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A BACKCOUNTRY LOYALIST PLAN TO RETAKE GEORGIA AND THE CAROLINAS, 1778

RANDALL M. MILLER *

During the war for Independence Loyalist elements from the backcountry settlements of Georgia and the Carolinas contributed significantly to British military successes in the lower South, and by their excesses precipitated much of the social revolution in those colonies. What is perhaps less appreciated by historians is the extent to which backcountry Loyalist strategies and intelligence positively shaped British policy in the South. The two letters published below demonstrate that the London ministry and Sir Henry Clinton, newly appointed commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, were well aware of the vulnerability of the sparsely settled lower South when the British determined to recapture the region in 1778 as a bargaining lever with other rebel colonies.

Both letters were written by Moses Kirkland, a backcountry Loyalist militia leader then serving as deputy Indian superintendant with the Seminoles. Kirkland's background defies the stereotype of the Southern backcountry Loyalist as no more than a scratch farmer resentful of Low-country wealth. Arriving in South Carolina in the 1750's, Kirkland amassed a large fortune through milling and land speculation, and with his numerous slaves also worked a 950 acre plantation in the Ninety-Six District of South Carolina. Immediately prior to the war he owned land plats of 3000 acres, which he extended to over 11,000 acres by confiscating rebel property. Kirkland was no stranger in his opposition to Low-country planters, however, since he participated in the Regulator movement in South Carolina. Indeed, his interests in the Revolution were as much in pursuit of the main chance than the consequence of any deep-seated philosophical commitment to Parliamentary authority.

Although described by one historian as corrupt and self-seeking in his habits, Kirkland did render important services to the crown, both as deputy superintendant of the Seminoles and as a lieutenant colonel in the Tory militia that long harassed Georgia and South Carolina. As such, he wielded considerable influence with the British, ever hungry for reliable intelligence. The two letters published below represent Kirkland's, indeed his fellow Loyalists' recognition that restoration of the lower

* Assistant Professor of History, Saint Joseph's College, Philadelphia, Pa. 19131.

South demanded ruthless measures and a large degree of coordination, theretofore lacking, on the part of British regular, Loyalist, and Amerindian forces. The letters also reveal the underlying sense of frustration and betrayal that marked the Southern Loyalists who felt that prompt British aid in Georgia and the Carolinas would bring easy conquests and stability, but suspected that the British did not appreciate the urgency of their situation.¹

The first letter, addressed to Sir Henry Clinton in 1778 while Kirkland was lobbying for British support in New York, urged a winter campaign against Georgia and South Carolina in order to break the "Heart of the Rebellion" by bringing the Southern seaport towns under British control. Kirkland advised that British regulars garrisoned in the North, then idled by the winter, coordinate an invasion of Georgia with troops from St. Augustine. After securing Savannah, the expedition could march to Augusta which, when taken, would open up lines of communication to Loyalists in the backcountry and also cut off the rebels from their Creek allies. This, in turn, would inspire the North Carolina Regulators and backcountry Scotch to rise against the rebel governments. Kirkland's plan is essentially the plan that Clinton adopted for his 1778-1779 expedition in the lower South.²

The second letter, directed to the Carlisle Commission, repeated Kirkland's insistence on a coordinated winter campaign in Georgia, but offered bold proposals for the best use to be made of the expected conquests. Conscious of the British preoccupation with ledgerbooks, he reminded the Commission that British control of the lower South would allow the British to reduce the burden of supplying presents to Indian allies as well as provide vital naval stores and foodstuffs for the services. Kirkland's most radical proposal, however, was to encourage slave escapes, indeed even slave rebellion. It was commonplace among Southern Loyalists that with its large population of Negroes, the South was especially vulnerable to attack, but most shied away from tampering with the institution. Not so Kirkland, for although an owner of Negroes, he recognized that his own security required the complete reduction of the Lowcountry planter, even at the risk of further social upheaval. The Lowcountry planter, crowded among his Negroes, thrived on slavery,

¹ Kirkland's career is well described in Richard Maxwell Brown, *The South Carolina Regulators* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), especially 128-130. But see also, Robert W. Barnwell, Jr., "Loyalism in South Carolina, 1765-1785" (doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 1941), 102-105, 116-117, 265-266.

² Good descriptions of the Southern campaign of 1778-1779 include John R. Alden, *The American Revolution 1775-1783* (New York, 1954), 227ff; and Kenneth Coleman, *The American Revolution in Georgia 1763-1789* (Athens, 1958), 116ff.

which provided, said Kirkland, the "principal resources for carrying on the Rebellion."

