WEST INDIES

Why did the British West Indies fail to support the American revolt?

Viewpoint: The British West Indies were far too dependent on the mother country economically, socially, and militarily to join the American War of Independence.

Viewpoint: The white inhabitants of the British Caribbean had more conservative views of the English constitution and Empire than those held by Americans.

Great Britain possessed twenty-six colonies in the Americas, but only the thirteen mainland colonies rebelled against the mother country in 1775. Why? The refusal of the British West Indies to support the American rebellion is puzzling, especially considering that the sugar islands had close social and economic ties with the mainland colonies and shared many of the essential preconditions of the American Revolution (1775-1783). As early as 1651, for example, Barbadians denied Parliament’s right to tax them on the grounds that legislation without representation was a violation of their rights as Englishmen. Thirty years later Jamaica’s assembly successfully established its right to legislate in all domestic matters. Like their mainland counterparts, the island colonists during the eighteenth century sought increasing control over internal taxation, the local militia, the islands’ defenses, the administering of governmental expenditures, the appointment of local officials, and the executive-decision-making process. The republican ideology of the American Revolution and Britain’s attempt to subdue the Americans by force intensified these political contests and created a political and constitutional crisis on some Caribbean islands. Local assemblies made claims of coequality with the House of Commons and usurped executive powers, while some island colonists refused to pay taxes and persecuted government officials determined to uphold the Crown’s prerogative. Some West Indians even drank to the American Revolution and openly called for their own rebellion. In short, the American Revolution severely tested the ties between the British Caribbean and the mother country.

Traditionally, historians have focused on military, economic, social, and demographic factors in answering the question of why the British West Indies refused to join the American War of Independence. They point out that the island colonies needed royal protection against foreign attacks and slave revolts; that the sugar islands were dependent on the British market for their leading export staple; and that the relatively high percentage of absentee landlords, many of whom resided in Britain, not only increased their attachment to the mother country but also inhibited the development of an incipient nationalism throughout the Caribbean.

Recently, historians have given a more nuanced explanation of why the British sugar islands did not join the American rebellion. Some scholars assert that the British Caribbean remained loyal because of fundamental differences between the island and mainland colonies. While acknowledging that the military, economic, social, and demographic factors mentioned above were important, they maintain that the West Indians and Americans held different views of the English constitution and Empire. Unlike the main-
land colonists, Caribbean leaders believed in obedience to authority and the concept of Parliamentary sovereignty. Their protests against imperial taxation, for example, derived more from practical and commercial purposes than constitutional ones. Also undermining island support for the American cause was the illicit trade in molasses between North America and the French West Indies. Indeed, American leaders suspected the powerful West Indian lobby of pushing through Parliament the post-1763 measures designed to bridle this illegal trade, which enriched American merchants but cut into the profits of Caribbean sugar planters. Finally, the British Caribbean lacked a large underclass of small landowners and artisans who could have provided as much momentum to a rebellion as their counterparts did on the mainland.

Despite the different explanations for the British Caribbean’s refusal to support the American War of Independence, a study of the sugar islands during this period is important for a more complete understanding of both the causes and consequences of the American Revolution. After all, these islands provided more revenue to the Crown’s coffers than did the mainland colonies, and thus they received special consideration from Whitehall. The sugar islands’ economic importance to Britain, as well as their “passivity toward colonial reforms,” affected imperial policy toward North America. Indeed, the British government devoted enormous resources toward defending their West Indian possessions during the Anglo-American conflict, expenditures that contributed to its failure to quell the American revolt. Finally, the division between North America and the British West Indies following the Revolution significantly impacted the institution of slavery and the economies of both regions.

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Scholars recently have focused much attention upon the unwillingness of the British West Indian colonists to support the American Revolution (1775–1783). Historians correctly have recognized that the Caribbean settlers, although ideologically similar to their North American counterparts, responded differently to metropolitan attempts at bureaucratic centralization primarily because of their peculiar economic and military dependence on the mother country. What scholars have failed to notice, however, are the diverse reasons for that dependence. They have thought of the British West Indies (Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, Tobago, and Tortola) as having more homogeneity than was the case, and thus they have not been aware of the special factors in the islanders’ resistance to independence. Although common motives existed, the West Indian planters’ decision to remain within the British Empire was based most of all on their desire to guard their interests on each island. They were guided neither by great loyalty to the British Crown nor by a sense of corporate identity with the British West Indies.

