

Benedict Arnold

Heroic

Traitor?



FROM ORIGINAL PORTRAIT BY JOHN TRUMBULL.

(Library of Congress image)

Heroic Traitor: The case for a new chapter in the Benedict Arnold story

Master Sgt. Michelle M. Johnson

Sergeants Major Course, Class 67

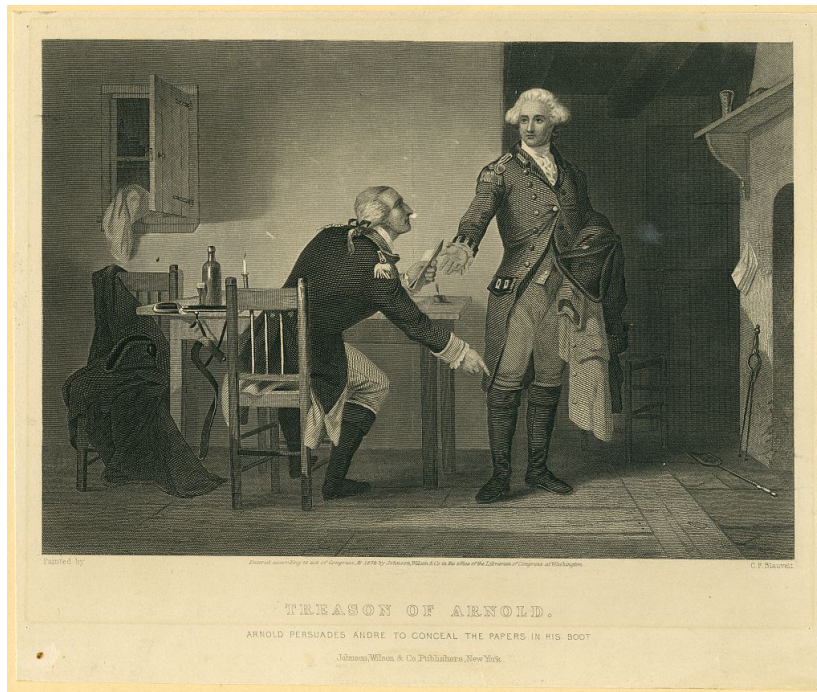
Imagine if a decorated combat veteran and distinguished leader conspired with an Islamic State intelligence agent to hand over the U.S. Military Academy. A recipient of various medals awarded for valor and an inspirational leader of troops in a number of campaigns - what would cause this Soldier to forsake his oath? Why would a dedicated man of previously unimpeachable commitment to the nation suddenly turn traitor?

During the Revolutionary War, Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold conspired with British intelligence officer, Maj. John Andre, to give the fort at West Point, New York, and thus Continental control of the Hudson River (Randall, 1990) to

British control. Historians write that Arnold was spurred by revenge like Macbeth, love like Romeo, and inflicted with political sabotage like Hamlet. Historians would have students believe that a patriot and hero of epic proportions would behave as a fatally-flawed Shakespearean character and betray all for personal gain despite evidence to the contrary in his previous actions, words, and relationships.

If one were to scrutinize Arnold's historical vilification, his year and a half of unfruitful intelligence, and Gen. George Washington's penchant for strategic diversions, a very different picture emerges of the lead actor in what is supposed to be America's greatest act of perfidy.

When one puts those impacts, missteps, and diversions in the context of the tenuous operational environment of late-eighteenth-century America, it seems a new act needs an author. Furthermore, if Arnold's "treason" was so much like the actions of a character in a play, maybe the story itself is also a master scene of historical fiction. Perhaps historians have not looked at an equally plausible reason for his "betrayal": the plot to give up West Point was the first in a series of tactical and strategic efforts to entice the British to abandon their stranglehold on New York City.



Treason of Arnold - Arnold persuades Andre to conceal the papers in his boot. (Library of Congress image)

If history got it wrong, Arnold might be the most unappreciated military leader among the pantheon of American founders. There is enough circumstantial evidence to warrant further historical analysis that at the time of his alleged treason, Arnold might have been a player in a plot to distract British forces to expose New York City to Continental dominance.

