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Samuel Peters, Transactional Leadership and the Failure of Loyalism in Revolutionary Connecticut

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Abstract

This study examines Rev. Samuel Peters, a Loyalist minister and writer from Connecticut, and his transactional leadership efforts during the American Revolution. The study relies on primary and secondary historical sources, including Peters' writings. This study also includes works on leadership, histories of the American Revolution, biographies, correspondence, memoirs, sermons, public statements, and diaries. Peters, one of the most prominent opponents of the American Revolution from Connecticut, relied on transactional strategies, showing the futility of such tactics in the face of transformative times.

Keywords: transactional leadership, the American Revolution, Loyalists, Tories, Connecticut, Samuel Peters

Introduction

In October 1774, in the middle of fleeing from his home in Connecticut with plans to head to London, Rev. Samuel Andrews Peters, an Anglican priest from the small town of Hebron, sent a letter to his daughter Hannah about the events that drove him into exile.

Peters ripped into his political opponents as "Incend[i]aries, Plunderers, Rioters, Felons, Rebels" and a "drunken barbarous People." Offering his daughter something of a history lesson while weighing in on contemporary politics, Peters compared the residents of Connecticut to their Puritan ancestors. "They hate Tyranny when themselves are not the Tyrants," Peters wrote,

insisting it was just as "their Fathers did before them—witness the Year 1648." Reviewing the various laws of Connecticut, including the colonial charter, Peters accused his enemies of "Persecution" and compared them to Oliver Cromwell and his supporters, claiming they supported "Oliverian, independent King-killing" measures. Besides lambasting his enemies, Peters tried to undermine their legal arguments by offering some of his own. "Do their Charters give them Liberty to persecute Loyalists and to destroy the Act of Toleration?" Peters asked. "What Law gave Liberty to the General Assembly of Connecticut and all Civil Magistrates to plunder by Night and Day?" Peters also insisted it was his "Misfortune" to be away from his family. "Your Infelicity

in being Motherless is now become intolerable in your deserted State, where the Care & tender Feelings of a fond Parent can only reach you in Tears, Prayers & Benedictions” (Peters, 1978, 6).

Much of what drove Peters and made him one of the most representative of Loyalists was captured in that letter. Driven by family tragedies onto the public stage, Peters was one of the foremost opponents of the American Revolution from New England, being ranked by one historian to be the most prominent Loyalist from Connecticut besides Benedict Arnold (Brown, 1969). But Peters often undermined his own effectiveness by going into the legal weeds, getting himself tangled up in precedents, the distant past, and the minutiae of the law instead of recognizing the changes impacting his community and the colonies in general. In short, Peters, like many other Loyalists, could not break from transactional leadership despite facing transformational times (Derby, 2024).

While Peters and the Loyalists occupied the public stage 250 years ago, they offer insights into the downside of some leadership when society and politics experiences major transformations. Today's political battles are increasingly heated as individuals are targeted—through social media, at movie theaters, at college campuses, indeed even as their own homes—much as Peters and the Loyalists were in the 1760s and 1770s. Peters and his Loyalist colleagues might be left at the bottom of the proverbial dustbin of history, but their stories and attempts at leadership remain relevant today.

Loyalists as Transactional Leaders

Often overlooked by historians of the American Revolution, the Loyalists embraced leadership strategies than their rivals in the Patriot ranks. James MacGregor Burns (2013), one of the key figures in creating leadership studies, touched on a leading Loyalist who relied on transactional leadership. In describing Massachusetts Gov. Thomas Hutchinson, one of the most prominent Loyalist political and intellectual leaders, Burns wrote Hutchinson “had knitted together enough judicial, legislative, and administrative authority to be virtually the boss” of Boston. Holding numerous political offices, almost all of which relied on the support of prominent nobles and political leaders in Great Britain, Hutchinson used his patronage to help his numerous relations and his supporters. Burns wrote that “Hutchinson’s stoutest supporters” remained at the “top of the pyramid” of a “social and economic hierarchy as set and stable as England’s” (Burns, 2013, 69).

