

**Caitlin A. Fitz.** "Suspected on Both Sides': Little Abraham, Iroquois Neutrality, and the American Revolution." *Journal of the Early Republic* 27:3 (Fall 2008): 299-335. DOI: 10.1353/jer.0.0017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jer.0.0017>.

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“Suspected on Both Sides” tells the largely unremembered story of Little Abraham (Tigoransera), a Mohawk chief who lived in the community of Tiononderoga in New York’s Mohawk Valley and who tried to guide his people, and the Iroquois in general, through the dangers of the American Revolution. Caitlin Fitz, a doctoral candidate in Yale’s history program, uses Little Abraham to explore the logic of and difficulties facing Iroquois efforts to pursue a policy of neutrality during the Anglo-American conflict. She examines what neutrality meant to Little Abraham, both by considering his own words and actions and by situating him within the context of eighteenth-century Iroquois diplomacy. She suggests why he chose and maintained such a policy from the beginning of the Anglo-American war in 1775 until his death in a British prison at Fort Niagara in 1780. And she juxtaposes his policy with that of Joseph Brant (Thayendenagea) and other Mohawk leaders who cast their lot with the British early and fully.

Reconstructing Little Abraham’s story leads Fitz to three major conclusions: “that support for neutrality [among the Iroquois] was stronger than most scholars have thought” (300); that Little Abraham and his supporters tried to preserve “a system of factional neutrality . . . in which he would pursue a limited partnership with the Americans while [other Iroquois leaders] pursued an alliance with the British” (301); and that the Iroquois defined neutrality in a way that “demanded active participation, but of a carefully circumscribed kind” (303), that could include providing military information for and undertaking negotiations with one side. Of these arguments, the last is the most convincing. Comparing Little Abraham’s words and actions forces Fitz to make sense of the apparent gap between proclaimed neutrality and demonstrated engagement—a gap that was noted, at different times, by Americans, British, and pro-British Iroquois. By looking at how Little Abraham and other Iroquois acted even as they considered themselves neutral

(whether between France and Great Britain before 1760 or between Great Britain and the United States after 1775), she convincingly establishes that neutrality--like diplomacy or war--is culturally constructed and defined. Much of the article examines Little Abraham's, and other Iroquois leaders', definitions of neutrality. This cultural construct might have been more fully developed had Fitz elaborated upon her occasional suggestions (see, for example, 327-328) that this concept of neutrality might have derived from Iroquois fears that full engagement in someone else's war would result in internecine killings and thus endless "mourning wars" among the Iroquois themselves.

Less convincing, but also less important to her account, is Fitz's argument that support for neutrality was both broader and more persistent than most accounts have suggested. She rests this conclusion primarily upon the British response to the diplomatic mission of Little Abraham and another Tiononderoga neutralist, Hans Crine, to the Iroquois refugee community at Niagara in early 1780. By that time, Little Abraham's following in Tiononderoga itself had been reduced to just a handful of families, as most of the community had fled to the protection of the British at Niagara following Major General John Sullivan's desolating campaign through Iroquoia a few months earlier. The actual sentiments of the Niagara refugees are unknowable. Fitz tries to extrapolate their views from the concerns of their hosts--the British officers and pro-British Mohawks who resided at Niagara. That Guy Johnson and Joseph Brant were concerned that the American-leaning neutrals Little Abraham and Hans Crine might be able to influence some of the refugees seems clear. It is less clear that their fears were based upon the actual, or even the potential, sentiments of the Iroquois refugees--to whom, after some advance preparation, Johnson ultimately allowed Little Abraham, Hans Crine, and two Oneida emissaries with similar ideas about neutrality to make their case. The fact that the months-long confinement of the four men in Niagara's "black hole" seems to have produced only occasional protests by the neighboring Senecas or the refugee community might be read as suggesting the limited appeal of the neutralist message, at least by 1780.

