



Patriots, Loyalists, and Fence-Sitters: A Revolution Divided

Whose Side Were You On?

It is tempting to imagine the American Revolution as thirteen colonies united against British rule. The reality was considerably messier. Americans were divided among active Patriots who supported independence, Loyalists who remained faithful to the Crown, and a large number of people who tried to remain neutral—or at least avoided committing themselves until they had some idea which side might win.

Exactly how many belonged to each group is impossible to determine. Loyalties changed during the war, varied enormously from one colony to another, and were sometimes deliberately concealed. Historians generally estimate that about **20 to 30 percent of the population remained Loyalist**, while Patriot support fluctuated throughout the conflict.

That uncertainty tells us something important about the Revolution itself. It was not simply a war between Americans and foreigners. **It was also a civil war among Americans who profoundly disagreed about what America should become.**

The Patriots Had the Most to Gain—and Lose

The Patriots came from nearly every level of colonial society. They included merchants, lawyers and southern planters, but also farmers, craftsmen, tradesmen and working people. Their reasons for supporting the Revolution were equally varied.

Merchants resented British commercial restrictions. Land speculators and settlers objected to restrictions on western expansion. Political activists condemned taxation imposed by a Parliament in which the colonies had no elected representation. Others became convinced that British actions threatened rights they believed belonged to them as Englishmen.

Men such as Samuel Adams transformed those grievances into a broader argument about liberty and political power. By 1776, independence—not merely reform within the British Empire—had become the Patriot objective.

Yet Patriots were hardly a unified political party. They disagreed over class, wealth, religion, state interests and the kind of government that should eventually replace British rule. Those differences would become more obvious after independence and would contribute to later disputes between Federalists and Anti-Federalists and eventually to the emergence of America's first political parties.

First, however, they had to win the war.

The Fence-Sitters

Between the Patriots and Loyalists stood a much harder group to measure: people who preferred not to choose either side.

For many colonists, political philosophy probably mattered less than keeping a farm productive, operating a shop, protecting a family and surviving a war. Allegiance could also depend upon which army happened to occupy the neighborhood. Supporting the Patriots could be dangerous when British troops arrived; openly supporting the king could be equally dangerous when Patriot militia controlled the area.

There were also people whose neutrality was based on principle. Pennsylvania Quakers, for example, had religious objections to warfare and attempted to maintain their pacifism despite pressure from both sides.

The Revolution therefore forced political choices upon people who might otherwise have preferred to make none. Remaining neutral became increasingly difficult as armies requisitioned supplies, governments demanded loyalty, militia units recruited men and neighbors began deciding who was a Patriot and who was a Tory.

Why Remain Loyal to the King?

Loyalists had many reasons for opposing independence. Some held government positions dependent upon royal authority. Others had commercial, family or social connections to Britain. Some sincerely believed that British constitutional government provided greater stability and liberty than an uncertain revolutionary experiment.

Fear mattered as well. To many Loyalists, the Revolution looked less like a glorious struggle for liberty than an illegal rebellion that might collapse into disorder. They did not know in 1776 that

George Washington would eventually win. Betting against the most powerful empire in the Atlantic world was hardly an irrational decision.

Regional and social rivalries also played a part. In parts of the South, some backcountry settlers resented wealthy coastal elites who supported the Patriot cause. Elsewhere, local feuds that had little to do with Parliament or taxation became absorbed into the larger war.

The Revolution gave old enemies new labels.

Native Americans Faced a Different Choice

For Native American nations, the choice between Britain and the Americans involved an entirely different calculation. Many had little reason to regard expanding American settlement as a cause for celebration. British authorities had sometimes attempted to restrain colonial settlement west of the Appalachians, while American settlers increasingly coveted Native lands.

Some Native nations therefore allied with Britain because they believed the Crown offered their best hope of slowing American expansion. The Mohawks and other members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy became particularly important British allies, although the Revolution also divided the Confederacy itself.