Fatally-Flawed

Historians would have readers believe Arnold was a tragic hero in an unwritten Shakespeare stage drama, destined for a fall from grace because of a fatal flaw of character. On Sept. 23, 1780, a trio of volunteers detained British intelligence officer, Major John Andre, as he trekked the New York countryside returning to British lines after meeting with Arnold to seal the treasonous deal to hand over the military fortification at West Point.

They found three documents in Andre's possession: a map of West Point, Washington's war council minutes from Sept. 6, and a pass signed by Arnold stating that Andre, under the pseudonym John Anderson, was on business for West Point's commander and should be allowed to travel freely (Byron, n.d.). Thus began the historical demonization of the man Brandt, Flexner, Kraske, Randall and Wallace argue (as cited in Ducharme and Fine, 1995) was America's greatest general of the Revolutionary War.

Authors of the day, notably Washington's aide Brig. Gen. Alexander Hamilton, demonized Arnold immediately; their vehement portrayal influenced how contemporary historians perceive and write about his actions (From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, 11 October 1780).

Despite Arnold's perseverance and leadership during the march and attack on Quebec and his epic victories at the battles of Ticonderoga and Saratoga, historians like Jared Sparks, author of one of the first Arnold biographies written in 1835, contributed greatly to national opinion: that he was mainly "a self-centered, glory-seeking madman, destined from an early age to engage in treasonous acts" (Ducharme and Fine, 1995).

Eighteenth-century historians, revolutionary figures, and journalists constructed a character akin to the devil, which has made attempts to contradict the narrative unfathomable for future historians (Ducharme and Fine,

1995). So influenced by this treatment of Arnold's character, Sparks (1835) recounted folktales of Arnold's devilish behavior as a child to cement the idea of Arnold as predestined for evil. This premeditated recasting of Arnold's contribution to the American Revolutionary War was set on an unstoppable trajectory, infecting America's collective memory.

Ducharme and Fine (1995) note how even a century after the scandal, authors who attempted to change the narrative were themselves vilified: Isaac Arnold (no relation to the general), who wrote several reviews of books on the Arnold story, was attacked by scholars and readers for being too sympathetic to the traitor and for being too apologetic in his expression of Arnold's acts. The depiction of Arnold as a devil is so engrained in the national psyche as a result of 200-plus years of "spin," that it is virtually impossible to see alternative explanations for his actions. Boylan (1973) acknowledges this prejudice:

If one assumes that Arnold was destined to become a traitor, as virtually every American historian has done, then it is a simple matter to dismiss his military achievements as accidents, since no traitor could be a really good American general. Everything he did on behalf of the American cause can be written off as a prelude to treason. (p. 11)

Boylan himself falls prey to the frame authors created as the backdrop for the Arnold story. Despite acknowledging in his book that Washington created a phony story of the French fleet landing in Rhode Island to join American troops for an attack on Canada in 1780, Boylan focuses his case on proving that Arnold was a complicated figure who had several valid motivations for changing sides (1973). He does not contradict the prevailing literature on Arnold as a traitor, just that Arnold was also a hero. However, the fact that Boylan himself recounts how Washington passed Arnold phony information to throw the British off his trail should give any historian pause that there could be more to the story than previously considered (1973).

Boylan seems unable or unwilling to put the puzzle together in any configuration other than the one already constructed by his predecessors. It is this two-century recasting that has prevented contemporary historians from recognizing there may be some subtext to the Arnold drama, even as these contemporary historians obviously document the clues themselves. After reshuffling the facts and looking at them without the frame of the tragic hero, these clues point to a potential clandestine explanation for his actions.

The Bigger they are, the Harder they Fall

Just as Shakespeare's Hamlet descends into madness as he attempts to avenge his father's death (Jamieson, 2016), historians and writers since 1780 tell the story of Arnold, the man willing to forsake his nation to retaliate against a Congress for which he sacrificed and bled, but which did not officially recognize those sacrifices (Randall, 1990; Boylan, 1973). In chronicle after chronicle about his treason, no more than a string of failed overtures to the British exist, including the most infamous failure - the plan to cede West Point.