The same type of hierarchy held true for the Anglican Church in the colonies. While prominent in most of the southern colonies, the Anglican Church was not as well established in the north, particularly in New England. In the New England colonies, most Anglican ministers, including Peters, were members of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Members of the Society depended on their ties to other leaders in Great Britain. “The Loyalism of these men has often been dismissed as the prudent, or at best conscientious, performance of their duty by men who were a species of royal official,” noted historian William Nelson (1992). “But there was more to it than that.” Nelson maintained that much of the foundation of Loyalist arguments could be found in the writings of members of the Society. “Lacking confidence both in individual men and in individual generations of men, they were suspicious of anything that broke through the current of custom and took people out of their habits,” Nelson noted about Loyalists in the ranks of the Anglican clergy (Nelson, 1992, 186-188).

This mindset was typical of several prominent pastors—almost all of them Anglican—who led Loyalist efforts throughout the American colonies. Faced with major changes in the colonies resulting from the end of the French and Indian War, these religious leaders could only rely on connections, look back to the past and draw upon legal precedents and the Bible as they argued for keeping the colonies in the British empire. In his insightful look at five Loyalist clergymen, Frazer (2018) looked at five pastors who cited the Bible and history in their arguments to remain part of the British empire. All of these are strategies employed by transactional leaders and were used, at various times, by Peters. Between relying on transactional leadership and where he lived, Peters had an uphill fight from the start.

Loyalism was weaker in Connecticut than in most of the other colonies, with one observer noting it “was numerically quite feeble” in regard to the largely Patriot population (Brown, 1965, 59). Some estimates found only 2,000-2,500 Loyalists in the colony (Brown, 1965). Examining Connecticut’s Loyalists, historian Robert East (1974) insisted they made up a “small minority of men indeed” who mostly had ties to the military and to the Anglican Church (East, 1974, 13-14). Despite that, the Anglican Loyalists in Connecticut had deep roots in the region with almost all of the ministers—including Peters—being born there and studying at Yale (Steiner, 1978).

While the Loyalist ranks in Connecticut were small, Peters was easily one of the most prominent of their leaders. Certainly, the small number of Loyalists in Connecticut helped doom their efforts to stand against the American Revolution, but the tactics and leadership styles of their most prominent advocates did not help matters. Peters and other Loyalists in the clergy revealed the limits of transactional leadership as they bore several of its hallmarks, including defending the status quo, responding to events instead of proactively guiding them, and relying on traditional structures and social agreements to maintain the established order. While transactional leadership can offer some advantages, it often proves transitory. “The bargainers have no enduring purposes that holds them together; hence they may go their separate ways,” Burns (1978) noted about transactional leadership, maintaining that kind of agreement fails to bind “leader and follower together in a mutual and continuing pursuit of a higher purpose” (Burns, 1978, 20). Confronted by the transformational nature of the American Revolution, Peters and other leading Loyalists learned that lesson the hard way.

The Formative Years

Born in 1735 in Hebron, a small town in eastern Connecticut, Peters received an excellent education by colonial standards, attending Hebron Academy and going to Yale when he was 17 (Metz, 1974). While Peters and his family were well off, they simply were not as prominent as most of his contemporaries at Yale thanks, in large part, to their Anglican faith. Peters stood 35th out of a class of 40 at Yale, but that ranking was determined by wealth and prestige instead of by academic standing (Cohen, 1977). After graduating from Yale, Peters decided to become an Anglican minister and headed to London in 1758 to become ordained. Peters’ religious studies and ordination in England helped shape his values, including respect for hierarchy, veneration of his superiors, suspicions of republicanism, and a desire to live like an English nobleman (Metz, 1974). Already a defender of the status quo, Peters returned to Hebron to lead St. Peter’s Church with the

seeds of his Loyalism and being a transactional leader already in place.

Describing the time between when he came back from England to the outbreak of the Revolution as "years in love, peace, and harmony, without knowing an enemy," Peters appeared headed to the quiet life of a country parson before he suffered a series of tragedies (Peters, 1967, 81). Peters married three times—and buried all three of his wives before he reached the age of 40. In the four years he was married to Hannah Owens, she bore him three children, only one of whom—their daughter Hannah—survived. Five years after his first wife's death, Peters married 17-year-old Abigail Gilbert, who died three weeks after their wedding. In 1773, Peters married Mary Birdseye, who died from complications resulting from childbirth 14 months after their wedding though their son survived. Peters' desolation and heartbreak came through in his account of his wife Hannah's passing and the haunting words he had carved on Abigail's grave: "a Wedding Changed to Lamentation, ye Greatest Greif [sic] in all Creation, a Mourning Groom in Desperation" (Metz, 1974, 14).