Certainly all of the British West Indian colonists shared in the plantation economics of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. All depended upon African slaves to supply labor; all needed British capital and markets; and all required British naval and military protection. Yet, a variety of political, geographical, and economic factors determined that the planters of the respective islands would establish their own particular relationships to the Empire. Although English settlers of the seventeenth century “first-phase” colonies—Barbados, Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Kitts, and Jamaica—nurtured a flourishing economy based upon sugar, those of the “second-phase” colonies—the Ceded Islands of Grenada, St. Vincent, Dominica, and Tobago (all acquired in 1763)—of necessity had to rely upon other crops as well. Nor did the same colonial regulations, types of government, or laws pertain to all the British West Indies. Even the ethnic mix of the islands varied considerably. In the second-phase settlements, for example, there were many French residents who had remained after the transfer of the Ceded Islands from France to Great Britain.

From the mid seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, West Indian planters were the most prominent and influential colonists within the British Empire. They were the primary beneficiaries of a closed market system that guaranteed them a monopoly of British markets. To their benefit, Parliament maintained sugar and rum prices that were among the highest in Europe. This arrangement especially promoted the success of elite planters who established multiple estates, built sophisticated sugar factories, and purchased large numbers of slaves. Almost from the outset of British colonization in the West Indies, highly successful planters were able to retire in Britain. Once in the mother country they purchased massive estates, arranged advan-
tageous marriages for their offspring, and gained seats in Parliament. Their success was spectacular, especially when compared to the vicissitudes of North American colonists who increasingly complained that Parliament ignored their concerns. In London, the well-connected West Indian planters regularly lobbied and enticed British officials to act on their behalf, unlike the discouraged Bostonians, Philadelphians, or New Yorkers who found little redress.

While West Indians benefited from their special relationship with Britain, they were tied to English financial institutions. Imperial creditors and merchants extended the necessary capital for purchasing estates, machinery, and laborers. Together with the planters they constructed a plantation system that was central to the transatlantic economy. This “plantation complex,” as historian Philip Curtin has labeled it, depended upon European capital and management as well as the continual supply of coerced labor from the British slave trade. In exchange for multiple benefits, West Indian planters surrendered to overseas economic and political authority while retaining almost absolute control over their estates.

The dependence upon metropolitan bankers was especially pronounced in newer colonies where settlers sought to build impressive estates in a single generation. These costly enterprises ensured continued reliance on contacts with the Old World. Throughout the West Indies, planters mortgaged their estates to obtain necessary credit, and the lure of metropolitan financing proved stronger than access to North American markets. Although during the American Revolution the West Indian planters complained mightily once they lost the ability to purchase cheap North American goods and sell their products to Yankee traders, their dependence on metropolitan banks ensured that they would oppose any rebellion that meant severing ties with Great Britain.

The predominance of sugar cultivation also connected the Caribbean colonies to Britain, even though recent scholars have identified several preconditions to revolution that West Indians shared with the North Americans. By 1775 planters in the first-phase colonies were especially loyal to the Crown because of the triumph of sugar monoculture, which so dominated islands such as Barbados and Antigua that the populations there neglected subsistence agriculture and imported basic food supplies. Sugar planters were rigidly committed to this staple because of the substantial capital investments they had made to establish their plantations. Once they began to acquire profits, planters expanded production of sugar rather than diversifying their agriculture. After a century of customary dependence upon sugar and its place in the British-controlled transatlantic economy, they had little desire to support the American Revolution.
Colonists in the second-phase settlements were much more flexible agriculturists, however, than their counterparts in Barbados, the Leeward Islands, and Jamaica. A variety of geographical and economic factors ensured that planters in Grenada, St. Vincent, Tobago, and Dominica were much more willing to avoid crop specialization. While Grenadian planters became the second-largest sugar producers in the British Caribbean by the American Revolution, they continued growing impressive quantities of coffee, cocoa, and cotton. The rugged topography of Dominica prohibited extensive sugar cultivation, which flourished in flat terrain. The arid climate and sandy soil of much of the Grenadines, meanwhile, proved especially favorable to cotton cultivation. During the late eighteenth century, islands such as Carriacou and Mustique were some of the primary colonial cotton producers. During the American Revolution the economy of the Ceded Islands was also much less mature than that of the sugar colonies, in part because sugar monoculture never took hold. Ceded Island planters were therefore more responsive to changes in market conditions than the first-phase colonists, although they still depended upon the British for capital and trade.