The idea that a proven brilliant strategist, such as the hero of Saratoga, would make blunder after blunder and never truly consummate his treasonous allegiance by delivering actionable intelligence, must at the least be ques-

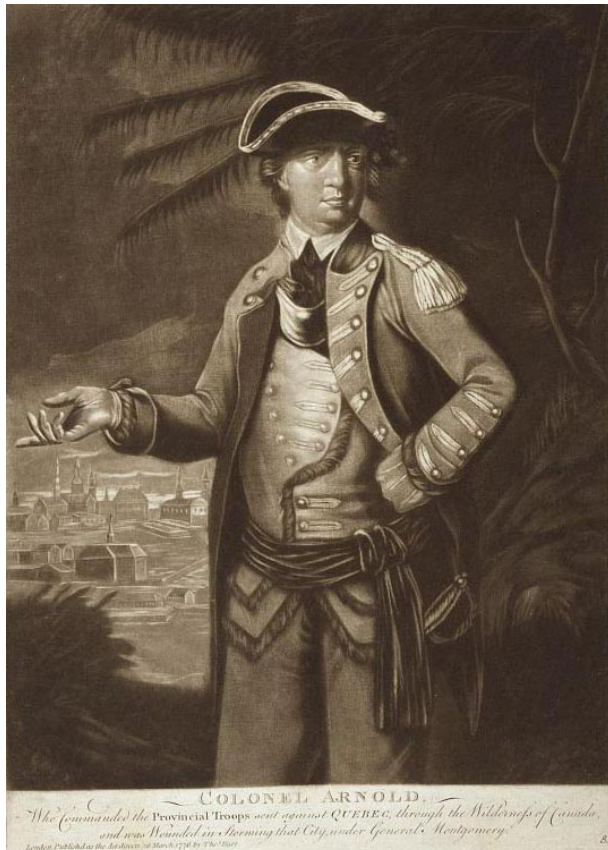


A biting cartoon showing Confederate president Jefferson Davis in league with both the devil and Revolutionary War traitor Benedict Arnold. (Library of Congress image)

tionable to contemporary historians. Further investigation finds the pieces of the puzzle were there all along waiting for the right historian to piece them together properly.

One of the first instances of an intelligence misstep poorly analyzed by history, was when Arnold sent a letter to Andre, drafted in Washington's headquarters after Washington left to lead troops against an attack on two forts along the Hudson River (Randall, 1990). The letter informs Andre that Washington's troop strength was just 8-thousand, supplies had dwindled, and the destination was Niagara and Detroit (Randall, 1990). The letter did not make it to Andre in time for it to be useful, though it would have been valuable information in support of the British efforts at Stoney Point, according to Randall (1990).

Randall's (1990) commentary on the facts of the situation notes this irony, as well as the fact that it was the attack on the two forts that caused the delay of Arnold's court-martial for allegations of impropriety and misuse of resources; it is this delay that gave Arnold time to gather this information at the American headquarters. Randall never conjectures that these circumstances are perhaps too convenient to be accidents of fate. Arnold's information did not hurt the American cause, but it did help persuade British commander-in-chief Sir Henry Clinton to pay him attention (Lehman, 2014).



Colonel Arnold - who commanded the provincial troops sent against Quebec, through the wilderness of Canada, and was wounded in storming that city, under General Montgomery. (Library of Congress image)

Another clue to a possible master plan to confuse and misdirect the British was missed by Lehman (2014) in his description of how Clinton left the commander of the southern campaign, Lord Charles Cornwallis, unsupported at Yorktown, Virginia. It was 1781, and the British had commissioned Arnold a British officer (Lehman, 2014). Though mostly ignored, Arnold provided regular counsel to Clinton during these months, including plans to raid ports in Connecticut, his home state (Lehman, 2014).