The most interesting of Fitz's three conclusions is her claim that Little Abraham hoped to perpetuate a practice of "factional neutrality" (301) that had been used by the Iroquois since the early years of the eighteenth century to accommodate pro-French and pro-British elements among the Six Nations without alienating either of the European powers. Direct evidence of this desire is largely lacking, but Fitz is careful to frame her discussion of Little Abraham's thinking on this point in the language of probabilities and possibilities (see, especially, 320). Placing him within a decades-old Iroquois tradition clarifies the break with the past represented by his Mohawk antagonists, particularly Joseph Brant and Aaron Hill. Their intolerance of and even hostility to Little Abraham's American-leaning neutrality--which he might easily have imagined as the counterpart to their own British-leaning approach--makes them, rather than him, "the great innovator[s]" (331), in Fitz's view. Their "rejection of . . . factional neutrality," she argues, "marked an important strategic departure from longstanding Iroquois practices" (331). Though the evidence is necessarily (and admittedly) thin on this point, I find Fitz's assessment to be quite solid. What I would like to have seen from her, however, is some

explanation, even if somewhat speculative, about why Little Abraham clung to this longstanding policy and why Brant and Hill abandoned it.

Two ideas suggest themselves to me, neither of which can be solidly advanced on the evidence that Fitz presents. A partial explanation might lie in the ages and experiences of these men. Fitz does not, perhaps because she cannot, say how old Little Abraham, Brant, and Hill were in the mid- to late 1770s. From the evidence that she does provide, combined with fragmentary information that I could glean from elsewhere, it seems clear that Little Abraham was at least a generation older than Brant, and perhaps than Hill as well. He had experienced factional neutrality during its heyday, in the decades before the French were driven from eastern North America by the British. Brant, and perhaps Hill, probably had not. Such past experiences might also have shaped the men's expectations for the future. Factional neutrality could only function in a situation in which at least two major powers bordered on Iroquoia. Little Abraham might have believed, correctly as things ultimately turned out, that the Americans would win their independence and the British would maintain a presence north of the St. Lawrence River. But, in 1775 and perhaps even in 1780, Brant and Hill would certainly have been in good company if they expected that the result of the Revolutionary War--just like the result of the Seven Years War--would leave a single power in control of eastern North America. If that was their expectation, there would have been little reason for them to revive a policy of factional neutrality that had been abandoned through necessity after 1760 and every reason for them to throw whatever support they could muster behind the side whose victory would best serve Iroquois interests.

As the preceding summary and reflections suggest, this is not an article about the construction or implementation of United States (U.S.) foreign policy. It is, instead, an account of the foreign policies of a nation with which the U.S. interacted in significant ways at an important moment in its past. Viewed in this light, one of the more interesting aspects of this article is what it reveals about the relative incoherence of the Six Nations if thought of as a "state," even in the contemporary sense of the word (of course, the same thing could be said about the U.S. in the late 1770s and 1780s). Little Abraham was one of many Mohawk chiefs and one of a much larger number of Iroquois chiefs. He had sufficient power and authority to chart his own diplomatic course, to force some level of engagement with U.S. and British officials, and to try to influence the ideas and actions of other Mohawks and Iroquois. But so did Brant and Hill and many other Iroquois chiefs with very different ideas about the proper policy for Iroquoia. No one was capable of making policy for the nation as a whole and Little Abraham was unable to enforce his preferred policies even within his own community (see 315 n.20). The seeming incoherence of the Iroquois state helped to doom Little Abraham's policy to irrelevance. U.S. officials evinced no respect for the Iroquois' territory and little for their government--"their . . . promises are not to be relied upon," General Philip Schuyler informed the Continental Congress, "however solemnly made" (323).

## H-Diplo Article Review

It is in its thoughtful discussion of the cultural differences that underlay diplomatic interaction--particularly regarding the meaning and value of neutrality--that Caitlin Fitz's "Suspected on Both Sides" should make its greatest contribution to most readers of H-Diplo. The implications of this article, implications which admittedly are not unique to it, extend far beyond the people and the time that are its subject.

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—Commissioned for H-Diplo by Jonathan Reed Winkler