The Sons of Liberty — Patriots or Terrorists?

Andrew Oliver had not expected trouble when he accepted the appointment to be the collector of the new stamp tax. He was a prominent merchant in Boston and the lieutenant governor's brother-in-law. He was not even alarmed when he heard someone had placed an effigy of him hanging from a tree on Newbury Street. Nobody likes new taxes, he thought. The local sheriff assured Oliver it would be removed. However, when the sheriff arrived at the scene, he found a large and unfriendly mob with the hanging dummy. He prudently withdrew without taking it down.

Later, the crowd took the effigy to Oliver's house. The crowd stopped on Kirby Street, where Oliver had a business property, and burned his business. When the mob reached Oliver's house, they beheaded the effigy of Oliver, went to a nearby hill, and burned it. A short time later, some of the mob returned and spent the rest of the night looting and ransacking Oliver's home. Oliver and his family fled. When the lieutenant governor and the sheriff arrived, a rock-throwing mob drove them away. This was the Sons of Liberty's first public appearance in Boston. It was August 14, 1765. Oliver withdrew his name as a collector of the stamp tax. It would not be the last time the Sons of Liberty would use violent tactics.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "terrorism" as "the systematic use of terror, especially as a means of coercion." In American folklore and history books, the Sons of Liberty usually are referred to as "patriots" who led the early resistance against the British before the American Revolution. "Patriotism" is defined as "love for and devotion to one's country." Which term describes the Sons of Liberty? Do both terms describe them?

Similar to many other government resistance groups (including terrorists), the Sons of Liberty was a secretive group. Information about them is limited. It is not clear where the group first appeared, Boston or New York City, or exactly when, although generally it is agreed they appeared sometime in 1765. Some historians say Sons of Liberty members were middle and lower class, while others say they were middle and upper class and used lower-class street gangs to carry out more violent tactics. Historians are unsure of the identities of all the members, although some of them are known. For example, Paul Revere was a member; but historians disagree as to whether Samuel Adams was a member, although some say he was actually the founder of the Massachusetts group.

There is one surviving list of possible members, compiled from a list of about three hundred fifty men who attended a Sons of Liberty dinner in 1769. By

CICERO
HISTORY BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK™

that time, however, their membership was in the thousands, and the Sons of Liberty had branches in all thirteen colonies. Recent studies show the group had no strong, central leadership and was a loose network of relatively independent units spread through the colonies. Similar to some modern terrorist groups, this made them an elusive target for the British to find and stop. The Sons of Liberty had no reason to keep detailed records that could get them in trouble if the British discovered their identities. Were they terrorists? Did they engage in violence on a regular basis?

There were numerous examples of force Sons of Liberty members allegedly used to enforce resistance against British tax laws. Merchants or customers who did not honor boycotts of British goods were subject to destruction of their property, threats, beatings, or being tarred and feathered. Some had their homes or businesses burned, including Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts. It is true there are no documented cases of the Sons of Liberty actually killing anyone, though tarring and feathering could sometimes be fatal. The Sons of Liberty clearly never left a trail of death and destruction as 21st century terrorist groups do. In that sense, the Sons of Liberty did not cause as much suffering as terrorist groups do today. However, the terrorist does not have to kill large numbers of people if he can generate fear and intimidation in another way. People fear terrorists as much for what they *might* do as for what they actually do.

The Sons of Liberty used various tactics to oppose British policies in addition to threats and violence. Many members were involved in the publishing trades and used their presses to publish articles criticizing British taxes, especially the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act was unpopular with people who published newspapers and pamphlets; since those items were taxed, it diminished their profits. Members were also involved in the Committees of Correspondence, which were networks of activists who wrote to each other to keep informed about the British laws in the colonies.

Did patriotism motivate the Sons of Liberty? Was financial self-interest, hoping to avoid paying higher taxes to the British or hoping to keep the British from closing their profitable smuggling operations, their motivation? Could a bit of both have motivated them? Would that make them less patriotic?

In the end, did their use of violence for what they believed to be a good cause make them terrorists or patriots? Does the justice of the cause affect whether its supporters' actions are terrorism? Would our judgment of the Sons of Liberty today be different if the Revolution had failed, and we were now still citizens of Britain? What do *you* think?

The Sons of Liberty — Patriots or Terrorists?

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the Sons of Liberty a difficult group to describe?

2. Since the Sons of Liberty supposedly did not kill anyone, does that mean they were not terrorists?

3. What tactics did the Sons of Liberty use to resist British taxes before the American Revolution?

4. Based on the definitions of patriotism and terrorism in the reading and the information presented on the Sons of Liberty, explain whether you think they were terrorists, or not.