Kirkland was confident that a British eruption into the South would excite the slaves owned by rebels to run away or rise against their masters, and so drive the rebel planters to seek refuge in the interior. Kirkland envisioned no emancipation as a consequence; rather, he anticipated that the confiscated slaves and runaways would labor to the advantage of the British and their friends. Kirkland's proposal evidently proved convincing to London officials because Clinton was encouraged to slice South Carolina in two in order to isolate Lowcountry planters and inspire a slave uprising. And in 1779 Clinton authorized British troops to give security to any Negro deserting to the British lines. This, combined with the earlier and more widely apprehended Dunmore Proclamation of arming the slaves, aroused Southern planters to bitter reprisals during the war, and with the numerous subsequent British confiscations and slave desertions long remained a source of resentment.³

The two letters, the originals of which are located in the Sir Henry Clinton Papers at the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan and published with the Clements Library's kind permission, are published as in the original, except that superscripts have been lowered to the line.

Plan of Service for his Majestys
Troops in Georgia, and back
Settlements of South Carolina,
Most Humbly Submitted to his
Excellency Sir Henry Clinton
Knight of the Most Noble
Order of The Bath, General &
Commander in Chief of his
Majesty's Forces in North
America.

By Lieutenant Colonel Kirkland Deputy
Superintendant of Indian Affairs over the Siminolia
Indians in East Florida.

- 1st. That Brigadier General Prevost⁴ and his Excellency Governor Tonnyn⁵ may be Commanded with all the Forces

³ On British policy toward the Negro and Kirkland's role see Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1961), 111ff.

⁴ General Augustine Prevost, then British commander in St. Augustine.

⁵ Governor Patrick Tonnyn, then governor of East Florida.

that can be spared from St. Augustine /vizt./ Regular Troops, Rangers, Voluntiers, and Indians, to carry on an Expedition against Georgia: To begin Their Operations at Sapallo the North side of the Mouth of the Altamahoy River, where The Kings Troops, Baggage & Artillery may go by Water The Rangers and Indians by Land. They may immediately make themselves Masters of all the small Stockade Forts and Magazines between that and Sunbury which are plentifully supplied with great quantity of Provisions and Horn Cattle. And from thence to Continue a Rapid March to Savannah Town.

2nd.

That one Regiment or not exceeding Two of his Majesty's Troops with a Sufficient Train of Artillery—Together with what Number of Refugee Voluntiers that may be gathered from this place to Sail under a proper Convoy of his Majesty's Ships to go to Savannah in Georgia where they will be met by the Forces under the Command of the above mentioned Officers, and After Securing The Harbour and Town which will be found a Convenient Port for Supplying His Majesty's Forces They may next march with all Expedition up to Augusta and take possession of that post which is of great Consequence, thereby securing all the Province of Georgia, and cutting off the communication entirely between the Creek Indians and the Rebels—They being the only Tribe divided in Their opinion in the present Contest: at the same time a Communication with all the Back-Settlements of the Two Carolina's will be open, and the Friends of Government will flock from all parts to that Post to join his Majesty's Troops which will also put us in Possession of the Savannah River which is Navigable for small Craft up to Augusta.

3rd.

That Orders may be sent to Mr. Stewart ⁶ Superintendant of Indian Affairs to direct his Deputy's in the Chactaw and Chicasaw Nations to raise and embody all the White Men and Indians that they can have influence over—To march from thence to the Cherokee Nations and join Mr.

⁶ John Stuart, royal Indian superintendant in the South after 1762 then operating out of St. Augustine and Pensacola until his death in 1779.

Cameron⁷ The Superintendent who has already agreed with and prepared the Friends of Government when ever the Kings Troops should make a descent in that Province They will be ready to Unite and join them. And that by the Reinforcement of his Majestys Troops at The Long Cane Settlement where Mr. Cameron is will then be so formidable a Body as easily to become Masters of the Whole Back Settlements of South Carolina which Country will afford every Supply of Provisions Horses and Waggon.

4th. That the Boer Hill, Cherokee, Indians Shawnees and Adjacent Tribes be encouraged to operate and make excursions on the West part of Virginia over the Mountains, Houlston and New River Settlements which will be the means of Alarming the Virginians and prevent Their assisting the Carolinians during these Operations.

5th. That the Commander in Chief of this Expedition after being in Possession of Augusta may be instructed to dispatch Couriers to the Leading Men of the Regulators and the Chiefs of the Scotch Settlers in the lower parts of the North Carolina to raise and Embody Their Men, to come forward and meet the Kings Army. But least a difficulty might arise as to the Levying and Supplying such Bodys of Men it is Humbly Submitted—That They be formed into Corps's as Malitia to serve for a short time—or during this operation and then to be dismissed at the descretion of the Commander in Chief on the spot, And that all persons capable of carrying Arms shall be obliged to Serve in Defense of Their property's—and the British Government—In case of refusal and They absent themselves Their Property to be Confiscated for the benefit of those Voluntiers who enter into the Service.

6th & Lastly As The Season to the Northward will soon become too Inclement for the Kings Troops to carry on any very considerable Operation—It is Humbly and with great deference presumed That could there be a body of His

⁷ Alexander Cameron, deputy Indian superintendent in the South until 1779 when he became superintendent of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and allied Indians along the Mississippi.