After losing two children and three wives in less than a decade, Peters threw himself into his work which included playing a larger role on the public stage. In the years that followed the tragedies, Peters tried to get out of Hebron as much as possible, expanding his missionary trips from Connecticut towns to other areas, including what is now Vermont and the New York wilderness (Cohen, 1977). He also begged his superiors to move him to other churches, including one in New Hampshire (Metz, 1974). By the time his third wife passed away in 1774, Peters was a man looking to expand his horizons.

Leadership Against the American Revolution

After losing his third wife, Peters took to the public stage just as resistance to British rule was gaining momentum. Before the American Revolution, Peters played a limited role in public affairs, mainly writing essays in the 1760s, but he focused mostly on ecclesiastical matters. When he did stray into politics, Peters was a conservative and a defender of the monarchy. Joshua Avery's (2008) look at Peters' writing noted his "views about a monarchy and its source of authority, were, like those of many conservatives of his era, both traditional and unsettled" as the pastor was "engaged in a conversation dating to before the English Civil Wars about the source of true and legitimate authority on earth and how Kings received that authority." Peters even continued to espouse the divine right of kings, a position which had been popular with the Stuart monarchs in the early 17th century but generally not one often advocated in the 18th century (Avery, 2008, 35-36).

In the summer of 1774, Peters became one of the most vocal Loyalists in the colony, opposing Gov. Jonathan Trumbull's efforts to offer aid to Boston after the civil government there was replaced by a military regime. After the British government closed Boston's port, at the Hebron town meeting, Peters argued against Trumbull's proposal to aid its residents. "Because Boston is not, and has not been, shut up by order of General Gage, and all people pass out of and into Boston as usual, and the citizens want not our charitable help," Peters insisted. "Governor Trumbull's letter was premature." Peters also claimed Trumbull had not "assigned any proof of the fact that Boston is, or has been, shut up by General Gage." Peters continued by saying the tea tossed overboard during the Boston Tea Party "ought to be paid for by the author of that horrible crime," adding that he would refuse to help Boston until those losses were compensated. Despite his legalistic points, Peters

carried the question and defeated Trumbull's proposal (Peters, 1967, 81).

Peters' influence quickly spread as Loyalists in Hartford used his arguments to defeat Trumbull's proposal in their town meeting. However, the Hebron pastor's increased activity made him more of a target. Some of the local Sons of Liberty led a mob to Peters' house on the night of August 14 and demanded "to search your house from top to bottom, to find your correspondence with the English bishops, Lord North, and other people in Great Britain." Peters fired back that their demand "is new and extraordinary" but eventually permitted them to search his house (Peters, 1967, 81-82).

Only two days later, Peters drafted and signed 13 "just and legal" resolves, which were approved by some residents of Hebron. These resolutions, which were hampered by excessively legal language, defended Great Britain taxing the colonies, controlling trade, and occupying Boston. The resolutions also denounced Connecticut towns that supported the Patriot cause (Peters, 1967, 174-175). With the resolutions winning some approval in Hebron, Peters' transactional leadership served him well, but that was to change quickly. At the end of August, at another town meeting in Hebron, Peters continued to defend the status quo by citing precedent, even going as far back as the Magna Carta, to justify the British taking over Boston and closing its port. But Peters took things too far when he insisted that Boston deserved to be punished, especially when rumors reached Hebron that the British had started massacring the city's residents (Calhoun, 1973). Peters faced more violence from mobs including being personally attacked and dragged through Hebron. Fleeing to New Haven for safety, Peters was threatened by a mob there as well (Cohen, 1977, 17-19).

Even after being attacked and facing mobs, Peters continued to rely on transactional leadership strategies by using his stature and connections to advance his cause. After the attack on his house, Peters met with Trumbull to see if he could rely on the governor's help to control the mobs (Peters, 1967). Peters also turned to the Connecticut Supreme Court for protection, hoping the traditional legal system could help him. With his faith in the legal system, Peters did not even consider whether or not mobs and his opponents, who were increasingly resisting British rule, would simply comply with a judicial order (Cohen, 1977).

