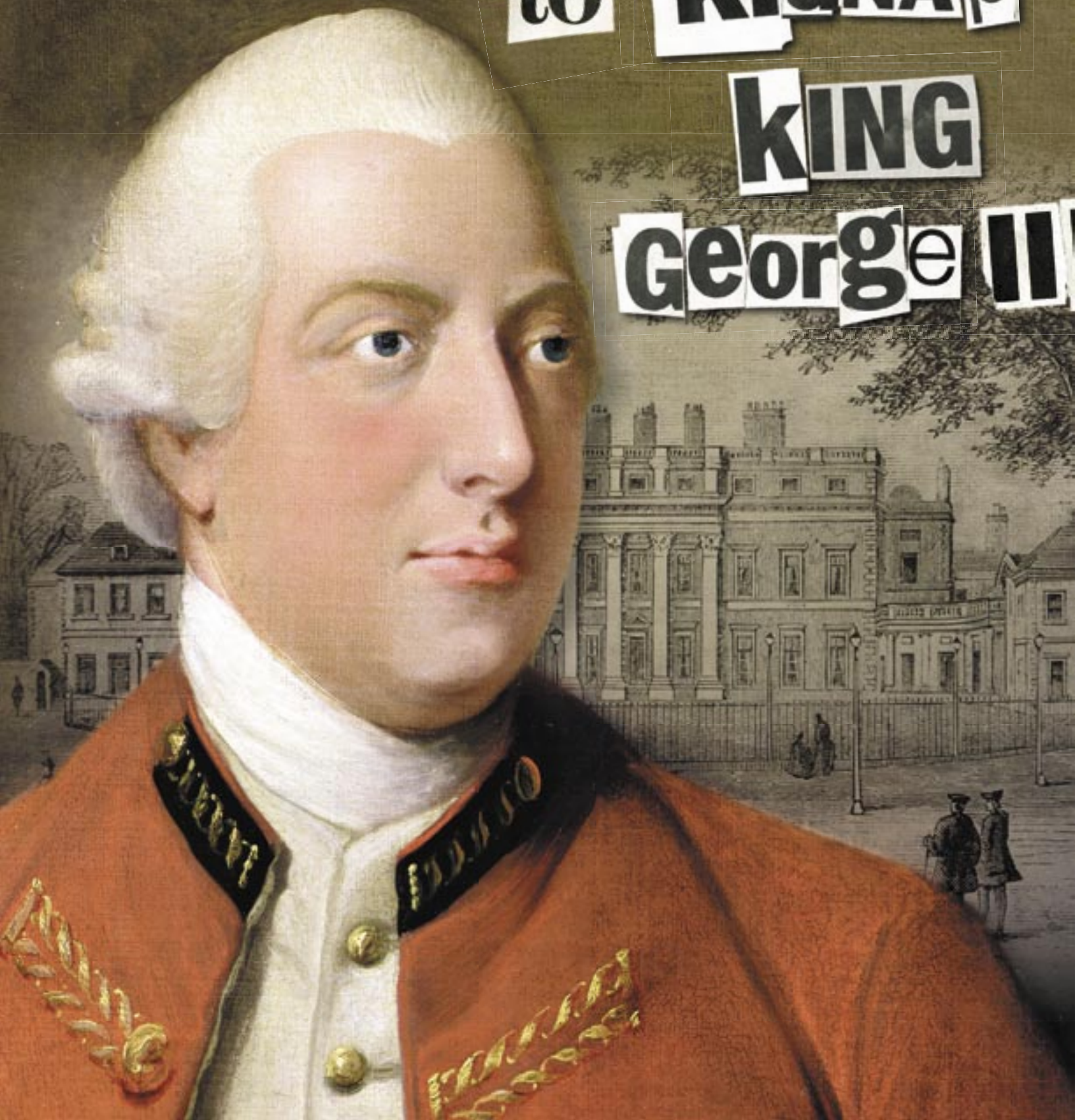


**The plot**

**to kidnap**

**KING**

**George III**



## JULIE FLAVELL looks back to an 18th-century episode with oddly modern overtones, when Britain's government was on high alert to a potential terrorist cell in London. And the source of the threat? America

**O**N A DARK October day in 1775, in a government office in Whitehall, Lord Rochford, the cabinet minister responsible for home affairs, found himself face to face with a young man with an astonishing story. In just six days, he said, King George III would fall victim to a sinister plot in which he would be kidnapped, incarcerated in the Tower of London, and forcibly abducted to his German domain of Hanover.

