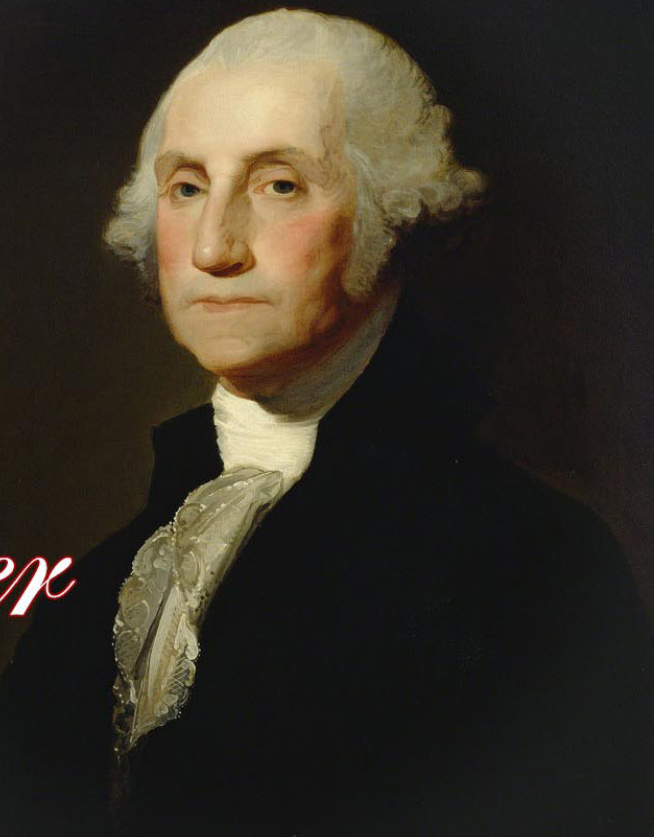


President General ... Spymaster



(Library of Congress image)

The importance of spies to Washington's success

Master Sgt. Quinnus G. Caldwell

Sergeants Major Course, Class 67

The Revolutionary War was a clash between Great Britain and 13 of its North American colonies. The 13 colonies were victorious and gained their independence from Great Britain, declaring themselves the United States of America. Gen. George Washington's military prowess was instrumental to the success of the Continental Army. For centuries, many strategies contributed to military victories and the use of spies played pivotal roles. This was no less true during America's war for independence. This paper discusses an overview of the Revolutionary War, intelligence during the war; the role women played during the conflict, and

other roles of other factors. Washington's dependence on espionage proved critical to his overall success.

Overview of the Revolutionary War

The Revolutionary War was the conflict leading to the establishment of the United States of America. It began with American colonists' frustration with British rule, which progressed to more than six years of war against a superior British military, and resulted in the 1786 Treaty of Paris, where the British recognized the United States as an independent nation (Tuchman, 1988).

As commander of the Continental Army, Washington was a key figure in the war. He suffered many triumphs and setbacks, but his overall strategies and leadership eventually led the country to victory. The Revolutionary War was unique because it was the first colonial uprising in the Western Hemisphere and paved the way for many more colonies to fight for freedom from colonial rule (Tuchman, 1988).

Intelligence During the Revolutionary War

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, Washington focused strategic goals and keeping his army well supplied, but as the war progressed, he began to see the need for accurate information. Washington was a relative novice in the management of large army formations and did not know many details regarding the enemy or the forces set against him (Lengel, 2016). As a result, Washington created a competent internal communication network to organize his troops. To gather intelligence on the enemy, he initially relied upon subordinates to scout and report back with information, but inaccurate reports led to early defeats (Daigler, 2014). These defeats forced him to recognize the importance of accurate intelligence, though it took a while for his efforts to improve in this area.

He eventually created a system of spy rings and secret agents who provided him accurate information from behind enemy lines (Misencik, 2014). They were the first in the American espionage community. Many spies lacked training and often had to develop strategies and skills necessary to operate covertly. The most famous spy ring of the period was the Culper spy ring, an espionage network organized by Maj. Benjamin Tallmadge (Lengel, 2016). While it achieved notoriety over the years, it was by no means the only intelligence network of the time. In fact, Washington considered many of their methods unreliable and dangerous. Despite this, Washington was able to make use of their efforts and encouraged others to establish networks for covert information gathering.

Advancements in strategies and skills led to the creation and improvement of technologies related to the community and improvement in spycraft techniques. Of note was the invisible ink developed by Sir James Jay, a chemist and a physician (Daigler, 2014). Written information needed to be transported securely so America's early spies developed a system of coded letters and ciphers and other ways of hiding information in letters. (Misencik, 2014). Also, agents also made use of disguises and covers to aid infiltration efforts (Daigler, 2014). A tactic employed by both sides was the use of misinformation given to the opposing party in the hope they would fall for a ruse. Another employed strategy was the use of Black Chamber operations where mail and messages were intercepted, covertly read, then resealed and sent on to the intended recipient (Daigler, 2014).

This implies the British used many of Washington's strategies. His focus on intelligence gathering allowed Continental forces to outmaneuver and outperform superior British forces. His establishment of spy networks and use of espionage was not only prudent; it was necessary and critical to his overall success.