It was the diversion of troops to one of Arnold's suggested raids that ultimately set the conditions for Cornwallis' defeat and surrender in the south and then allowed Washington to use his troops in the north to retake New York City (Kilmeade and Yaeger, 2013).

Of this, Lehman writes that "even more strangely," though British intelligence officers figured out the American Army intended to turn a large force against Cornwallis, neither he nor the accomplished tactician Arnold considered sending troops to reinforce Yorktown, even though Clinton assured Cornwallis he would (2014). Even more strangely indeed; how did Lehman not consider the "convenient" coincidence that it was Arnold's counsel to Clinton that likely led to Washington's ability to retake New York?

Perhaps Lehman overlooked the connections because his research echoed two centuries of tales of a fatally-flawed actor destined to fall from grace. Lehman's facts are not so strange at all when one considers these kinds of bait-and-switch tactics were some of Washington's proven maneuvers (Kilmeade and Yaeger, 2013).

Something Rotten in the State of New York

Washington employed double-agents and diversions regularly to manipulate the enemy (Kilmeade and Yaeger, 2013). Making the leap to thinking he might have entrusted his most accomplished general with a covert mission to deliver New York back to the Continental Army is far from far-fetched.

Washington enlisted a young man named Sgt. Daniel Bissell to defect as a Loyalist and join the British Army (Braisted, 2015). After he did as ordered, Bissell fell in with the American Legion, a unit commanded by none other than Arnold, at precisely the time Arnold convinced Clinton to attack New London, Connecticut, diverting troops from Yorktown and opening a path for American dominance in the south and New York City (Braisted, 2015). Somehow, historians have overlooked that Bissell, Washington's double-agent, furtively acquired a position in the same unit that the nationally despised turncoat commanded.

Washington appointed another Connecticut native, Maj. Benjamin Tallmadge as the head of his secret spy ring known as the Culper Ring (Kilmeade and Yaeger, 2013). When Arnold's plot to hand over West Point was supposedly set and the meeting with Andre scheduled, Arnold asked his new subordinate - Tallmadge - to keep a lookout for a man from New York by the name of James Anderson (Lehman, 2014).

Lehman also notes that earlier in the month, Tallmadge, acting as spy ring commander, received intelligence from one of his operatives identifying the name John Anderson as a British spy's code name (Lehman, 2014). If this timeline is correct, Tallmadge already knew Arnold was potentially corresponding with a likely spy. Or, perhaps Tallmadge was there to ensure Arnold's success. Either way, the facts point that Washington was aware of Arnold's actions, and it is therefore at least possible he also sanctioned them, to offer Clinton a decoy to occupy him long enough to take New York City.

French Gen. Count de Rochambeau validated Washington's primary objective was New York: "The attack on New York from its first contemplation had been deemed eventual ..." (Lehman, 2014, p.133). Lehman included Rochambeau's acknowledgment of Washington's complicated spy games, writing that Washington deceived his own Army to make sure no one knew the next move (2014).

Again, Lehman failed to make the connection that something was not completely copacetic in the Arnold story. If this evidence of Washington's predilection for complex cloak and dagger schemes to keep his intentions guarded from the enemy has been on bookshelves and in archives for hundreds of years, how could today's historians consistently err in connecting it with other plausible arguments for Arnold's actions?

Conclusion

It does not take Macbeth's witches to prophesize future historians will uncover more evidence that Arnold's alleged treason was part of a complicated plot to distract Clinton's forces allowing the Continental Army to recapture New York City.

For 200 years, authors have artfully sketched Arnold as Lucifer in the play about America's birth. They paint a picture so clouded with damaging rhetoric that not even modern-day historians can remove the grime long enough to notice a string of convenient coincidences in the tale.

From Arnold's 18-month inability to provide worthwhile intelligence to Washington's espionage ring that miraculously encircled Arnold before, during, and after Andre's capture, the facts demonstrate a general inability for historians to see them as facts. There is certainly enough evidence for a new playwright to take the stage, reexamine the narrative, and rewrite the story of the nation's most vilified traitor. ■

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