Finally, realizing that the traditional authorities were not going to help, Peters fled to Boston to rely on the British army's protection before heading to England. Once there, Peters bombarded his family, supporters, and allies with legalistic letters, diving into historical and governmental minutiae to defend Loyalism. Even as he updated his family on his situation, Peters could not avoid the pitfalls of sounding like a transactional leader, caring more for connections and the established order than emotional connections. Writing his daughter from London at the end of 1774, Peters praised England as the land "where Law is Liberty, and Obedience is Property—where the King, the Bishops, Nobles and Commons unite in paternal Care for the general Good." Peters then offered a wealth of legal and historical details to attack the Patriots back home in Connecticut, hitting them on several fronts covering everything from connections to the deposed Stuart monarchy to being aligned with France and the Catholic Church (Peters, 1978, 6-7). Even as late as 1781, when he wrote an alternately bitter and witty history of Connecticut, Peters related his experiences in the appendix, regurgitating the legal points and citations used in the

Hebron town meetings, in his encounters with Trumbull, and when he faced mobs (Peters, 1967).

Legacy

While Peters' leadership style was inadequate to face the coming of the American Revolution, it proved a blessing during his three decades in exile in Great Britain. Peters himself never obtained the bishopric he wanted—though he was elected but not consecrated to serve as bishop of Vermont—but his transactional leadership efforts often bore fruit during his exile. In the 1780s, convinced that New England could work with Great Britain, Peters proved instrumental in keeping many of his fellow exiles from Connecticut from joining formal organizations of Loyalists, recognizing such a move would only ensure they would never return home (Norton, 1972). In the late 1780s, Peters helped many Loyalists looking to start anew in Canada, usually through his connections in the Anglican Church (Peters, 1978). As his correspondence shows, Peters had no problem pulling strings with his contacts in the government and the clergy to help his friends, family, and supporters. Despite writing a controversial history of Connecticut, during his London exile, Peters followed events at Yale and Hebron and kept tabs on the Anglican Church in the new country, continuing to offer guidance (Cohen, 1977).

During his exile, there were even signs that Peters had turned into something of a servant leader. According to Kenneth W. Cameron, an Episcopalian minister and longtime professor at Trinity College who edited Peters' papers, the exiled pastor "served the scattered and improvised Anglican Loyalist clergy of the United States, Canada, Nova Scotia and Great Britain as a kind of spiritual father and business manager" (Peters, 1978, 4). Writing to Peters in 1796, John Cosins Ogden, a Loyalist Anglican minister who moved from New Haven to Troy, New York, showed his gratitude for Peters' leadership and urged him to collect the letters he had been sending from England. "If you depart this life without compiling something for the Church from your American letters, future generations will have reason to lament," Ogden insisted. "Who is so well informed? Who is better qualified? Whose situation is better." Ogden even lamented he did not have the funds to head to London to act as Peters' scribe (Peters, 1978, 130).

After four decades in exile, Peters returned to the United States in 1805, settling in New York and attempting to claim some lands in the West. Peters remained a transactional leader, relying on political contacts to obtain the land claims. His efforts proved unsuccessful even though in 1817, despite being in his early 80s, Peters headed to what is now Wisconsin and met Native American leaders to see if they could back his claims. Peters remained active in Connecticut affairs before his death in April 1826, more than a half-century after being chased out of the colony (Cohen, 1977).

Conclusion

While Peters had a fine education, a thriving congregation, a sharp mind, and deep roots in Connecticut, he failed to recognize the challenges he faced in 1774. Peters relied on his connections, the organizational structures which had been in place for decades, and traditional authority—be it legal or clerical—to try and guide his community. While he could be an effective transactional leader, as he demonstrated when he helped his fellow exiles, Peters, along with a generation of Loyalists in the clergy, did not rise to meet the challenge of the Revolution. Peters stood against the spirit of the times and failed to respond effectively to them.

Peters was also boosted by what one historian labeled his "commanding personal appearance." In his dissertation on Peters, Wayne Metz offered a quick sketch of his subject's appearance. "With a remarkably erect and large muscular body, he was over six feet tall," Metz wrote. "His eyes were blue and his face marked by the scars of smallpox. As a speaker at the Hebron Bicentennial described him, 'his iron frame encompassed an iron will'" (Metz, 1974, 2).