Washington was so successful in his use of espionage that it landed him the title of spymaster (Lengel, 2016). He employed both local and foreign networks and often did not know the identities of many of the people who worked to send him information, though he preferred to meet his spies in person so he could judge their measure. In addition to official spies, many ordinary, everyday individuals, such as farmers and merchants, supplied information to Washington's spy rings and worked in tandem with covert agents to aid the cause of freedom.

With resolutions passed by Congress, intelligence operations spread and became the foundation for the modern intelligence community where civilian observation and mobilization considerations are as important as a military strategy (Misencik, 2014). Since the country's inception, espionage became an important tactic in maintaining an advantage over the enemy. As the war continued, women played vital roles in gathering intelligence.

The Role of Women as Spies

The role of women in winning freedom from British rule was crucial. They played an important support role by nursing the wounded and sick, washing clothing, cooking, gathering supplies, and by being resourceful and coming up with alternatives for goods that were unavailable (Berkin, 2006). As more and more men joined the Continental Army, women took on the roles of managing farms and shops in addition to their regular duties. They were also essential participants in the boycott of British goods since wives and mothers were the primary buyers of supplies (Berkin, 2006). Their support during the Revolutionary War aided their men and their efforts allowed for strategies such as the boycott to take place.

Women also played pivotal roles in intelligence networks. Washington often used women as scouts and spies because of their ability to gain information not easy to obtain (Samuelson, 1989). Some women rode long distances heroically to warn American forces of British plans (Samuelson, 1989). In addition to the women who overtly supported the war efforts, many of them covertly supported it by acting as spies, secret messengers, and performing other intelligence gathering activities.

As mentioned earlier, the Culper Ring was one of the most lauded spy rings of the time, and women played an essential part in this network as well. Anna Strong, a member of the network, transferred messages by hanging laundry in patterns based on a code (Berkin, 2006).

Many of the group's wives and sisters assisted their men in passing information or acting as couriers. One of the most mysterious members was a covert operative called agent 355. She discovered Benedict Arnold's defection and passed the information to American agents. She was held captive and died on the prison ship Jersey and then buried in a mass grave along with hundreds of prisoners (Samuelson, 1989). Women's efforts in America's victory over the British were no less difficult or dangerous than that of their male counterparts.

Women were successful as spies for many reasons. Many of them made use of their skills as cooks or house cleaners and took advantage of opportunities to eavesdrop and gather information directly from the enemy (Berkin, 2006). In these roles, they often had unrestricted access to enemy campsites and used it to gain intelligence on equipment shortages, leadership changes, and even troop movements (Samuelson, 1989). Washington held the information collected at great peril to these women operatives in high value. Their contributions were not in flamboyant dealings, but in taking advantage of the attitudes towards them and using traditional and simple skills to gather accurate intelligence. Though women were a force multiplier, many other factors played into the outcome of the war.

Other Important of Factors

Though the role of spies in the overall operations of the Revolutionary War is certain, many other factors helped cement that victory. Some may imply the network of spies and spy rings were irrelevant to America's eventual victory over the British. An important element that helped the American Revolution was the great size of the United States, which made it difficult for British troops to maintain control (Tuchman, 1988), and restricted their efforts to cities and ports. Also, the British were unaccustomed to U.S. geography, which was heavily forested, rugged, humid, and had rough, muddy roads, which were uncommon in England (Tuchman, 1988). These characteristics gave the United States a geographical advantage.

Other important factors were Washington's militia and the military strategies. For example, Washington avoided confronting the British head-on because of their superior numbers, training, and weapons. American militia resorted to guerrilla warfare, specifically the use of snipers to engage British officers (Kelly, 2014).

The militiamen were close-knit and knew the territory better than their enemies (Kelly, 2014). What they lacked in training and experience, they made up for in passion and the desire for independence. The British faced tactics they had not seen before, fought by those willing to put everything on the line for freedom.

France, Spain, and the Netherlands contributed significantly to America's independence. Spain sided with the Americans for the chance to push Britain out of North America as a force, supplying the Continental Army with needed supplies, including munitions (Tuchman, 1988). When



One member of the Culper spy ring communicated by hanging laundry in patterns based on a code (Berkin, 2006). (Graphic by NCO Journal)

they entered the war as combatants, their presence forced the British to spread themselves thin. France considered England a principal rival and sent supplies to the Continental Army as a way to weaken their enemy (Daigler, 2014). France, Spain, and eventually the Netherlands assisted in the battle for independence by supplying the Continental Army, diverting the British troop efforts, providing grants and loans, and contributing weapons and soldiers.

Conclusion

Espionage aided Washington and contributed to his success during the Revolutionary War. It was not a new invention. The British had spies and used them significantly over the course of history. While spies

and espionage did not single-handedly win the war, it allowed Washington to mitigate the damage occurring from poor information. Spy networks were critical to Washington's success in the Revolutionary War. Even

though America could have gained independence without espionage, Washington's use of spies provided the information and intelligence necessary for success during the American Revolutionary War. ■

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