Largely because of their particular economic interests, planters in the first- and second-phase settlements confronted crucial issues of the American Revolutionary era much differently. For instance, while Jamaicans and Barbadians supported the Sugar Act (1764), the plantocracy of the Ceded Islands successfully challenged the imposition of sugar duties. In 1774, Chief Justice Lord Mansfield ruled in favor of planters in the Ceded Islands in the landmark case Campbell v. Hall. In this suit the Grenadian planter and assemblyman Alexander Campbell sued the local British customs official, challenging the Crown’s prerogative to levy the customary 4.5 percent sugar duty in the Ceded Islands. Lord Mansfield ruled in favor of Campbell, contending that in the charter establishing the government for the Ceded Islands, the Crown had indeed surrendered the right to levy taxes to the newly created Ceded Island assemblies.

The Campbell v. Hall case demonstrates that scholars have overemphasized West Indian passivity to imperial administration. In fact, it was not passivity but confrontation that might have served to allay revolutionary sentiment. The Grenadians were actually opposed to the growth of imperial authority. The British concessions to Campbell’s suit brought satisfaction to the Ceded Island colonists.

The foremost objective of West Indian planters was to establish and maintain a hierarchical society that recognized social inequities. The West Indian system itself was built upon slavery, and Caribbean planters aggressively struggled to build a world of privilege. West Indian law recognized the enslaved person as chattel, or movable property, and saw him or her as an extension of the master’s will. The primary wealth of the elite planters was composed of slaves and land, and local legislatures worked to guard planters and their property rights. The establishment and maintenance of the plantocracy, however, meant that elite planters had to be vigilant within their communities while seeking help from the metropolis. At times their attentions were divided, and some often left for London to lobby for their interests, leaving the management of their estates to lawyers, kin, or other overseers.

In the pursuit of their selfish concerns and even in their confrontations with the Crown, the planters were hardly rebels against the Empire. Planters demanded autonomous legislatures that reflected their demands as property holders. For example, the government of the Southern Charibbee Islands, which administered the Ceded Islands of Grenada, St. Vincent, Dominica, and Tobago, fell apart almost as soon as it was organized in 1763. It was dismembered as planters and merchants in each island insisted upon independent governors and local assemblies, and they also required island registries to maintain legal records. Colonists in the Leeward Islands also resisted British attempts to create a centralized government as they successfully demanded their own lieutenant governors and local assemblies in Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts. Because autonomous legislatures represented the demands of the local planters, they survived, even though there were often few Europeans to fill vacant positions. The British concessions to local autonomy proved wise. Under the circumstances, if West Indian planters had yoked themselves to the thirteen North American colonies, they would have jeopardized their own independence.

Perhaps the most important factor ensuring West Indian loyalty to the British Empire was their military dependence upon imperial troops to protect the islands from foreign invasion. Because European settlements were in close proximity, the threat was real. Historian Richard Dunn contends that French invasions and occupations of the Leeward Islands slowed the rate of development in those islands during the seventeenth century. Similarly, French reoccupation of the Ceded Islands during the Revolutionary War stultified the British plantations. The problem was most acute in Tobago, which remained under French rule until the end of the eighteenth century. Barbados was the only British Caribbean possession to escape occupation, and it benefited accordingly. Throughout the Caribbean, sugar planters needed stability and the assurance that their estates, crops, and slaves could be protected from French and perhaps other forces.