This spectacularly bold conspiracy was to be launched six months into the rebellion that would become known as the American War of Independence. The young informer was Francis Richardson, an American loyal to his king who served in the British army. The conspirator he named at the heart of the plot was one of his countrymen, Stephen Sayre. Both men were part of a community of over 1,000 colonial Americans who lived and worked in London, the centre of the empire and until 1776 America's capital city.

Far away in America, colonists were choosing sides, taking up arms for or against British rule. For them, eight years of bloodshed, division and civil war lay ahead.

### Wicked and desperate people

In London a recent Proclamation of Rebellion had warned the British public that here, too, the threat of subversion cast its shadow. In newspapers and broadsides, and from the lips of the Town Criers, the people learned that "Divers wicked and desperate Persons" within Britain were promoting and encouraging the American rebellion. All loyal Britons were to be on the alert for "traitorous Conspiracies and Attempts against Us, Our Crown and Dignity", and were to inform the King's Secretaries of State forthwith of any suspicions.

So when young Lieutenant Richardson had a chance meeting with Stephen Sayre in a coffeehouse near Cornhill in the City his duty was clear. His commanding officer took him to Lord Rochford, to whom he poured forth his story. Richardson claimed he had met Sayre the day before, on 19 October, while stopping in for a routine noontime visit to the Pennsylvania Coffeehouse in Birchin Lane. Sayre had invited him upstairs to a private room, and there he unfolded his scheme.

On 26 October, Sayre, supported by a London mob, intended to hijack the King's coach en route from Buckingham House to the opening of the new session of Parliament, and

divert it to the Tower of London. Once there, the King was to be secured, the Tower gates were to be shut, and the rioters were to break into the Tower arsenal and arm themselves. The Lord Mayor, John Wilkes, whom Sayre claimed was a co-conspirator, would summon a body of constables to keep the peace in the city at large. The conspirators would issue a proclamation under the King's official seal "to annul the Authority of all Officers, Civil & Military of which the aforesaid Stephen Sayre's Party should disapprove". Appealing to Richardson both as a fellow American and a true Briton, Sayre declared that "if there was not a change in Government both countries would be ruined".

And what was to be Richardson's part in all this? He was required to help bribe the guards at the Tower, where he served as adjutant. The foot guards were to be promised money and a pay rise if they would stand by passively during the whole business. Fifteen hundred pounds had already been distributed for the purpose, asserted Sayre, and he proposed to give Richardson £20 more in another day or so. When the mob reached the Tower on the 26th, Richardson was to ensure that the gates were left open.

The plot sounded improbable, but plots usually do upon first hearing. And London mobs could be formidable. Their numbers could swell to tens of thousands, more than the red-coated regiments that

were supposed to keep them in order.

With the opening of Parliament just days away, Rochford decided to act, but he would need more than Richardson's word to arrest Sayre. Could

Richardson induce Sayre to give him the £20 he had promised? The next day, Saturday, Richardson sought Sayre out. But Sayre was suspicious. "He looked me steadily in the Countenance", said Richardson, "and Said 'Did you see nobody?'" since they had last met. Despite Richardson's protests that he had told no one, Sayre put off giving him the money.

Rochford passed an anxious Sunday. There were only four days before the opening of Parliament, and the business was unresolved, with the suspect American still at large. Fatefully, he decided that the evidence could wait until after the arrest.

Early Monday morning on 23 October, three men knocked at the door of Sayre's house in Oxford Street, claiming they wished to see him on business. Once in the door they identified themselves as constables, told Sayre he was under arrest for high treason, and searched through his papers while he stood



An early stars and stripes with 13 stars, c 1775. Over 1,000 Americans lived in London at the time

**Julie Flavell** is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. She is co-editor with Stephen Conway of *Britain and America Go to War: The Impact of War and Warfare in Anglo-America, 1754-1815* (University Press of Florida, 2005)

The K--- is hated more than any other man in the Kingdom & I believe the most trivial convulsion here will produce an abdication or banishment of the Family, for not one of his menial Servants wou'd support him.

