Loyalists, fence-sitters and patriots in the American Revolution

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Image 1. British loyalists fought alongside British soldiers and Native Americans at the Battle of Oriskany on August 6, 1777. This 1857 engraving by John Reuben Chapin depicts a scene at the battle. Print: Wikimedia Commons/Ballou's pictorial

It is impossible to know the exact number of American colonists who favored or opposed independence.

For years it was widely believed that one-third favored the Revolution, one-third opposed it and one-third were undecided. This stems from an estimate made by John Adams in his personal writings in 1815.

Historians have since concluded that Adams was referring to American attitudes toward the French Revolution, not ours. The current thought is that about 20 percent of the colonists were loyalists — those who remained loyal to England and King George. Another small group in terms of percentage were the dedicated patriots, for whom there was no alternative but independence.

On The Fence

Often overlooked are the fence-sitters who made up the largest group.
With so many Americans undecided, the war became in great measure a battle to win popular support. If the patriots could succeed in selling their ideas of revolution to the public, then popular support might follow and the British would be doomed.

Even with a military victory, it would have been impossible for the Crown to regain the allegiance of the people. Revolution would merely flare up at a later date.

The British understood the need to attract American popular support for the parent country, as well. Some colonists who were not persuaded by the political struggle joined the British for personal gain or military glory. Some joined out of sheer loyalty to the Crown — they still believed themselves loyal British citizens. There were also many American farmers willing to sell their goods to the British for profit.

In the long run, however, the Patriots were much more successful in attracting support. American patriots won the war of propaganda. Committees of Correspondence persuaded many fence-sitters to join the patriot cause. Writings such as Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" stirred newfound American nationalism.

Patriots subjected loyalists to public humiliation and violence. Many loyalists found their property vandalized, looted and burned. The patriots controlled public discourse. Woe to the citizen who publicly proclaimed sympathy to Britain.

Families were sometimes divided over the revolution. Benjamin Franklin's son, William, a loyalist governor of New Jersey, supported the British effort during the war. William Franklin, rarely, if ever, spoke to his patriot father Ben after the war.

What Happened To The Loyalists?

In the end, many loyalists simply left America. About 80,000 of them fled to Canada or Britain during or just after the war. Because loyalists were often wealthy, educated, older and Anglican, the American social fabric was altered by their departure. American history brands them as traitors. But most were just trying to maintain the lifestyles to which they had become accustomed. After all, history is always written by the winners.
Read the following selection from the section "What Happened To The Loyalists?"

*But most were just trying to maintain the lifestyles to which they had become accustomed. After all, history is always written by the winners.*

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selection above?

(A) Loyalists were primarily concerned with preserving their busy lifestyles by maintaining contact with England.

(B) Loyalists were primarily concerned with protecting their wealth by maintaining contact with England.

(C) The patriots’ victory in the American Revolution made it impossible for loyalists to stay in the United States.

(D) The patriots’ victory in the American Revolution took away the power the loyalists used to have.

Which of the following claims does the author support the LEAST?

(A) Some people remained loyalists because they wanted military glory.

(B) The patriots used propaganda effectively to convince others to join them.

(C) Historically, it has been unclear exactly how many people supported the American Revolution.

(D) A major goal of the patriots was winning over the people who were undecided about the revolution.

What role did propaganda play in the American Revolution?

(A) It inspired many people to join the patriots' cause.

(B) It inspired many people to join the loyalists' cause.

(C) It created divisions within Benjamin Franklin's family.

(D) It created divisions within many colonies.

Which sentence BEST explains how patriots affected loyalists?

(A) Patriots would attempt to send loyalists back to England.

(B) Patriots would use propaganda in an effort to convert loyalists.

(C) Patriots would subject loyalists to public shame and violence.

(D) Patriots would try to divide the members of loyalist families.