

# **Treachery and Revolution**

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## Treachery and Revolution

As a society, we glorify the past. The elderly often speak wistfully of the golden days, some time of yore when everything was unquantifiably better. It is perhaps for this reason that old battles capture our fancy. We gaze in longing at pictures of Napoleon's forces, ranks of smartly attired soldiers in rigid formation awaiting their turn in the fray. We envision wars fought by upstanding, honorable men who had not a single deceitful bone among them. We like our battles neat. But when we varnish history by imagining that all of antiquity's conflict played out with gloves on hands, we pass over some of olden times' most fascinating nuances. Most know that General Washington's innovative tactics contributed in no small way to American victory in the Revolutionary War. Few know the deeper truth—the War for Independence contained spying, intrigue, and treachery enough to shake the hardest soldier today.

Nathan Hale is best known as an American hero who, when captured by the British and sentenced to death, claimed that his only regret was that he had but one life to give for his country. But what had Hale done to so enrage the Redcoats that their only recourse was to hang him? He engaged in what was, at the time, considered illegal combat—espionage. When British troops landed on Staten Island in New York Bay, George Washington realized he needed a way of gathering information about their troop movements, their numbers, and their plans. He assembled a unit of volunteers to garner intelligence on the Brits, but was temporarily stymied when he asked for a man to go behind enemy lines. The group's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knowlton, spoke for most soldiers of the day when he proclaimed, "I am willing to go

and fight them. But as far as going among them and being taken and hung up like a dog, I will not do it." But Hale, determined to do whatever his country needed to defeat the Tories, stepped forward and offered to slip into British territory in Long Island.

Unfortunately for himself and for Washington's efforts, though history shows him to be a brave and patriotic citizen, Nathan Hale was no master spy. A British Major, Robert Rogers, recognized Hale in a tavern despite the latter's schoolmaster disguise, and, pretending to be a patriot himself, tricked Hale into revealing his mission.

The failure of Nathan Hale to produce actionable intelligence was surely a setback for the Continental Army. But far, far worse than Hale's capture by the British was the willing defection of another American hero, Major General Benedict Arnold. Arnold first distinguished himself in the French and Indian War, in which he fought as a teenager. More recently, he had been a vitalizing force within the Revolutionary Army. His leadership at the Battle of Valcour Island, the first true combat situation that the young American Navy faced, delayed the British campaign by nearly a year. Arnold's daring night-time seizure of Fort Ticonderoga captured the imagination of many a Rebel, and his victory at the Battle of Saratoga later proved one of the war's turning points. But Arnold was displeased with the treatment he had received from American leadership. With the American victory at Saratoga came much-needed aid from France. But Arnold, who had hated the French since his experiences in the French and Indian War, saw the new alliance as a personal slight. He had also been looked over for promotion despite his crucial heroics, due in part, ironically, to the independent streak that had made them possible. General Horatio Gates, one of the Continental Army's old guard, vilified Arnold for exceeding authority and acting on his own at Saratoga, though the junior

officer's actions almost certainly saved the day for Gates's troops. Bitter at the slights to his reputation and rank and recovering from a debilitating leg wound sustained at Saratoga, Arnold threw himself into social life in Philadelphia. He hosted parties as the military commander of the city that both attracted great attention and plunged Arnold into debt. It was at one such party that Arnold met Peggy Shippen, an 18-year-old Philadelphian who, two weeks later, became Peggy Arnold. Through his new wife, Arnold met the British intelligence officer John Andre, who had previously courted Ms. Shippen. The two plotted Arnold's defection. When Arnold learned that the fort at West Point, which ensured American control of the crucial Hudson River, needed a commander, the two devised a plot to geld American shipping lanes. By turning West Point over to the British, Arnold would allow British forces in Canada to meet with those in the South, dividing America in two. Though Arnold succeeded in gaining appointment to West Point, his more treacherous plans failed when Andre fell prey to American militiamen on the way back to British lines. Andre was carrying blueprints of the fort in his boot. When Arnold heard of Andre's capture, he knew his time was short. Leaving Andre to hang, he escaped to the British sloop *Vulture* before Washington could hear of the betrayal. Though he was unable to deliver the Hudson to the British, Benedict Arnold for months undermined the American war efforts by divulging classified information, and later commanded British forces as a Brigadier General.

Far from the pure image many hold of past conflict, the Revolutionary War involved more dirty dealing and backstabbing than Prohibition-era Chicago. From Nathan Hale's ill-fated escapade to Benedict Arnold and his debilitating defection, colonial Americans engaged in as much secret warfare as their modern compatriots. Even

General Washington dipped his hand in the pool, running a network of spies that informed on Loyalist forces and arranging several times—unsuccessfully—for the kidnapping of the traitor Arnold. The Revolution created America, but such innovative tactics existed long before it.

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