verbatim from this 1782 report.

In Cumberland’s opinion, bad timing was the villain of the drama. The riots ruined the optimism at the start of the negotiations. Both Spain and Britain approached the negotiations under the belief that they could leverage the other’s reciprocal interest to craft some sort of agreement. While the Spanish empire was the relatively weaker of the two nations at the start of the war, the protracted conflict had sapped Britain’s strength and was starting to paint it into a corner. Perhaps, therefore, they could find some common ground to stop the hostilities. Even though both sides were locked into certain positions (Gibraltar) that would make true negotiations impossible, Cumberland genuinely thought a deal could be reached. But news of the riots, and the damage they did to the reputation

⁴⁶ Richard J. Dircks, ed., *The Letters of Richard Cumberland* (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 196-197.

⁴⁷ Dircks, *The Letters of Richard Cumberland*, 203-204.

⁴⁸ Dircks, *The Letters of Richard Cumberland*, 212.

of the British government, changed how the players entered the stage. Now, starting from a place of perceived weakness, Cumberland (as Britain's agent) was at a disadvantage. Had the riots not occurred just prior to the start of negotiations, Cumberland might have been able to spin the disturbance into something positive. But walking into the room for the very first time, with no information other than the partial (and wrong) information provided by the Spanish Secretary, Cumberland had nothing to rebut the opinions formed by the Spanish court. If only the riots had occurred and been resolved a month earlier, Cumberland might have had the whole story to show just how strong and resilient his government was. Or if they had occurred a month later, Cumberland would have established a relationship with Floridablanca that he could leverage to caution the Spanish minister to hold off on judging the situation until Cumberland had more information. But those things did not happen. The news of the Gordon Riots doomed the negotiations from the very onset, Cumberland was certain. And though he was likely only partially correct, his resolution on this matter makes clear that we cannot discount the influence the Gordon Riots played on the diplomatic stage.

Seizing the Moment: Adams, Vergennes, & the Coming British Election

John Adams was frustrated. Once again back in France, his presence tolerated by the French court, Adams was waiting for his moment to arrive.⁴⁹ The Continental Congress appointed Adams as a diplomat with plenipotentiary powers to negotiate both a

⁴⁹ Adams was first posted in France in 1778 as diplomat at the French court, but arriving after the conclusion of treaty negotiations he had little work to do and ultimately had his commission revoked in late 1778. He returned to the U.S. in 1779, only to be sent back to Europe as the minister plenipotentiary to Great Britain, charged with negotiating a peace treaty and a trade treaty. By many accounts, Adams temperament was not entirely suited for diplomatic negotiations, which tended to rub the French ministers the wrong way. See James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1980), 33-38, 51-74.

peace and a commerce treaty with the British government. But Adams could not fulfill that role until the British government knew of his commission—something that the French foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, had instructed Adams to keep concealed. As foreign minister of the more powerful (and sovereign) country, Vergennes called the shots. That included making sure the Americans upheld their end of the 1778 Franco-American treaty, which stipulated that neither side would make a separate peace with Britain without the approval of the other.⁵⁰ If Adams acted without consulting Vergennes—without asking permission—he could have upset the Franco-American alliance, which had provided legitimacy, not to mention arms and resources and manpower, to the Patriot American’s cause. So he waited and conferred with the other diplomatic representatives from the U.S. He wrote friends and family and politicians back in the U.S. And, crucially, he pestered Vergennes about the course of the war and his diplomatic powers.⁵¹

In the aftermath of the Gordon Riots, Adams saw a window of opportunity to alter the course of war and secure American independence. The riots showed that British people were discontent with their government.⁵² Rumors from late spring that the king

⁵⁰ Treaty of Alliance with France; 2/6/1778; Perfected Treaties, 1778 - 1945; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/treaty-of-alliance-with-france#:~:text=The%20American%20Colonies%20and%20France,the%20revolutionary%20government%20in%20America>. According to Hutson, Vergennes was also suspicious of Adams’ motives, based on misleading intel he received from the French minister in the US, Conrad Alexandre Gérard, who informed Vergennes that Adams was part of a pro-British faction that intended to “betray France by composing the quarrel with Britain and concluding an alliance with her,” (57). See Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 57-59.

⁵¹ For more on the relationship between Adams and Vergennes in 1780, see Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 191-198. Morris provides detail about Vergennes’ larger diplomatic concerns and an analysis of the critical issue of whether, and when, to reveal Adams’ commission to the British. But Morris overlooks Adams’ analysis of the British political mood in the wake of the Gordon Riots and Adams’ eagerness to influence the September 1780 election.

⁵² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

would prorogue and dissolve Parliament came to fruition with the king's speech on July 8 proroguing Parliament and later on August 24 dissolving Parliament.⁵³ Britain would hold a general election in September 1780. In Adam's estimation, the people of Britain were tired of the war and longed for peace with the Americans.⁵⁴ Adams was certain that the king and his ministry were determined to fight to the bitter end, no matter the strain it put on the British nation and people. But if enough Opposition members were elected to Parliament, the king's ministry might not have the support to continue fighting. The ministry had called an election in order to grow their numbers and further cement their power, but in Adams' view, they had opened up an opportunity for those sympathetic to American independence to gain greater footing in Parliament. If only he could provide a little nudge to the British people.

Over the course of ten days in late July, 1780, Adams attempted to convince the French foreign minister, yet again, that Adams' true purpose and powers should be announced to the Court of London. But this time, he pressed the particular timing as reason to announce his appointment. In his July 17 letter to Vergennes, Adams provided many arguments to support announcing that Congress had appointed him Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of London.⁵⁵ Using phrases such as "at present" and "at this moment" and "at this particular time," Adams emphasized the expediency of the moment.

⁵³ For rumors about the dissolution of the British Parliament, see Edmund Jenings to John Adams, 5 May 1780, *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. Sara Martin (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008-2019); for the King's announcement proroguing and dissolving Parliament, see House of Lords Journals, Vol. 36 (July 8; August 24), *British History Online*. While George III didn't dissolve Parliament until late August, Adams and others considered his July 8th prorogation as indication that dissolving Parliament was certain to follow.