Peters' personality also helped prepare him for leadership. In his survey of leadership, Peter Northouse (2012) identified major leadership traits, including intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. Peters easily had most of those traits though his integrity has been questioned over the years, namely over his honesty. In his biography of Peters, Sheldon Cohen (1977) noted that "scholars have alternately described him as 'modest,' 'arrogant,' 'charitable,' 'selfish,' 'devoted,' 'malicious,' and, in one instance, 'a celebrated liar'" (Cohen, 1977, 5).

Still, Peters' personality also helped undermine his efforts at leadership, including his being overly confrontational, failing to diagnose the situation—namely how little support there was for the British government in Connecticut—and adopting to what was happening. In his study of Connecticut Anglicans during the Revolution, Bruce Steiner (1978) portrayed Peters as "a man of strong passions and violent, often scurrilous language, habitually given to exaggerations which at times became outright falsehoods" (Steiner, 1978, 35). To be sure, Peters tended to puff himself up, but the most glaring examples of his self-aggrandizing exaggerations took place when he was a senior citizen, long after he had fled Hebron. For example, in his biography of Puritan leader Hugh Peter which was published in 1807 when he was in his early 70s, Peters claimed that he had come up with the name "Verdmount," which eventually became "Vermont" (Peters, 1967, 130). Most of the attacks on Peters' integrity focus on his *General History of Connecticut*, which was published in 1781 and proved to be something of a success in England with possibly three printings (Metz, 1974). Robert East described Peters' book as "odd but often affectionate," which is far milder than how several other critics described it (East, 1974, 9). James Kingsley, a professor who taught at Yale, came out swinging at the book, insisting it was full of falsehoods. Even as late as the 1870s, scholars debated the merits of the book as history. (Cohen, 1977).

There remains a major problem with this criticism direct at Peters. Despite the title, Peters was not actually attempting to write a history. Peters' accounts of bullfrogs invading Connecticut towns, of impossibly sized onions, and the odd behavior of the Puritans and the punishments conjured by their leaders should not be taken as actual history. As Metz noted in his dissertation of Peters, the Connecticut Loyalist was more akin to Washington Irving and Mark Twain than he was to any serious historian (Metz, 1974). In fact, in *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, Irving told much the same story about "bundling" (the practice of unmarried couples spending the night tied up together to see if they were sexually compatible) that Peters did almost 30 years earlier, and both writers had their tongues held firmly in place (Folsom, 1949).

Peters certainly had more than his share of vanity and never had any problem trumpeting his abilities or even adding to his credentials in his old age. But when it came to playing an active role in leading the people of Hebron—which to his dying day, he insisted he loved more than any in the world—Peters practiced

what he preached (Cohen, 1977). "Integrity is the quality of honesty and trustworthiness," Northouse wrote. "People who adhere to a strong set of principles and take responsibility for their actions are exhibiting integrity" (Northouse, 2012, 25). By that standard, Peters possessed integrity. He certainly had his principles and suffered the consequences for them.

For their part, some of Peters' contemporaries recognized his leadership style. After hearing Peters was on his way to England, at the end of 1774, Turnbull reached out to Connecticut's agent in London, trying to make sure the Loyalist would not be able to use his connections and tell his side of the story (Cohen, 1977)/, Ezra Stiles, who had clashed with Peters on religious matters before the Revolution, insisted the Loyalist "fled to Boston, to embark for England & tell the King his Story, get a Pension and perhaps a Bishoprick for his suffering in the Cause of Government as it is called" (Stiles, 1901, 497).

In his account of the American Revolution, Peter Oliver, a Loyalist who served as chief justice of Massachusetts and also fled to England, also noted that Peters had tried to rely on transactional leadership strategies. After relating how the mob attacked Peters, Oliver misnamed the Connecticut governor when he wrote the pastor "applied to Governor Trumble [sic] & to some of the Magistrates, for Redress; but they were as relentless as the Mob, & he was obliged to go to England incognito, having been hunted after, to the Danger of his Life" (Oliver, 1967, 154)/ Both Peters' adversaries and enemies rightfully recognized the signs of a transactional leader whose style simply could not counter the drastic transformational changes which led to American independence. Even with his intelligence and abilities, by failing to adjust his leadership style, Peters helped ensure his efforts to keep Connecticut loyal to the crown proved fruitless.

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