Majesty's Troops spared, Consisting of Three or Four Thousand Men to make a Descent at Charles Town South Carolina while the afore mentioned Service is carrying on there is little doubt But it might be easily carried without much Loss—Which would entirely put His Majesty in Possession of the whole Southern Colonies—That being done The Heart of Rebellion would be broken as all the other Sea Port Towns and Forts from thence to the Capes of Virginia would be Easily Commanded.

Moses Kirkland

New York October 13th. 1778

To Their Excellencies His Majesty's
Commissioners.

Lieut. Col. Moses Kirkland
of the Militia of South Carolina,
and Deputy Superintendant of
the Seminollie Indians in East-
Florida.

Begs leave humbly to represent;

That great advantages might accrue to his Majesty's service in general, and the Rebellion be more speedily suppressed, by beginning and carrying on an Expedition to the Southward in the Colony of Georgia; for which, among many others, he craves permission to assign the following reasons.

- 1st. That the greater part of the Regular Troops and all the Rangers, Refugees and Indians, now in Garrison at St. Augustine, might be employed in reducing that Province and the back Country of South Carolina to their former obedience; which would cut off all communication between the Rebels and Indians, and would be the means of uniting the Seminollies, Creeks, Chickesaws and Cherokee Indians in the interest of his Majesty. This would be a much greater security for the defence of the two Florida Governments, than five times the number of Troops that are now kept there in Garrisons; and would in a great measure put a stop to that enormous Expence which Mr. Stuart Superintendant of the Southern District is obliged to bear, in Presents to those different Nations of Indians, as well as in feeding them with Provisions and treating them with Liquors, together with the expence of Men and Horses em-

ployed in transporting and dispersing such Presents among them: all which is not sufficient to keep them in good temper and secure their friendship, for many of them have been joining the Rebels against Government. And if the French should take possession of Mobile, before his Excellency the Commander in Chief has secured the Colony of Georgia, the consequences will be fatal: the two Florida Governments must fall, for Miss. Indians have the Balance of Power in that quarter. But if his Majesty's Troops are beforehand in possessing themselves of the Colony of Georgia, that power may be turned against the Rebels at the pleasure of the Commander in Chief.

2. It is well known that the principal resources for carrying on the Rebellion are drawn from the labour of an incredible multitude of Negroes in the Southern Colonies, who are daily drove by their hard Task-masters in the Manufacture of Rice, Indico, Tobacco, Hemp, Wheat, Indian Corn, and also in raising Stock of all kinds. These are the Fiends that support the credit of the Paper Currency, and enable the Congress to draw supplies from every part of this Continent, as well as from Europe and the West Indies. But the instant that The Kings Troops are put in motion in those Colonies, these poor Slaves would be ready to rise upon their Rebel Masters, and be a great means of compelling them to seek refuge in the interior Provinces. That prodigious quantity of Hemp, Tar, Pitch and Turpentine, which supports the Navy of the Congress, might then be converted to the use of His Majesty; and as those Colonies abound with every necessary, the Army might in a great measure be supplied with Provisions, without the expence of transporting them across the Atlantic.
3. A great majority of the Inhabitants of North and South Carolina are loyal Subjects, groaning under the usurped authority of Congress; these have embodied themselves at different times, under every disadvantage, in defence of their Liberties and the British Constitution. Do not such Men merit the assistance and protection of their Sovereign? especially when it might be afforded them at a Season of the year when the Troops, if kept to the Northward, must remain in Winter Quarters.
4. It is well known that all the power and influence of the Congress cannot prevail on any body of the New England-men

to undertake a March to the Carolinas, and those that might attempt it from this Colony and New Jersey, would be broken and wearied out by fatigues; so that the Southern Colonies must not only become an easy conquest, but would soon furnish a body of Veterans Sufficient to drive the Oliverian Race from the Continent, or reduce them to a proper submission.

5. The reduction of the Southern Colonies would not only furnish his Majesty's Army and the different Garrisons on the Continent with many needful supplies, which are now brought at a great expence across the Atlantic, but it would also lessen the extent of this Coast from St. Augustine to Chesapeake Bay, and render the effects of his Majesty's Cruisers more sensible to the Northern Colonies.

Your memorialist begs leave further to inform your Excellencies, that he arrived at Philadelphia with dispatches from Governor Tonyn of East Florida and Brigadier General Prevost, to His Excellency Sir William Howe, just before his departure for England; which, together with the evacuation of Philadelphia, prevented the attention to the Plan proposed that its' importance seemed to require: but as the present Season affords a most convenient opportunity of putting it into execution, your Memorialist conceived it to be his duty to acquaint your Excellencies, that he was strongly recommended by those Gentlemen for his knowledge of the Southern Colonies, and that he shall be happy if his presence at this conjuncture, can be any way serviceable to the cause of his King and Country.

Moses Kirkland

New York 21st. October 1778

Lt. Col: Kirkland may be found at

Messieurs Stoughton & Michies'

No. 512—Hanover Square