⁵⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁵⁵ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

Adams asserted that the announcement would put pressure on the British ministry internally at a critical time:

The English Nation wou'd expect of the Ministers that some answer shou'd be given to me. If it shou'd be an insolent one, as there is too much Cause to expect, it will prepare the minds of the Americans, and of the other belligerent Powers, for what they are to expect; and it will alarm and arouse, if anything can, the People of England. At this particular time when an Election approaches, it wou'd throw the Ministry into some Embarrassment; for the People of England sigh for Peace.⁵⁶

The mention of the forthcoming election was telling. To Adams, the opportunity was not to diplomatically engage with the North ministry. North and his ministry were too invested in the war to entertain any sort of diplomatic engagement with Adams—at least, on terms Adams would find acceptable (namely, acknowledging American independence).⁵⁷ Adams' contended that the announcement of his negotiation powers, and the response it might elicit from the North administration, would embolden the British people to rebuke the ministry's hawkishness on the eve of the upcoming election. Emphasizing the importance of the political moment, Adams contended that there were "at present many Persons of Consideration in England, who have long followed the Ministry in War against America; who begin to see the impracticability of succeeding, and now vote for Peace, and will lay hold of every occurrence that favors its accomplishment."⁵⁸ Releasing the information about his appointment would give those "Persons of Consideration" standing ground to insist upon peace negotiations. In Adams formulation, they could point to his commission

⁵⁶ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁵⁷ North did support an attempted peace negotiation with the rebelling colonists in 1778 via the Carlisle Commission, but that commission stopped short of granting independence to the rebelling colonies. See Anthony Gregory, "Formed for Empire": The Continental Congress Response to the Carlisle Peace Commission," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2018): 643-72.

⁵⁸ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

as a sign that the Americans were ready to treat on peace and to set up a beneficial commercial treaty between Britain and an independent United States. Adams asserted the importance of the timing, arguing that by releasing the information at that time “the Nation [Britain] may consider this [information] before the Meeting of Parliament, and that those who are for Peace, may digest their plans accordingly.”⁵⁹ Adams postulated that for a war-weary public, especially those able to vote, the potential for peace and the resumption of trade would be a compelling factor in their vote in the upcoming election.

Near the end of Adams’ July 17 letter, he meditated on the Gordon Riots and what they indicated about the political mood in Britain. In doing so, Adams again pressed the importance of the moment:

Notwithstanding the suppression of the late Riots and the consequent temporary Relaxation of the Committee and Associations, the Nation is in a most critical situation. Those Disturbances were not simply the Effect of Fanaticism and Bigotry, but of deep and general discontent and distress among the People; and although Ministry may at present be confident they have suppressed them forever, they will surely find themselves mistaken, if they pursue this War. I know of no measure that will be more likely to encrease the opposition against Administration than communication my Powers. It will at least show all the World, that the Continuance of the War, and the consequent Ruin of England, is their own fault, not that of the Americans, who are ready to make Peace upon Terms honourable and advantageous to Great Britain.⁶⁰

The riots, in Adams’ view, exposed a fractured British nation, not because of religious bigotry, but because of the British ministry and their pursuit of the war. The riots revealed that Britain was in a “critical situation” that Adams saw the potential to capitalize upon. Announcing his status as plenipotentiary minister, Adams asserted, would help the

⁵⁹ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁶⁰ John Adams to the Comte de Vergennes, 17 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

Opposition obtain more seats in Parliament. If North was not forced out of power, he would be weakened enough that he would have to negotiate and recognize American independence. The riots exposed the fractures within the British nation—fractures that Adams thought he could exploit in the time leading up to the September election.

Vergennes rejected Adams' request, barely holding back his contempt for the irritating American. Vergennes' July 25 letter contained an enclosure in which Vergennes replied in the margins to "each of the points which appear to merit observations" on his part.⁶¹ In a further display of his contempt, Vergennes "request[ed] and require[d]" Adams to share Adams' letter and Vergennes' response with Congress and ask for their explicit instruction on the matter—sent both to Adams and to Vergennes, implying that Vergennes did not trust Adams to be honest about Congress' response. In doing so, Vergennes reminded Adams of the power dynamics at play even before Vergennes gave a detailed rebuttal to Adams' arguments for announcing his commission. In the point-by-point enclosed response, Vergennes dismissed Adams' arguments for announcing his power to negotiate a treaty of commerce, insisting it was first necessary to secure the peace. Vergennes missed, or ignored, Adams' point about the lure that establishing commercial ties might have for Britons with commercial interests, however. Vergennes also disagreed that announcing Adams' commission would do much to entice the British ministry towards peace, since they "consider all Americans as Rebellious subjects" and therefore would not honor Adams' appointment until the British ministry first recognized American independence.⁶² Further, Vergennes argued, while "some private individuals speak of independence," there never "had been a single motion made in Parliament tending to grant

⁶¹ The Comte de Vergennes to John Adams: A Translation, 25 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁶² Enclosure: The Comte de Vergennes to John Adams: A Translation, 25 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

that independence.”⁶³ Announcing Adams’ plenipotentiary powers “will not change the present situation in this regard,” he concluded. Without the British acknowledging American independence, Vergennes asserted, there was no point in announcing that the United States’ Congress had empowered Adams to negotiate both a peace and a commercial treaty. Announcing his commission would make him the “laughing stock of all nations which have not yet recognized” American independence, and do nothing to sway a British ministry still set on vigorously pursuing the war.⁶⁴ In essence, the timing was not right.

Interestingly, in Vergennes’ denial, he never directly addressed Adams’ point about the possibility of influencing the upcoming British election. While Vergennes granted in generalities that the British public may desire peace, he did not seem to see the potential to sway the British government through electioneering as Adams proposed. There are potentially several reasons for this. Vergennes may have been hesitant to interfere with domestic politics, especially with rumors already circulating that the French and Americans had instigated the riots. Actually interfering in the British election, even a relatively innocuous interference such as releasing information about Adams’ appointment, might have backfired, confirmed the conspiracy rumors, and pushed support towards the ministry. The intelligence that Vergennes was getting from Britain also highlighted the anti-Catholic sentiment of the British people, and probably shaped his distrust that these people could be swayed over to vote for those who would end the war with the Catholic

⁶³ Enclosure: The Comte de Vergennes to John Adams: A Translation, 25 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁶⁴ Enclosure: The Comte de Vergennes to John Adams: A Translation, 25 July 1780, *Founders Online*.

enemies.⁶⁵ Shortly after the riots had ended, Vergennes had the opportunity to support a plot concocted by “Montagu Fox,” a self-proclaimed escaped rioter, for an uprising in Cornwall. Vergennes erred on the side of caution, raising the question of whether the armed Cornish would not just attack the French rather than their own countrymen. Vergennes spotted a trap and thought Fox to be an agent of the British government attempting to implicate the French and Americans for the riots.⁶⁶ To Vergennes, his intuition about British anti-Catholic sentiments—confirmed by the recent riots—meant that meddling in domestic politics was unlikely to result in France’s favor.

Another reason for Vergennes to ignore Adams’ point about the upcoming election: the lack of importance of elections in French governance. The French government operated closer to an absolutist model, with the king controlling government administration. In France, even the meager democratic aspects found in the British system (wherein only approximately 17% of the male population could vote in the late-eighteenth century) were absent from performing any sort of check on government power.⁶⁷ Vergennes likely found Adams’ argument for informing the British public of his diplomatic purpose prior to the election to be of little consequence. Adams and Vergennes did not see the same level of importance of the upcoming British parliamentary election,

⁶⁵ Howard Weinbrot, “The *Courier de l’Europe*, The Gordon Riots and Trials, and the Changing Face of Anglo-French Relations,” *Etudes Epistémè* vol. 26 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.312>. Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 116-117.