**William Lee**, American tobacco merchant resident in London and political associate of Stephen Sayre, February 1775

A portrait of King George III in 1794 before a 1775 sketch of Buckingham House. The conspirators were, it was alleged, planning to kidnap the King while en route from the House to Parliament

BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/HULTON ARCHIVE-GETTY IMAGES

The nation is on a perilous edge... The present measures of Government appear to me to be not only unjust, but wild in the highest degree... The Americans are wise enough to know the value of liberty; and it will, I believe, be found that they have virtue and fortitude enough to defend it against all invaders. It is this kingdom, my Lord, that is most in danger.

**Richard Price**, British radical and founder of Unitarianism, letter to Pitt the Elder, 9 February 1775

in his dressing gown. The prisoner was then taken to Lord Rochford's office. There he admitted seeing Lieutenant Richardson at the Pennsylvania Coffeehouse on the day in question, but emphatically denied knowledge of any plot. Sayre's lawyer, who arrived shortly after, laughed aloud when he heard the accusation. He would not be the last to make fun. Sayre was committed to the Tower, where he was held a close prisoner, and denied visitors, pen, and paper.

With Sayre locked up and out of the way, Rochford pursued another tack. According to Richardson, one other officer, Lieutenant Nicholas Nugent, had been approached by Sayre. Nugent had confided to Richardson the gist of a recent curious conversation with "a Gentleman" in the City – clearly meaning Sayre – who had questioned Nugent as to whether Richardson and two other officers were popular with their men.

But once Lieutenant Nugent learned that his story had been taken to a cabinet minister, he cooled considerably. He told Richardson he was sorry to be "lugg'd into this Affair"; and



A coloured engraving of the Tower of London, as seen from the River Thames, c 1700

dismissed the conversation with the "Gentleman" as "of no Consequence". It was too late for him to retreat. The morning after Sayre's arrest, Nugent was summoned to Rochford's office. For the next 12 hours he was cross-examined, threatened with imprisonment, and even warned that his army career would be over unless he identified Stephen Sayre as the mysterious "Gentleman" who had asked him about Richardson. Nugent was even locked up for a brief spell in the guardroom at St James's, yet steadfastly refused to name Sayre. Finally Rochford dismissed the angry, bewildered young officer.

Rochford was not getting the evidence he needed to justify locking Stephen Sayre in the Tower. And to make matters worse, the London newspapers had got hold of the story. The reaction was universal derision. Sayre had been arrested "upon an Information so romantic, so foolish, so absurd, that if they thought the Accused could have done what he was charged with, he ought to have been committed to Bedlam, not the Tower", declared one. Sayre's arrest was the "Subject of Ridicule in every Coffeehouse in Town".

### Safely under lock and key

When they were not laughing, the papers were accusing the Government of heavy handedness. "It is French Law", declared one, and proved that the present government was "capable of as violent, arbitrary, and unjust Executions of Power, as if the Tower of London were actually the Bastille". Sayre became something of a celebrity. "Bets were actually made in Clerkenwell on Tuesday Evening," announced one, "that Mr Sayre would be Lord Mayor within five years, taking all Chances of Deaths or Resignations".

Even as the necessary corroborating evidence slipped through his fingers, Rochford continued to keep Sayre safely under lock and key and he slowed down the business of releasing him. When he reduced Sayre's charge from high treason to "treasonable practices", making the American eligible for bail, he neglected to inform Sayre's lawyer. When Sayre's friends produced a writ of habeas corpus on his behalf, the hearing was inexplicably delayed for 24 hours. On 28 October, two days after the King had safely opened

## STEPHEN SAYRE: THE 'HANDSOMEST MAN IN LONDON'

STEPHEN SAYRE was born the son of a New York farmer in 1736, but from a young age he sought to escape the pastoral life. He was educated at Princeton, and by the 1760s, had set himself up as a merchant in London. There his style of living obliged him to shop for a wealthy wife. His personal charm opened many doors for him; he was said to be the handsomest man in London. When he failed to gain the hand of a slave-owning heiress from the West Indies, a string of mistresses kept his life comfortable. He eventually married a wealthy woman ten years his senior.

