

1 The "Plain Dealer" on Political Divisions

["Plain Dealer," No. 2, manuscript copy in the Alexander Library, Rutgers University.]

Because theirs was the only province from New Hampshire to Georgia without a newspaper in the colonial period, Jerseymen were greatly hampered in the dissemination of news and views. It was in part the deepening imperial crisis that prompted two Cumberland County youths, Thomas Harris and Jonathan Stratton, to establish an informal alternative to the distant New York and Philadelphia press. Posted each Tuesday from December 21, 1775, to February 12, 1776, in Matthew Potter's tavern in Bridgeton, the "Plain Dealer" was ostensibly founded to enable "several persons whose genius & inclination for many years past have led them to Study and contemplation . . . to communicate Weekly to their neighbours the result of their enquiries and Speculations on political occurrences and other important Subjects particularly calculated to suit this place." That five of the eight essays, all anonymous, promote and justify rebellion suggests that the "Plain Dealer" was actually a forum for local Whigs. The selection that follows reveals the political divisions within the community—and the colony as a whole—and the importance rebels attached to the battle for men's minds.

Jan. [2] 1776

"Tis with our Judgments as our watches none
go just alike yet each believes his own."

Pope

From a careful attention to the sentiments and actions of the People in this place, with respect to politics ever since the commencement of the present unhappy dispute between Great Britain and America, I find they may all [be] reduced to three Classes:

The first class includes all those who religiously adhere to the old absurd and wormeaten Jacobite¹ doctrine of passive obedience, and nonresistance, or an absolute submission to the higher powers and a tame obease subjection to the most unjust and tyrannical impositions for conscience sake or under the specious pretence of being conscience bound so to do, and may therefore be truly called *rank Tories*.

The second Class on the contrary comprehends those who considering that all mankind in a state of nature were upon an equality, that all power is derived from the people and not from any imaginary divine right, and therefore that all those placed in authority over us, having received their power & right of governing immediately from us, must of consequence be at all times accountable to their constituents for the due and regular discharge of the trust reposed in them by the constitution under which we live; and to whom we are no longer obliged to yield subjection than while such rulers strictly adhere to the express design of their appointment, but on the contrary are equally bound in duty to oppose every unjust

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and unconstitutional infringement of our rights and priviledges as we are to observe and obey those laws and regula[tions] which art just and constitutional.

These are the principles upon which the nobles of England declared war against the unfortunate King John till they pressed him sword in hand to grant them that famous Charter of Priviledges commonly called by way of eminence *Magna Charta*.²

These are the principles by which the people of England boldly opposed the arbtrary measures of Charles the first.³ These are the principles by which our venerable forefathers happily brought about the glorious revolution under King William the third, and by which the present royal family, the Hanoverian branch of the house of Brunswick, were placed on the Throne of Great Britain.⁴ These, in Short, are the principles of every person in the world who rightly understands the genuine principles of Civil liberty and the rights of human nature, who are therefore justly entitled to the honourable appel[lation] of being stiled True Whigs.

Under the third Class may be ranked great numbers of ignorant thoughtless beings who are one day Tories, and the next day Whigs; and the third day nothing at all; who like the pendulum of a clock are perpetually changing sides and strictly speaking [are] as unsteady as the wind. Having no fixed principles at all, and being wholly unacquainted with the nature of Government, the principles of the English constitution, and the rights of Americans, they are easily influenced any way, and therefore, either change their sentiments daily without being able to assign any just reason for so doing, or else hastily espouse the one side or the other, merely out of humour or party spite. These I shall beg leave to distinguish by the significant name of Turn-Coats. I shall make it my business in some future paper to consider [each of] these classes of people seperately.⁵

1. Jacobite: supporter of the Stuart claim to the British throne which began with the reign of James I in 1603. Specifically, the term refers to the adherents of James II, who abdicated under duress in 1688-1689, or his descendants.

2. See Sec. V, Doc. 2, headnote.

3. The reference is to the English Civil War.

4. The Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 established a Protestant succession to the throne through William and Mary. When Queen Anne died in 1714 without surviving children, the crown passed to George Augustus, the Elector of Hanover (Brunswick).

5. If the author, unknown, produced such a paper it has been lost.

2 The Political Creed of "Shary O'Brion"

["Plain Dealer," No. 5, Alexander Library, Rutgers University.]