⁶⁶ Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 113-116. Morris details that Vergennes, despite his distrust, kept entertaining Fox throughout 1780 and 1781. But Vergennes did not support the proposal to arm the Cornish for an uprising (which never happened), and was always critical of the information Fox produced. Ultimately, Vergennes was right, as Morris argues that Fox was likely an agent of the British government feeding curated information in hopes to damage the American-French-Spanish alliance (127-129).

⁶⁷ H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 1994), 32; George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 46-60; Georges LeFebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005);

and this difference lied beneath their disagreement over the timing of announcing Adams' plenipotentiary appointment. The different view on the upcoming election influenced how each man approached diplomacy with the British nation. Adams saw a potential to sway the public to put pressure on—or enough legislators in—the British government to negotiate by appealing to the public's desire for peace and trade. Vergennes saw the public as having little power to alter the course of the British government in prosecuting the war—therefore appealing to them was useless and opened up the potential to push away other European nations from being sympathetic to their side.

While Vergennes did not share Adams' logic about the British electoral opportunity produced by the riots, the riots may have furthered French support for the American cause. French spending (in loans, credit, and material support) to support the American War increased significantly in 1780 and in 1781. Some of that spending had already occurred prior to the riots in June 1780, and we must be mindful not to relate correlation with causation. But the riots certainly did not sap French support, as indicated by the increased in spending from 1781 over 1780 (approximately 25 million livres in 1780; approximately 37 million livres in 1781).⁶⁸ As the intelligence supplied by Montagu Fox suggested—which Vergennes viewed with distrust, but still critically assessed—the North Ministry showed no signs of slowing their war machine.⁶⁹ Vergennes was skeptical that the riots had somehow created an opportunity for the Opposition in Britain to seize power. Even if so, the British people were clearly anti-Catholic. Fully investing in the war was the only path forward.

⁶⁸ William V. Wenger, "Key to Victory: Foreign Assistance to America's Revolutionary War," *Journal of the American Revolution* (April 2021), <https://allthingsliberty.com/2021/04/key-to-victory-foreign-assistance-to-americas-revolutionary-war/>.

⁶⁹ Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 120-122.

At an impasse, the power differentials between Adams and Vergennes, between the United States and France, meant that Vergennes controlled the release of information. Adams had to defer to Vergennes to avoid upsetting the alliance. If he had gone ahead and announced his position on his own, he would risk Vergennes considering Adams' actions as negotiating on his own—an action against the alliance treaty between France and the United States.⁷⁰ Representing the more senior, and more powerful, partner in the treaty, Vergennes insisted on maintaining a united front in negotiating any peace. Already dealing with Spain entertaining an off-the-books—and potentially against the family compact—negotiation with British representatives at the same time, Vergennes needed to keep the Americans in line. From Vergennes' viewpoint, if both allies operated on their own in engaging with their common enemy, it could damage the settlement that France intended to get from the war. If he could not entirely control Spain, he could at least put a stop to any actions that the American ambassador might take that could indicate the potential to the British government to negotiate a separate peace.⁷¹

The exchange proved to be the final straw for Adams and Vergennes. Adams took offense at Vergennes' response and fired off two subsequent letters attacking Vergennes' reasonings, though neither addressed Adams' point about the upcoming British election and focused on Vergennes' other arguments.⁷² Adams left (with permission—and good riddance—from Vergennes) for the Netherlands on July 27, 1780. But he kept abreast of the British election as he settled into his work in Amsterdam, relaying news and analysis

⁷⁰ Article 8, Treaty of Alliance with France; 2/6/1778; Perfected Treaties, 1778 - 1945; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

⁷¹ Vergennes wasn't entirely wrong here, either, as the Americans did move to negotiate a separate peace in 1782. Morris, *The Peacemakers*, 308-340.

⁷² For more on the exchange in the July 26 and 27 letters, see Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 68-69.

about the British election to his correspondents. Writing to Samuel Huntington on September 20, Adams shared his suspicion that “to influence Elections,” the North Administration was deceiving the public that the new Parliament, under their leadership, would “turn their Thoughts to Peace.” Yet while doing this, Adams surmised, they intended to “prepare some Sly Expedition” akin to Clinton’s attack on Charleston.⁷³ Adams’ official reports to Congress also discussed the British election, with his August 23 report framing the “Errand of Mr. Cumberland to Madrid” as the Ministry’s effort to aid “the Canvas for an Election.”⁷⁴ However, this peace mission, Adams asserted, was just cover while the Ministry prepared for “future Enterprizes and another Campaign.”⁷⁵ He returned to this issue in his October 14 letter to Congress, in which he relayed that the British had taken Henry Laurens prisoner. In discussing the possibility that the North administration might exchange Laurens for a British prisoner, as had happened before, Adams noted how capturing and keeping Laurens as a “Prisoner of State” (rather than a prisoner of war) was to signify the government’s commitment to the cause. Adams added further analysis:

that now they have obtained an Election of Parliament to their Minds, they are determind to prosecute the War, with Vigour, and to bring America Still to unlimited Submission. For however our Countrymen, may have flattered themselves with hopes of Peace, there is nothing further from the Thoughts of the King of England, his Ministers, Parliament, or Nation, for they are now all *his*, than Peace upon any Terms that America can agree to. There is no future Event more certain in my Mind than that they never will acknowledge American Independence while they have a Soldier in the united States. Nay, they would not do it, even after their Troops should be all driven from the Continent.⁷⁶

⁷³ John Adams to Samuel Huntington, 20 September 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁷⁴ John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 3, 23 August 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁷⁵ John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 3, 23 August 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁷⁶ John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 16, 14 October 1780, *Founders Online*. Emphasis original.

Any chance of utilizing the British public to pressure the king and “*his*” ministers towards peace was gone. The election had secured the power of the king and “*his*” ministers, and they were resolute in prosecuting the war to its violent ends, no matter the consequences. In his last October letter to the President of Congress, once news of the results of the British elections reached him, Adams opened his report by noting that the “British Ministry, by the terrible Examples of the Rioters, have So intimidated the Nation, and by their Success in the late Elections have So great a Majority in Parliament, that they think themselves secure for Seven Years, and Seem determined to go on, with more Vigour than ever.”⁷⁷ Adams’ worst fears about the election seemed to have come true, at least in his analysis of the results.⁷⁸ Though no extant letters speak to it, it is likely that he pondered what the outcome might have been if he *had* been able to announce to the British public his purpose. Would those that could vote have seen his plenipotentiary appointment as a sign that peace and trade was possible, and voted against candidates sponsored by the hawkish king and his ministry? On the other side of the election, with results he considered as further prolonging the violent conflict, Adams was left only with questions of “what if.”

Diplomacy is a delicate dance of both timing and power. But the type of dance depends on the relationship between the partners. Who leads and who follows, who keeps time and sets the pace, all factor in to the coordination and performance of the diplomatic

⁷⁷ John Adams to the President of Congress, No. 19, 31 October 1780, *Founders Online*.