The planters also sought British protection from internal threats. Since small communities of elite planters held tenuous sway over thousands of
enslaved African and Creole slaves, they sometimes were easily overwhelmed, and slave rebellions were frequent. In islands such as Jamaica, Dominica, and Grenada, bands of maroons waged war against local plantations and often reduced nearby plantations to turmoil. The problem was most acute on islands with vast interiors or in colonies where plantation communities were not firmly established. In Grenada and Dominica, British planters feared their French counterparts who also owned extensive land tracts. Anglo-French ethnic tensions rose to their highest during times of hostilities between France and Britain. Also, on St. Vincent, Carib Indians prevented the territorial expansion of West Indian planters until their eviction in the final years of the eighteenth century. Not surprisingly, elites throughout the Indies were dependent upon imperial troops to intimidate internal enemies. Securing internal stability was a task even more monumental than safeguarding individual islands from foreign invasion.

Undoubtedly, many West Indians sympathized with their North American neighbors during the American Revolution. Planters in the Ceded Islands had already challenged British attempts to impose duties without the support of local assemblies. With their large numbers of slaves, however, West Indian planters could not support a rebellion that challenged hierarchical rule. The livelihood of elite planters depended upon British law to justify their privileges and to protect their property. It was Parliament and the Crown, the forces that the thirteen North American colonies opposed, that undergirded the West Indian system and ensured its privileged position within the Empire. As the American Revolution progressed, it exposed essential problems of the West Indian planters, primarily their dependence upon inexpensive, unfinished North American goods. Yet, Caribbean planters could not join the revolution without giving up their local autonomy or destroying their vital economic, social, and military links to the British Empire.

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Viewpoint:
The white inhabitants of the British Caribbean had more conservative views of the English constitution and Empire than those held by Americans.

The Thirteen Colonies represented only half of the provinces of British America in 1775. The majority of the rest, and indeed the wealthiest, were in the Caribbean: Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, Tobago, and Tortola. These colonies shared to a large degree the essential preconditions of the American Revolution, but they did not rebel. They shared similar political developments and a similar political ideology to North America and were closely associated with the mainland colonies by their proximity and trade. Their plantation system was analogous to the Southern mainland colonies, especially South Carolina. In a period when most British colonists in North America lived less than two hundred miles inland and the major cities were often situated along the coast, the ocean often acted as a highway between the islands and the mainland rather than a barrier. Yet, when revolution came, the majority of the white island colonists did not side with their compatriots on the mainland.

In 1775 there was no republican shift in the political ideology of the British Caribbean. Planters continued to think of liberty in traditional hierarchical terms. They defined rights narrowly as privileges associated with property and corporations; they preferred a traditional rhetoric of customary rights and privileges rather than universal abstract rights; they avoided discussion of natural rights and equality; they did not appropriate the republican language of virtue to claim moral superiority over the corruption of the mother country; they did not attempt to widen the franchise; they did not try to disestablish the Anglican Church; they did not expand their concept of education to advocate broader opportunities, even among the white population; and they exhibited no sudden wish to change or to improve their societies.

The divergence of the British West Indies and North America at the time of the Declaration of Independence (1776) was anticipated in the 1760s. West Indians not only supported the Sugar Act, the first direct imperial tax, but also campaigned for higher duties after 1764. Although the Stamp Act (1765) imposed a greater fiscal burden on the Caribbean than on North America, Jamaica and Barbados paid stamp duties in contrast to all the thirteen mainland colonies. The mainland Patriots mocked the submission of these islands because they regarded any payment of imperial duties as an acknowledgment of Parliamentary authority to tax the colonies and therefore as a fatal precedent. Stamp Act riots occurred in St. Kitts and Nevis, but these events happened only after threats of what amounted to an economic boycott by the mainland Patriots. The Leeward Islands had little choice but to resist because they imported most of their food from North America. They risked a famine and the associ-
GOOD WISHES OF THE FRIENDS OF LIBERTY

In late December 1774 the assembly in Jamaica sent a petition to King George III on behalf of the thirteen mainland colonies. Although this attempt at mediation in the growing Anglo-American crisis failed, the Continental Congress thanked the Jamaicans for their efforts:

MR. SPEAKER AND GENTLEMEN OF THE ASSEMBLY OF JAMAICA,

We would think ourselves deficient in our duty, if we suffered this Congress to pass over, without expressing our esteem for the assembly of Jamaica.

Whoever attends to the conduct of those who have been entrusted with the administration of the British affairs, during these last twelve years, will discover in it, a deliberate plan to destroy, in every part of the empire, the free constitution, for which Britain has been so long and so justly famed.