Sayre was deeply involved in London politics, and was elected a sheriff of the city in 1773. The notorious John Wilkes,



the popular champion of liberty in England and America, was a close political associate. Wilkes, Sayre, and other City politicians led opposition in London to the government's American policy. In 1775 Sayre was managing a bank in Oxford Street, yet this failed after the scandal of his arrest broke. Undaunted, he went on to serve as a diplomatic agent for the United States in various parts of Europe. In Russia he hoped to

"make a Conquest" of Catherine the Great, who he said "may have a Curiosity for an American Gallant". Apparently she did not.

After American Independence, Sayre tried in vain to re-establish himself in London, and was obliged to return to his native country, where he died in 1818.



## HABEAS CORPUS: A BASIC LIBERTY

HABEAS CORPUS is a legal writ requiring that a prisoner be brought before a court to determine whether he is being legally detained. It was established in English common law before Magna Carta, and was guaranteed as an Englishman's right in the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679. It has traditionally been seen as a bulwark against the detention of persons without charge or due process of law, and has only been suspended during times of extreme national crisis, such as the threat of invasion.

In the 20th century, legislation was passed that set out in greater detail the rules by which an individual may be detained. Nevertheless, habeas corpus remains today a symbol of fundamental liberties. Whether recent anti-terror legislation, allowing a suspected terrorist to be detained without charge for 28 days, is an infringement of the right to habeas corpus remains a matter of controversy.



George III's proclamation for the suppression of rebellion and sedition in the colonies, 1775

and instructed to pay Sayre £1,000 in damages. But the payment was never made. Why? Well Sayre's circumstances were very different from those of Wilkes in 1763 – by the time the case came to court, in mid-1776, the war in America had escalated and the colonists were about to declare their independence. Sayre was now marked out as an American rebel, rather than the romantic colonist making a stand for British liberty he had appeared to be the previous year. Rochford was let off on a legal technicality.

Lord Chief Justice De Grey, summing up the case of Sayre v Rochford, expressed sympathy for Rochford's predicament. Rochford was a cabinet minister. He was obliged as a "vigilant centinel of the state" to investigate any threat to the King's safety, however unlikely it seemed. De Grey concluded, "This Cause has turned out to be one of the most important that I ever knew because it very materially affects the safety of the Government on one side and the safety of the Subject on the other". It had been Rochford's dilemma to decide where to draw the line. Although he was an experienced politician, he appeared to have panicked and overstepped his authority.

The truth was that Rochford had what members of Tony Blair's cabinet would call today "sensitive evidence" which he could not make known to the public. For at least a year, the correspondence of Stephen Sayre and other suspicious Americans in London had been intercepted by the Government. They and their political cronies in the City of London – some of whom openly supported the colonial rebellion as the cause of true British liberty – were indeed engaged in illegal activities. They sent military advice and intelligence to the rebels in Massachusetts. They arranged for shipments

Parliament, Stephen Sayre was released on a huge bail of £1,000.

The whole affair now began to fizzle out. With the moment of crisis over, Rochford was left to enquire if there was evidence enough to prosecute Sayre. His fellow cabinet ministers had by now distanced themselves from the business. Everyone remembered the case of John Wilkes, 12 years earlier, when ministers had suffered a great deal of embarrassment over what proved to be an illegal arrest. Wilkes published an anti-Government newspaper piece that was so provocative that ministers had him arrested on a charge of seditious libel. Unfortunately the warrant they issued against him – a type known as a general warrant – had a legal question mark over it. Wilkes was able to turn the tables on the ministers with a vengeance, successfully challenging the legality of the warrant in court. He was awarded £1,000, and the Government found itself labelled the arbitrary, corrupt enemy of British liberty.

On 7 November, one day after meeting the Lord Chancellor to assess the evidence against Sayre, Rochford resigned from the cabinet. He gave ill health as his reason, but was consoled with a handsome pension. As for Sayre, within weeks all charges against him were dropped, and his bail cancelled. But Rochford could not just walk away. Sayre, like his good friend Wilkes, filed a civil suit against the former minister. And, like his friend, he emerged victorious. In the end Rochford was found guilty of refusing bail,

We have been seduced, by various false representations, and Groundless promises, into a War. There is no sort of prospect or possibility of its coming to any good end by the pursuit of a continued train of Hostility. The only deliberation is, whether honest men will make one last Effort to give peace to their Country.