⁷⁸ See John Adams to Nathaniel Tracy, 2 October 1780, *Founders Online*, wherein Adams shares his analysis about the results of the British election favoring the North administration. There is some debate over just how successful the North ministry was in retaining the majority in the 1780 election. Unlike modern politics wherein politicians sort themselves into more rigid political parties, in 18th century Britain the party system was nebulous. But while historians debate how strong the North ministry was coming out of the 1780 election, as a contemporary of the event, Adams viewed the election as having gone strongly for North’s hawkish ministry. See N.C. Phillips, “The British General Election of 1780: A Vortex of Politics,” *Political Science* vol. 11, no. 2 (1959): 3-22.

dance. Responding to outside variables, do the dance partners alter their steps or remain on course? Adams felt the timing was right to announce to the British voting public his full power to treat on behalf of the (independent) United States. By seizing this moment, Adams calculated, he could influence the outcome of the British parliamentary election to weaken, if not topple, the North ministry. After all, the Gordon Riots had shown that the country was fractured. The British government had only hung on to power by going to the extreme. Yet the discontent of the people remained. An election was forthcoming that could, perhaps, change the makeup of the British government. Adams' desire to capitalize on the political aftermath of the Gordon Riots—and his frustration at being denied the opportunity—ultimately is a story about not seizing the moment. It reveals the hesitations and conservativeness that often slowed diplomacy to a protracted pace. But, primarily, it reminds us of the delicate relationship between timing and power dynamics that we explored in the Cumberland affair. If John Adams did not have to consult with and abide by the wishes of the more powerful partner in the Franco-American alliance, Vergennes, then Adams might have been able to capitalize on the opportune moment in front of him. But Adams was not free to act on his own accord, even as a minister plenipotentiary from the United States. Because of this—because of the power relationships between diplomatic dance partners—the moment was lost. And just like Adams, we are only left with “what ifs.”

Everyday Diplomacy in America

When General Rochambeau's French naval squadron arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, in July 1780, they brought with them a portable printing press. It was not uncommon for the French to bring portable printing presses with them—they were a

useful tool for producing forms, administrative paperwork, and announcements and proclamations.⁷⁹ Among the production of this printing press was *La Gazette Française*, a weekly newspaper printed in French primarily for the officers (and literate troops) stationed in Newport.

La Gazette Française served multiple functions. It informed its French audience of the news curated by John Jastram, the French printer who operated the press. Following the norms of the day, Jastram reprinted information from other newspapers (the *Newport Mercury*, *American Journal*, and *Pennsylvania Gazette* among them) and cultivated information from letters and other sources.⁸⁰ For the reprinted stories, Jastram translated them from English to French. Jastram declared his intention in the first issue, stating that:

those among Messrs. The Officers, & other Persons who are not familiar with the language of the country, & who are interested in the political events of this nascent Nation, will be delighted to be able to obtain information about it, without having to resort to the task of translation. And so, I shall only commit myself vis-à-vis the Public, to repeating in French, what the Americans have said in their language.⁸¹

Jastram sought to supply his readers with insights into the political news their American allies consumed. Using his skills as a translator and printer, he cultivated news stories from American newspapers and sources that he discerned would offer his readers the informed ability to engage with Americans while in a shared geographic area and fighting a shared cause.

⁷⁹ Eugena Poulin and Claire Quintal, eds. and trans., *La Gazette Française, 1780-1781: Revolutionary America's French Newspaper* (Hanover, CT: Salve Regina University in association with University Press of New England, 2007), xviii-xix.

⁸⁰ For information on the practice of newspaper printers in collecting news, see Slauter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology;" Joseph Adelman, *Revolutionary Network: The Business of Politics and Printing, 1763-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 5-7.

⁸¹ Jastram would go on to advertise his services as an English tutor, and in a bit of irony for the translator and printer of the *La Gazette Française*, would admit he was pretty inexperienced at the job! Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, xx, xxii.

More than just informing French officers and troops of the news of the day, *La Gazette Française*, Jastram spread information through this medium that became a tool for diplomatic engagement. By translating and including information from American newspapers, Jastram afforded the French officers and troops insight into the affairs and interests of their American hosts. This was of great concern considering the poor impression many Newporters had of the French following the failure of the French navy during the siege of 1778.⁸² Though the French received a cautious welcome from the Newporters (including Patriot newspaper articles condemning the anti-Catholic violence in the Gordon Riots), Jastram could not take it for granted that the Americans were enthusiastic about the French stationed in their city.⁸³ By reprinting and including the news that their American hosts were circulating, *La Gazette Française* helped its French audience have insight into American concerns and interests, including those related to the Gordon Riots. For the officer class who might engage with Americans—be they fellow officers, or keepers of a public house, or purveyors of goods and services—this information gave them a leg up, a means to engage (if they spoke English, that is) with their American hosts. Knowledge of what Americans were concerned with leveled the playing field of everyday diplomatic encounters. It also provided the opportunity to bridge longstanding cultural

⁸² French warships under the command of Admiral d'Estaing, along with portions of the Continental Army, laid siege to the British-occupied Newport in summer 1778, but were ultimately unsuccessful in dispelling British occupation of the city. The British left of their own accord in 1779. For more on the siege, see T. Cole Jones, "'Displaying the Ensigns of Harmony': The French Army in Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1781," *The New England Quarterly* vol. LXXV, no. 3 (September 2012), 439-440; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 430-432; Thomas Coffin Amory, *The Siege of Newport, August 1778* (Newport, RI: Newport Historical Publishing Company, 1884).

⁸³ Articles reporting on the Gordon Riots, including descriptions and condemnation of the anti-Catholic violence, were printed in several Rhode Island newspapers shortly after the French arrived in Newport. See, for example, *Providence Gazette*, 26 August 1780; *American Journal*, 30 August 1780; *Newport Mercury*, 2 September 1780. Though the French had arrived ahead of the news of the riots, they likely did not have their printing press fully operational when the news of the riots first (and most extensively) circulated in the United States. By the time the press was settled ashore and up and running, the most all-encompassing news of the riots had passed, yet reports on the after effects continued.

hostilities, as the news related to the Gordon Riots reminded French allies of British anti-Catholicism in comparison to the less-hostile treatment from their American allies.⁸⁴

In November 1780, *La Gazette Française* printed two articles related to the Gordon Riots and their political fallout. These articles were limited in scope, especially compared to the expansive coverage given in Patriot newspapers (in August and September 1780). However, what was printed indicated Jastram's belief that the information shared with his audience revealed American interests and politics. On November 17, 1780, the first issue of *La Gazette Française* included news via packet ship to New York that "the trial of Lord Gordon has been put off until the month of November" amidst other news related to British and French military appointments.⁸⁵ More substantially, a November 30, 1780, article relayed the news of the anti-Catholic riots in Bath, England on June 9, linking them to the riots in London both in inspiration and in actors.⁸⁶ As the translators of *La Gazette Française* suggest, Jastram's inclusion of the English Anti-Catholic riots and prejudice "inspired even more respect on the part of the French for the cordial reception accorded them by the population of Newport."⁸⁷ It reminded Jastram's French readers of their

⁸⁴ For a discussion about Newporters' relative tolerance (or at least diminished anti-Catholicism), see Jones, "Displaying the Ensigns of Harmony," 434-448. Jones argues that, though not completely without anti-Catholic prejudice (as opposed to that of the surrounding New Englanders), "religious freedom, or 'liberty of conscience,' was of singular importance to Newporters," and was an important factor in their reception of the French military during the war (436).