Their fears of American expansion proved well founded. Whatever benefits independence brought the new United States, it brought no comparable victory to Britain's Native allies.

Freedom Offered by the British

For enslaved Americans, the words *Patriot* and *Loyalist* could have meanings quite different from those understood by white colonists.

In November 1775, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to enslaved people belonging to rebels who escaped and joined British forces. Hundreds joined his Ethiopian Regiment, whose uniforms carried the extraordinary motto “**Liberty to Slaves.**” Thousands of other enslaved people subsequently sought freedom behind British lines

Their allegiance was not necessarily devotion to King George III. For many, the calculation was considerably more direct: **which side offered the best chance of freedom?**

The answer was not always Britain. Thousands of Black men also served in American forces during the Revolution. The conflict therefore presented enslaved people with opportunities as well as terrible risks, and African Americans could be found serving on both sides.

Some Black Loyalists evacuated with the British after the war and settled in places such as Nova Scotia; some of their descendants later migrated to Sierra Leone. Their story adds another complication to the familiar claim that the American Revolution was simply a struggle between Americans seeking liberty and Britons trying to deny it.

Sometimes It Really Was a Civil War

Nowhere was the Revolution's civil-war character clearer than in the South. Patriot and Loyalist militia sometimes fought one another with a ferocity made worse because the enemy might be a neighbor.

The **Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780** is a particularly striking example. The British commander, Major Patrick Ferguson, led a force composed largely of American Loyalists. The Patriot force that surrounded and defeated them consisted largely of American frontiersmen and militia. Americans were fighting Americans.

Kings Mountain seriously damaged British hopes of mobilizing Loyalist strength in the Carolinas and contributed to the difficulties Cornwallis faced during the Southern Campaign. It was another demonstration that British military occupation did not automatically translate into political control.

Benjamin Franklin's Loyalist Son

Perhaps no family better illustrates the personal divisions caused by the Revolution than Benjamin Franklin's. Franklin became one of the most famous advocates of American independence and one of the new nation's most important diplomats. His son William Franklin took the opposite side. William was the royal governor of New Jersey and remained an ardent Loyalist.

The political division became a family rupture. Father and son were never truly reconciled. Their story reminds us that the Revolution did not merely divide colonies, legislatures and armies. It divided friendships, communities, churches and families.

What Happened to the Loyalists?

Victory brought serious consequences for those who had chosen the losing side. Loyalists could face fines, confiscation of property, loss of political rights, harassment and occasional mob violence. Patriot governments had arrested Loyalists and seized property during the war; the Library of Congress notes that Patriot authorities actively attempted to suppress Loyalist activity.

The peace settlement attempted to address some of these problems. Under the **Treaty of Paris of 1783**, Congress agreed to *recommend* that state legislatures restore confiscated Loyalist property and reconsider laws directed against them. The treaty also prohibited future confiscations and prosecutions based upon a person's wartime allegiance. Congress, however, lacked the power simply to order the states to return everything that had been taken.

Tens of thousands of Loyalists ultimately left the United States, relocating principally to British Canada, Britain and the Caribbean. For them, American independence meant exile rather than liberation.

The Winners Wrote Most of the Story

American history naturally remembers Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and the Patriots who created the United States. The Loyalists largely disappeared from the national story because their vision of America's future lost.

Yet removing them from the story makes the Revolution seem simpler than it really was.

The colonists did not wake up one morning in 1776 unanimously determined to become Americans. They argued about independence, fought over it, sometimes changed sides, sometimes refused to choose a side, and occasionally killed neighbors who had chosen differently.

Patriots ultimately won the Revolution and created the United States. Loyalists lost homes, property, influence and sometimes their country. Native Americans who supported Britain discovered that the peace settlement offered them little protection against American expansion. Enslaved people sought freedom wherever they believed they could find it.

The American Revolution created a new nation—but before Americans could become one people, they first had to survive a war in which they were deeply divided over whether that nation should exist at all.