An appeal to the justice and humanity of those who had injured us, and who were bound to redress our injuries, was ineffectual: we next resolved to make an appeal to their interests, though by doing so, we knew we must sacrifice our own, and (which gave us equal uneasiness) that of our friends, who had never offended us, and who were connected with us by a sympathy of feelings, under oppressions similar to our own. We resolved to give up our commerce that we might preserve our liberty. We flattered ourselves, that when, by withdrawing our commercial intercourse with Britain, which we had an undoubted right either to withdraw or continue, her trade should be diminished, her revenues impaired, and her manufactures unemployed, our ministerial foes would be induced by interest, or compelled by necessity, to depart from the plan of tyranny which they had so long pursued, and to substitute in its place, a system more compatible with the freedom of America, and justice of Britain. That this scheme of non-importation and non-exportation might be productive of the desired effects, we were obliged to include the islands in it. From this necessity, and from this necessity alone, has our conduct towards them proceeded. By converting your sugar plantations into fields of grain, you can supply yourselves with the necessities of life: While the present unhappy struggle shall continue, we cannot do more.

But why should we make any apology to the patriotic assembly of Jamaica, who knows so well the value of liberty; who are so sensible of the extreme danger to which ours is exposed; and who foresee how certainly the destruction of ours must be followed by the destruction of their own?

The peculiar situation of your Island forbids your assistance. But we have your good wishes. From the good wishes of the friends of liberty and mankind, we thank always derive consolation.


ated danger of a slave rebellion if they complied with the Stamp Act.

After the repeal of the act in 1766, the British West Indies remained aloof from the growing imperial crisis until the eve of the Revolutionary War. Parochial disputes about the corporal privileges of the island assemblies transcended the larger imperial crisis in the British Caribbean until the eve of the Revolutionary War. Unlike North America, tensions did not mount to a climactic breakdown between the legislatures and the governors in the 1770s. On the contrary, unusual harmony existed. West Indians conspicuously failed to join the pamphlet campaign against Britain. Their silence contrasts with the torrent of literature they produced in the post-war abolition debate. They did not set up extraparliamentary opposition groups like the Sons of Liberty, the nonimportation associations, and the committees of correspondence. No radical leader became prominent in the Caribbean in opposition to the Stamp Act and Townshend duties (1767). The islands made no attempt at federation like the Stamp Act Congress (1765). There was no appeal to limit trade with Britain, and there was no denunciation of luxury and corruption against the mother country.

The colonists of the British West Indies were less strident in their ideology than the
mainland Patriots. Like the American Loyalists, they objected to imperial taxes, but they believed in obedience to authority. Furthermore, they preferred to stress commercial and practical rather than constitutional objections to imperial policies. West Indians shared more in common with the contemporary political leaders in Ireland than those in North America. They sought to direct the internal affairs of their colonies and to obtain local autonomy within the British Empire. They specifically denied claims of coequality between their assemblies and Parliament. They affirmed their belief in Parliamentary sovereignty. Bermuda sent delegates to the First Continental Congress (1774), but the example was not imitated by any of the British West Indies. It was significant that Congress never bothered to offer the West Indies the option of signing the Articles of Confederation (1781), but left open a provision for Canada.

On the eve of the American Revolution, the British West Indies were unlikely to find a conspiracy theory on the part of the Crown credible. They escaped some of those imperial policies whose cumulative logic convinced the mainland Patriots of a deliberate plan of tyranny by Britain. West Indians welcomed the presence of the British Army, which was no symbol of tyranny but an instrument of white hegemony over the black majority and essential protection against European enemies. Between 1763 and 1775 their dependence on metropolitan security was highlighted by the increased frequency of slave conspiracies and the rearmament of neighboring European colonies. When the Army became the chief symbol of tyranny in North America in the year of the Boston Massacre (1770), the British West Indies petitioned for more troops to police their slaves and to provide defense against foreign attack.

The Jamaican assembly finally petitioned the King in 1774 in words and sentiments that were almost indistinguishable from the Patriots in North America. This protest was a spontaneous reaction to the threat of losing their trade with North America, together with the associated fear of a slave rebellion, in response to the economic boycott of the First Continental Congress. It was not the result of a cumulative opposition movement.

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References