⁸⁵ Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, 10-11. This same article also appeared in *Connecticut Journal*, 16 November 1780.

⁸⁶ Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, 26-28. I do not focus much on the subsequent riots in Bath in this work. The Bath riots are inextricably connected to the Gordon Riots. Both riots stem from anti-Catholic prejudice and suspicion of the government acting arbitrarily (something they consider a feature of Catholic thinking). Similar, in many ways, to the Scottish Riots in 1779. But the Gordon Riots took a decided turn towards attacking symbols of the state, whereas the Bath and Scottish riots primarily targeted known and suspected Catholic meeting houses, chapels, and businesses. The riots in Bath were also relatively short-lived. Coming after the Gordon Riots, the king's proclamation enabling troop action meant that, even though the Bath civil magistrates failed to suppress the riots, when troops entered Bath they quickly quashed the riots. For more on the Bath riots, see Colin Haydon, "The Gordon Riots in the English Provinces," *Historical Research* vol. 63, no. 152 (1990): 354-359.

⁸⁷ Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, 28.

shared enemy's anti-Catholicism and willingness to persecute Catholics through mob violence. Jastram's decision to include articles from American newspapers reporting on the anti-Catholic actions of their shared English enemies was an attempt to convey to his French readers that the Americans saw these actions as egregious. Even though Jastram did not give a source for the article, it was a direct translation from an article printed in the *American Journal* on November 25, 1780. That Jastram had framed his intentions just a few issues prior to translate the news from American newspapers and relay "what the Americans have said in their language" facilitated readers to interpret the report on the Bath riots as the view of the Americans.⁸⁸

Though *La Gazette Française* did not extensively report on the Gordon Riots or related events, what Jastram did share with his audience indicates his view of these events' importance. That both articles were copied from American newspapers, rather than other sources, is also telling. While his audience would not necessarily know the exact American newspaper source, as it was not indicated in the text per se, Jastram found this information worth sharing out of other potential news options. Considering that by November, Patriot newspapers' coverage of news related to the Gordon Riots had shrunk, and they were much more preoccupied by the fallout of Benedict Arnold's defection and other news, Jastram's purposeful decision to include these pieces gives insight into what he felt it was important for French readers to know. Anti-Catholicism was surging in Britain, while Britain's American descendants struggled to break free and showed more tolerance for their Catholic allies. Inherent in the information that Jastram printed was the weakness of the British government. The British government on one hand was delaying the trial of the

⁸⁸ Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, 1.

man responsible for devastating anti-Catholic riots, while also floundering to suppress the anti-Catholic riots when they spread beyond London. Jastram's publication of these two articles was an attempt to engender understanding and commonality between the French officers and their American hosts. They faced together an enemy they perceived to be bigoted and ruthless—and weak. In fighting together they were on the noble and just side, and a side that could win.

The story of *La Gazette Française* reminds us that diplomacy was not just what was conducted in France or Spain between appointed and credentialed men. Diplomacy could also happen on the ground, in everyday interactions between Patriot Americans living in Newport and French soldiers staying there as they helped to fight for American independence. It might not even be something these soldiers and residents consciously engaged in—as Eugena Poulin and Claire Quintal note, *La Gazette Française* did not appear in any officer's journal or memoirs.⁸⁹ It was a fleeting piece of ephemera, something to inform but not keep. Yet still, having access to this information possibly shaped the interactions between the French stationed in Newport and their American hosts. It certainly informed the French readership about American interests and concerns, and perhaps engendered feelings of commonality between them. After the disastrous and failed siege of 1778, the French needed to rebuild some trust and goodwill among their Newporter hosts. Jastram's efforts to help his French readers understand their American allies through publicizing news from the Americans, including news about the anti-Catholic riots, was one way to smooth over any lingering suspicion and concern.

⁸⁹ Poulin and Quintal, *La Gazette Française*, xxi.

The Gordon Riots influenced diplomatic relationships and engagements crucial to the belligerent empires in the American Revolutionary War. They produced tantalizing diplomatic “what ifs.” If the riots had not happened, would Spain and Britain have worked out a deal for Spain to pull out of the war? Richard Cumberland thought it possible. If Vergennes had allowed Adams to announce his plenipotentiary powers to a fractured and discontented British public, would they have returned more Opposition members in favor of peace at the September 1780 election? If the riots had not happened, what other sorts of American news would Jastram translate and reprint to his French officer audience to give them insight into the minds of their American allies? Diplomacy was a matter of power, timing, and political jockeying. The Gordon Riots occurred, and news spread of them, at a time that upset or reified power dynamics, or brought understanding, to diplomatic stages around the Atlantic. The riots revealed the contingency inherent to diplomacy. News of the riots created moments to be seized and perceptions to overcome against the backdrop of the American War for Independence. Few diplomats were successful in navigating the waters that the riots produced. Those that were not successful seemed to lament the “what if” left in the riots’ wake.

Conclusion

This dissertation examines how a week-long riot in London connected to a revolution across the Atlantic. The London rebellion formed a new node on the British Atlantic political feedback loop, spurred on by activities across the Atlantic and, in turn, spurring on an accelerated response. In the middle of the American Revolutionary War, London experienced its worst insurrection to date. For far too long, history has overlooked or downplayed the ties between these two events. Yet, as I have shown, the London riots and the American Revolution shared a multitude of connections. At the most basic level, the riots were in response to a British law intended to raise more troops to fight in the war. But looking beyond that surface level connection, we start to see the ways the American Revolution influenced the rioters and how the London insurrection affected the course of the American Revolutionary War.

These ostensibly domestic riots built upon democratic notions of governmental representation expressed by Americans in the 1760s and 1770s, and pushed by the burgeoning County Association movement in Britain in 1780. Members of the Protestant Association expected Parliament, as representatives of the people, to address their mass petition, especially when it was physically accompanied by a massive crowd to demonstrate public support. Parliament's dismissal of that petition provoked violent retaliation against symbols of power and the state. The rebellion only subsided when the government ordered troops to fire-at-will on the crowd, bypassing civil magistrates' approval for such action as legally required. The insurrection demonstrated that Britain's crisis was not merely imperial, but constitutional. Rather than bend to the populist desires expressed by the radical arm of the County Association movement and physically embodied by the

Protestant Association rioters, King George III and his ministers violently quashed the riots and delayed any sort of democratic concessions for decades to come.¹ In the wake of the riots, the government and its supporters used rumors and conspiracies to shift blame for the insurrection to external or dissenting actors who supposedly fomented the disturbance out of nothing, thereby absolving the government from addressing the authentic discontent felt by some segment of the British population. The riots, influenced by rhetoric from the American Revolution, seriously threatened the stability of the British government, prompting the government to resort to unprecedented use of power to maintain the status quo. Despite the government's success in suppressing the riots, the insurrection revealed a significant British population dissatisfied with the government's relationship to the people it purported to represent.