**Edmund Burke**, British politician, reformer, and political theorist, to the Marquess of Rockingham, 4 August 1775



George III, painted by Johann Zoffany, c 1800. Conspirators spoke of replacing him with a Prussian noble

I am confident... that the sense of the mass of the people is in favour of the Americans. They think that the provocation given by a rash and insufficient ministry to the colony of Massachusetts's bay, in lawless and oppressive exactions, enforced by famine, devastation, and slaughter, at length constitutionally justified an appeal to arms.

**Temple Luttrell**, MP, speech before the House of Commons on the opening of the new session of Parliament, 26 October 1775



A print depicting 'The Fight on Lexington Common', the first military engagement of the American War of Independence, Massachusetts, 19 April 1775

of weapons to America from neutral countries such as Holland. By September 1775, they had made contact with a French agent in London. They illegally encouraged striking shipwrights in England to emigrate to the colonies. Government agents had tried, and failed, to incriminate those who had tampered with the strike several months before Sayre's arrest.

In their letters, Sayre and his associates spoke of the need for a new government – and perhaps a new king – if British liberty were to be saved in Britain and America. One letter even named a possible successor to George III, Charles William Ferdinand, the Duke of Brunswick, a Prussian noble who was married to the King's sister.

Lord Rochford knew that Stephen Sayre was a dangerous man. He wanted him under lock and key. But he found to his cost that an excess of zeal could backfire, and the lesson was not lost on other cabinet members. When, less than a year after Sayre's suit against Rochford, the American was at the centre of another alleged conspiracy, they erred on the side of caution.

This time Sayre was named as one of a group of conspirators plotting to assassinate the King. The informer, a young Irishman, brought news of the scheme to cabinet member Lord Suffolk. The conspirators were debating the best location for the murder, said the informer, whether "the Queen's Garden", the royal palace in London, or "about the Way to the play-house" so often attended by the royals. "Instruments", the Irishman said ominously, "were hir'd" for the deed.

This intelligence reached the cabinet in February 1777. After investigating, the ministers decided this time around to dismiss the accusation as spurious. Like the case involving Francis Richardson, they had only the informer's word for it, and the whole business was kept well out of the public eye. The letters exchanged by members of the government are buried in the correspondence of William Eden, who headed the British Secret Service during the War of Independence.

### Subversive activities

The scandal of Stephen Sayre's arrest in October 1775 occurred because, six months into the American rebellion, ministers knew that subversive activities were taking place under their noses. But they had no settled policy for dealing with them. The Sayre fiasco left them as uncertain as ever and, throughout the American War of Independence, they showed great restraint in dealing with potential subversion. Americans in London who openly sided with the rebellion were suffered to live quietly in the imperial capital. Indeed, an American just returned from London in 1780, three years before the war's end, reported that he had seen fellow countrymen, who had served in the rebel army, walking "openly in the city and no notice taken of them by authority". Sayre himself lived in

London until mid-1777, and then departed unmolested for France to serve his new country, the United States.

Today's anti-terror laws would have spared Lord Rochford much embarrassment. The counter-terrorism act would have made it straightforward to detain and question both Sayre and Nugent. The newspapers could not have laughed if there had been laws in place that made a duty out of Rochford's conscientiousness. And Sayre would have been guilty at least of the crime of glorifying terrorism. He admitted to Rochford that he thought "nothing could save both Countries but a total Change of Men and Measures", but "there was not Spirit enough



**William Henry Nassau de Zuylestein**, the fourth Earl of Rochford, c 1740-45

Lord Rochford... said he would take it on him to affirm that there was a design to raise a rebellion here and overturn the Government; an assertion not only ridiculous from what had been discovered, but very inconsistent with the boasts of the Ministers that the whole nation was with them.

**Horace Walpole**, English author and politician, *Journal of the Reign of King George III*. Entry dated 26 October 1775 on Rochford's speech before the House of Lords

left in this Country to bring such a Measure about". Violent rebellion, in his mind, was an admirable act of heroism.

Rochford and his fellow ministers saw themselves as the preservers of British liberty. The rebellion in America exposed the British empire to an attack from France, the arch-enemy of constitutional government. In the colonies, meanwhile, loyal subjects of the Crown were persecuted and denied their rights in the name of freedom. In the War of American Independence, both sides claimed they were contending for the same end: to preserve true British liberty. Neither protagonist wished to find themselves fighting an empty war in which liberty was preserved in name but lost in practice. ■

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