Although the British government was successful in staving off constitutional change in Britain, it enjoyed no such success in keeping the British empire intact. News of the insurrection influenced the course of the ongoing war for American independence, inspiring American Patriots and Loyalists to both continue fighting, while adding contingencies to ongoing diplomatic engagements. The riots proved to be a malleable event, allowing printers, politicians, prominent individuals, and diplomats to construct their own, often competing, meanings and narratives about the week-long insurrection. For Patriots, the riots confirmed that their critique of the British government was justified, especially in light of the king's troops' brutal suppression of rioters. "The King seems in a fair Way to the Summit of all his wishes, absolute Power," John Adams observed about

¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 334-350; Sean Lang, *Parliamentary Reform, 1785-1928* (London: Routledge, 1999); Eric Evans, *Parliamentary Reform in Britain, c. 1770-1918* (New York: Longman, 1999); Arthur Burnes and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

the London rebellion, underscoring how the king's response validated Patriot critiques of the British king prior to declaring independence.²

Loyalists similarly used the riots to their advantage, fitting them alongside other British military victories from the summer of 1780 as proof that the British government was on the path to victory. Loyalists' hope, however, was tinged with fears about the Sons of Liberty's dangerous republican ideology spreading and threatening to topple the government at the heart of the British empire. Still, Loyalists preferred to focus on the results of the riots and the government's triumph over radical dissent at home and expected the same would happen in the rebelling North American colonies as well.

As the Patriots and Loyalists made meaning of the riots to support their respective sides, diplomats around the Atlantic grappled with what the insurrection in London meant for their missions. For British secret diplomat Richard Cumberland, the riots marked an early death knell in his efforts to negotiate Spain pulling out from the war. For John Adams, who had hoped to use the political aftermath created by the rebellion to meddle in British politics, the post-riots political window was not enough to convince the French foreign minister to influence the British election. And in the on-the-ground diplomatic engagements of the French military stationed in Newport, Rhode Island, the riots were a means for French officers to promote understanding and commonalities with their American hosts and allies. In a multitude of ways, the riots filtered out beyond Britain's borders, inspiring those participating in the war to stay committed to the fight. The London insurrection, therefore, shaped the war in ways seen and unseen at the time.

² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 June 1780, *Founders Online*.

Placing the Gordon Riots in its proper relationship with the American Revolution challenges our understanding of the scope and extent of the revolution. Protestant Associators and rioters echoed the critiques raised by American Patriots about the British government's relationship to the people it governed and pushed for a radical reimagining of that relationship built upon the idea of popular sovereignty. The criticisms about the British government's representativeness raised on both sides of the Atlantic revealed a British constitution in crisis. The revolutionary ideas about popular sovereignty crossed the Atlantic and manifested among segments of the British population. With a government acting against their wishes, this segment saw no other option but to protest, first peacefully through a petition, and then through violence. More than appreciating how the riots reflected the revolution manifesting *in* Britain, the London insurrection shaped the course of the revolutionary war beyond Britain's shores. Patriots, Loyalists, and foreign diplomats all utilized the riots for their own purposes. Pulling from the riots different narratives, these groups saw the disturbance in London as having a real impact on the war. Whether revealing the British government's weakness and the disunity of the nation, or focusing on the British government's dynamic (and extralegal) use of power, for Patriots, Loyalists, and French and Spanish diplomats, the riots were an important and related part of the revolutionary (and world) war.

Restoring the London riots to their rightful place as part of the American Revolution emphasizes that the revolutionary ideas about political representation mattered, and they mattered to more than just the rebelling American Patriots. The London riots revealed that the revolution was not merely American, but a revolution against a particular kind of relationship between government and the people. Though this revolution only succeeded in changing the nature of government in one location (the

United States), it planted the seeds for change in Britain and demonstrated to the British government that a significant segment of its subjects expected the government to adhere to their wishes. Had George III and his ministry been unsuccessful in mercilessly squashing the rebellion, it was possible that rioters could have toppled the British government. Among the materials collected by General Jeffrey Amherst's troops deployed to suppress the riots were handbills calling for George to be dethroned, and demanding representation in Parliament.³ If George had not moved approximately 15,000 troops into London (a portion of which remained, as far as I can tell, for the rest of the war), and ordered them to fire-at-will, it is entirely possible the rebellion would have continued to grow and seriously threaten his crown. But because troops were successful in suppressing the insurrection, and staving off any further rebellions at the heart of the empire, George and his government held—at least for Britain.

Though the London rebellion was not as successful in forcing the British government to change compared to the American rebellion, the insurrection left its mark on the British nation. It is possible that the riots helped accelerate Britain's shift towards more bureaucratic policing. The Bow Street Runners predate the insurrection, but Londoners engaged them and other organized law enforcement increasingly in the decades following the riots.⁴ Electorally, the North administration's response to the riots led to North maintaining his hold on Parliament in the September 1780 election, delaying any political reform measures advocated for by Opposition members until after the war

³ Lord Grenville to Lord Amherst, 7 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/58-60; Lt. Col. Twisleton to Lord Amherst, 9 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/228-233; Richard Worsley to Lord Amherst, 11 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/325-326; Report from Lt. Col. Jonathan Marvel, 12 June 1780, TNA WO 34/103/367-368.

⁴ Robert Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 2004), 290-299.

ended.⁵ Indeed, the riots caused rifts among the Opposition members, and led to some losing their seats, including Edmund Burke (though he ended up returned for another seat bought by the Rockingham faction).

Beyond the electoral impact, the riots likely persuaded some Members of Parliament to change their political views. Living through the insurrection made clear to some politicians, including Edmund Burke, the dangers of an agitated population angling for more power. This might explain why Burke, who had tried to channel popular calls for political reform in Spring 1780, wholly objected to the popular demands made during the French Revolution.⁶ The riots may have further fed into the British government's response to those expressing support or sympathy for the French Revolution, resulting in laws to curb any similar democratic movement on British soil.⁷ Having lived through the week-long rebellion, when London seemed to teeter on the edge of collapse, the government feared support for the French revolutionaries might inspire Britons to reenact the 1780 riots, though with different results. Though the 1780 London riots did not overthrow the government, or succeed in forcing the government to be more responsive to public grievances, the insurrection left a legacy in pushing the government towards more conservative policies and restrictions on subjects' liberties.

⁵ Ian R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815*, The New History of England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 136-138, 198-200; Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture/University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 172-180.

⁶ Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 406-432.

⁷ Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 386-415.

Indeed, Lord George Gordon, who had been acquitted for high treason in relation to the 1780 riots, was convicted for defamation of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, in 1787. After a brief escape to the Netherlands, he returned to Britain and served his sentence in the rebuilt Newgate Prison. He died while imprisoned. Dominic Green, "The Lunatick Apostle: The Life and Times of Lord George Gordon (1751-1793)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2012), 445-515.

Beyond Britain, the riots served as part of a blueprint for later revolts during the Age of Revolutions. One of the defining moments of the French Revolution was the attack on the Bastille, the French prison and symbol of King Louis XVI's absolutist rule. If the French Revolution borrowed inspiration from the American Revolution (or at least owed a debt, literally, to the French debt caused by the Franco-American alliance), then the storming of the Bastille paralleled the London rioters' attack on Newgate and the other London prisons.⁸ This one event was tremendously important, symbolically if for no other reason, in the story of the French Revolution. Did the French insurgents intentionally parallel the attack that the London rioters had made on prisons nearly a decade before? We may never know for certain, but both the French and British rebels sought to challenge the monarchical authority prisons symbolized. Yet one prison's sacking (the Bastille) is commonly viewed as a key part of that nation's revolution, whereas the other's (Newgate) is too often separated from the revolution of which it was an important component. The difference might be chalked up to the immediate response of the government in quelling or acquiescing to the insurrectionists' demands. However, by appreciating the London riots as part of the American Revolution, we start to recognize the variety of places where popular sovereignty revolts manifested. Some manifestations were successful; others were not or only partial. But all of these exhibitions influenced political ideologies and practices during the Age of Revolutions.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to explore the various connections between the Gordon Riots and the American Revolution. While in some regards I had an

⁸ Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800 - Updated Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

abundance of primary sources to analyze, particularly British and Patriot materials, I faced more limits on sources from Loyalists. Many of the Loyalist collections I was able to access did not discuss the riots, likely due to self-censorship for fear of persecution, or because the materials relate to Loyalists' claims and efforts after the war. This shaped what stories I could tell, and how. While fortunate to have access to the Library of Congress' Foreign Copy Program collection, my limited ability to read French and Spanish also factored into what sources I could utilize. I was lucky, however, to find translations of certain documents, and to have the assistance of bilingual friends for other materials. Limits to sources and methods aside, time prohibited me from fully probing some aspects of the connections between the riots and the revolution. More can certainly be made of the religious complexities as they intersected with the riots and the revolution. Religious identity fractured during the American Revolution as the various denominations wrestled with their relationship to the British crown. The resurgence of anti-Catholic animus added another dimension to the fracture, one that I could only just scratch the surface. Additionally, I was unable to examine fully the nuances of the legal instruments used by the king-in-council to suppress the riots compared to actions taken to suppress the rebellion in the North American colonies. More analysis and comparisons in these areas might yield interesting insights that deepen our understanding of how the government saw connections between the riots and the revolution, and the similarities and differences in their approach to them. While these limits reflect some of the constraints of my project, I have still managed to demonstrate the important links between the London riots and the American Revolution.

This dissertation opens up questions for further research. One such area is the importance of timing, both in the course of the events of the riots as well as how news of

the riots was received by groups around the Atlantic. Factoring in the way the eighteenth-century political day unfolded in Britain could illuminate why the riots occurred when they did.⁹ Did Parliament starting so late in the day contribute to the crowd reaching its boiling point late in the evening? Similarly, the rhythm of communication around the Atlantic meant that some places received only partial news about the riots (Spain), whereas other places received the entire story from start to finish (British North America). This raises questions about how the compression or incompleteness of the story of the riots affected those hearing and reading about it. Additionally, my dissertation pushes us to consider the London insurrection as part of a revolutionary movement that arose in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Though the British government succeeded in stopping the riots from blossoming into all-out revolution, I argue they still mattered, and influenced the course of events. What other uprisings, riots, rebellions might we look at afresh with this understanding that failure does not mean it was not revolutionary? My work is not the first to do this, indeed many historians writing on slave rebellions have pushed this line of questioning.¹⁰ But I think it important to continue to revisit the issue and see in even the smallest disturbances and uprisings their potential to influence subsequent events. In the wake of two recent uprisings (Black Lives Matters 2020 and the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection) for two very, *very* different reasons, it behooves us to be mindful about how

⁹ Hannah Greig and Amanda Vickery, "The Political Day in London, c.1697–1834*," *Past & Present* 252, no. 1 (August 2021): 101–37.

¹⁰ See, for example: Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jason T. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (London ; Verso, 2018).

those in power react to such rebellions—and how they create policies to permit or deter such uprisings from happening again.

The crowds churned towards the stately building in front of them. Hurling insults at passers-by who moved to enter the legislative building, they vented their anger at their politicians—their *representatives*—for not heeding the protesters’ concerns and demands. Their very country and national identity were threatened by a perceived conspiracy to usurp power and ignore their will. As news spread throughout the mob, which had toppled any sort of barricade or crowd-directing barrier, that their politicians were ignoring their protest, the crowd’s already ominous presence intensified. If they could not make their representatives understand with their words, perhaps they could make them understand with violence.

The above scenario captures the atmosphere of the June 2, 1780, rally outside the British Parliament in support of the Protestant Association’s petition to repeal the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. But it just as easily could describe the atmosphere of the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. It is not a perfect parallel, but as I watched on television the scene unfolded mere miles away from my home on that fateful day, I could not help but reflect on my own research and understanding of the Gordon Riots. My sympathy for the London rioters was suddenly complicated by living through a similar situation where an aggrieved mob challenged the stability of my government. It was not the first time that modern events forced me to reconsider, then reconsider again, my understanding of the eighteenth-century insurrection in London. In the previous summer, wide-spread uprisings in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor

(as well as ongoing state brutality against people of color) provoked me to have more empathy toward the 1780 protestors. Although these and the Gordon Riots have fundamentally different political origins, there were striking similarities to the actions of the crowds in both instances—attacks on symbols of the state, demands for those in power to listen to those protesting what they viewed as injustice.

During and in the aftermath of the racial uprisings in 2020, a well rehearsed quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. was used to justify or explain (to white America) the behavior of some of the mob that engaged in property damage: “a riot is the language of the unheard.”¹¹ Perhaps trite from current overuse, there is a ring of truth to the quote, particularly if looking at the long history of crowd activity. Mobs, riots, uprisings, insurrections were all relatively common aspects to eighteenth century life in the British Atlantic.¹² In an era with limited avenues for formal democratic participation, crowd action was a means to force those in governmental or social power to bend. The modern-day disenfranchisement that exists for some, or is perceived to exist by others, in certain ways replicates the situation for segments of twenty-first century Americans. If the government that is supposed to represent you, that you have delegated your sovereignty to act in your stead, refuses to address your grievances—then the only avenue left for some Americans may be to rebel. Perhaps, then, those grievances might be finally addressed, either by the government bending, or through replacement of that government outright. But as the

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Other America,” Grosse Pointe High School, March 14, 1968, <https://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/mlkspeech/>.

¹² E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964); Lloyd I. Rudolph, “The Eighteenth Century Mob in America and Europe,” *American Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1959): 447–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2710309>; Pauline Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1970): 4–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1923837>; Shoemaker, *The London Mob*.

London riots and the American Revolution demonstrated, a government might be able to win the battle against one revolt by bearing down its full strength and power, while losing the overall war. Time will tell whether the fallout from 2020-2021 follows the pattern of 1780-1781.

Appendix

List of Patriot and Loyalist Newspapers Printing on the Riots and Related Events

The following lists of Patriot and Loyalist newspapers printed material related to the Gordon Riots (including preceding events in the two years prior, and the post-riots political and legal fallout). I have categorized the newspapers according to their political persuasion at the time of publishing material about the riots. In some cases, newspapers appear on both lists as a result of the wartime occupations that forced printers to switch allegiances (or abandon the press altogether).

Patriot Newspapers

Location	Newspaper	Printer
Providence, Rhode Island	<i>American Journal and General Advertiser</i>	Bennett Wheeler
Boston, Massachusetts	<i>Boston Evening Post and the General Advertiser</i>	Edward Eveleth Powars
Boston, Massachusetts	<i>Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal</i>	Benjamin Edes and Sons
Hartford, Connecticut	<i>Connecticut Courant; and the Weekly Intelligencer</i>	Hannah (Watson) Hudson/Barzillai Hudson & George Goodwin
New London, Connecticut	<i>Connecticut Gazette; and the Universal Intelligencer</i>	Timothy Green
New Haven, Connecticut	<i>Connecticut Journal</i>	Thomas & Samuel Green
Boston, Massachusetts	<i>Continental Journal, and Weekly Advertiser</i>	John Gill
Exeter, New-Hampshire	<i>Exeter Journal. Or, The New-Hampshire Gazette, and Tuesday's General Advertiser</i>	Zechariah Fowle
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Freeman's Journal: Or, the North-American Intelligencer</i>	Francis Bailey
Boston, Massachusetts	<i>Independent Chronicle; And the Universal Advertiser</i>	Nathaniel Willis
Boston, Massachusetts	<i>Independent Ledger, And the American Advertiser</i>	Draper & Folsom
Baltimore, Maryland	<i>Maryland Journal and the Baltimore Advertiser</i>	William Goddard
Worcester, Massachusetts	<i>Massachusetts Spy; Or, the Worcester Gazette</i>	Isaiah Thomas

Springfield, Massachusetts	<i>Massachusetts Gazette, or the Springfield and Northampton Weekly Advertiser</i>	Babcock & Haswell
Portsmouth, New Hampshire	<i>New-Hampshire Gazette. Or, the State Journal, and General Advertiser</i>	Daniel Fowle
Trenton, New Jersey	<i>New-Jersey Gazette</i>	Isaac Collins
Fishkill, New York	<i>New-York Packet, and the American Advertiser</i>	Samuel Loudon
Newport, Rhode Island	<i>Newport Mercury</i>	Solomon Southwick
Norwich, Connecticut	<i>Norwich Packet; or the Weekly Advertiser</i>	John Trumbull
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Pennsylvania Evening Post</i>	Benjamin Towne
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser</i>	Thomas Bradford
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Pennsylvania Packet. Or The General Advertiser</i>	John Dunlap
Providence, Rhode Island	<i>Providence Gazette; and Country Journal</i>	John Carter
Richmond, Virginia	<i>Virginia Gazette</i>	John Dixon & Thomas Nicolson

Loyalist Newspapers

Location	Newspaper	Printer
Savannah, Georgia	<i>Royal Georgia Gazette</i>	James Johnston
New York City, New York	<i>New-York Gazette; and the Weekly Mercury</i>	Hugh Gaine
New York City, New York	<i>Royal Gazette</i>	James Rivington
New York City, New York	<i>Royal American Gazette</i>	Alexander Robertson
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Pennsylvania Evening Post</i>	Benjamin Towne
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Pennsylvania Ledger: or the Philadelphia Market-Day Advertiser</i>	James Humphreys
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	<i>Royal Pennsylvania Gazette</i>	James Robertson
Charleston, South Carolina	<i>South-Carolina and American General Gazette</i> (name changed to <i>The Royal Gazette</i> in March 1781)	John Wells

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Historical Society of Pennsylvania
William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan
Library of Congress
British Library
The National Archives (United Kingdom)
Georgian Papers Programme, Royal Archives (United Kingdom)
Old Bailey Online/Digital Panopticon
State Papers Online (Gale)
Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration (United States)
Rotunda Online, University of Virginia

Primary Sources: Newspapers & Periodicals

Great Britain:

Adam's Weekly Courant, Chester, England
Caledonian Mercury, Edinburgh, Scotland
Chester Chronicle, Chester, England
Edinburgh Magazine, Edinburgh, Scotland
Gentleman's Magazine, London, England
General Evening Post, London, England
Hibernian Magazine, Dublin, Ireland
London Chronicle, London, England
London Courant, London, England
London Evening Post, London, England
Monthly Review, London, England
Morning Chronicle, London, England
Morning Post, London, England
New Annual Register, London, England
Political Magazine, London, England
Protestant Magazine, London, England
Public Advertiser, London, England
Scots Magazine, Edinburgh, Scotland
St. James Chronicle, London, England
Whitehall Evening Post, London, England
Yorkshire Freeholder, York, England

United States:

American Journal, Providence, Rhode Island
Boston Evening Post, Boston, Massachusetts
Boston Gazette, Boston, Massachusetts
Connecticut Courant, Hartford, Connecticut
Connecticut Gazette, New London, Connecticut

Connecticut Journal, New Haven, Connecticut
Continental Journal, Boston, Massachusetts
Exeter Journal, Exeter, New Hampshire
Freeman's Journal, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Independent Chronicle, Boston, Massachusetts
Independent Ledger, Boston, Massachusetts
Maryland Journal, Baltimore, Maryland
Massachusetts Spy, Worcester, Massachusetts
Massachusetts Gazette, Springfield, Massachusetts
New-Hampshire Gazette, Portsmouth, New Hampshire
New-Jersey Gazette, Trenton, New Jersey
New-York Gazette, New York City, New York
New-York Packet, Fishkill, New York
Newport Mercury, Newport, Rhode Island
Norwich Packet, Norwich, Connecticut
Pennsylvania Evening Post, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Journal, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Ledger, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Packet, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Providence Gazette, Providence, Rhode Island
Royal American Gazette, New York City, New York
Royal Gazette, New York City, New York
Royal Georgia Gazette, Savannah, Georgia
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