The Setauket Gang: The American Revolutionary War Spy Ring you've never heard about

Fran Leskovar
University of Puget Sound, fleskovar@pugetsound.edu

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Abstract or Introduction

When the British captured Philadelphia and New York in the early years of the War for Independence, George Washington decided to change his previous strategy of "the front door" intelligence and entrust the clandestine activities to the civilians who resided in the territory under the British control. He chose Nathanial Sackett, who radically revolutionized clandestine techniques, but was soon replaced with Benjamin Tallmadge who, after the British retreat from Philadelphia to New York, created a successful spy network, the Culper Spy Ring, stationed in Long Island with the purpose of surveilling the British garrisons.

The ring was composed of Tallmadge’s childhood friends and other residents of Setauket, Long Island, and New York City who collected intelligence and used a courier to deliver a message across the Sound (a sound between Connecticut and Long Island). Tallmadge and, especially, his confidants were able to employ people of different backgrounds, such as slaves, children of Tories, women, and Quakers, who willingly risked their lives, and even status of their families for the success of the Revolution, even though they did not know how everything would turn out. When George Washington received the intelligence, in contrast to the British, he was able to cross-reference it with reports provided to the military outposts by ordinary residents and refugees. This process continued until the end of the War, and, even with Benedict Arnold’s betrayal, the British were not able to compromise the Culper Ring’s operations.

The question is even more fascinating from any inquiry about the tactics employed or techniques used in the question of the excitement. Why would some choose to overlook their apparent differences, ethnicity, religion, gender, and race, and risk being hanged to participate in something where the outcome was not certain? Could they have sensed a moment in history was longer than they were and felt premonition of the new country before it was born?

Hypothesis

Due to the complex and vibrant environment, a single answer is not possible. The Anglo-American conflict was not just a conflict or Revolution; instead, it was a gradual transformation of individual social and political views, as Bernard Bailyn argues. The British aggressive imperial policies had a significant impact on the colonial routine. The quasi-independent political environment and accustomed economic conditions were suddenly coming under stricter control of the Westminster. These actions were the antithesis to the constitutional rights of the British subjects and personal want, and people started wondering whether they held the same status as the residents of the British Isles. In good faith, the colonial legislatures, acting for the whole nation, sent grievances to the Crown, but the ignorance, stubbornness, and want for mastery prevented London from grasping and accepting colonial reasoning. In this environment, the radical ideas, championed by a small group of people, were slowly gaining momentum and becoming a refuge from, and shorted than an alternative, to British imperial policies. This process would not stop when the new American life was conceptualized in 1776, instead, the British atrocities on the battlefield and conditions in the occupied territory would keep it alive. The Revolution and War for Independence were ideological, but, at the same time, interspersed with personal motivations and experiences. Almost all colonies were driven to consider joining the cause by the dominant psychological justifications, but their own internal motivations pushed them to cut their ties with the Crown permanently.

Therefore, if we must distill a single factor for opining during the Revolution, the traditional motives—money, ideology, coercion, and ego (“CMCE”)—would be the most accurate. With the ideological motivation more dominant on the side of George Washington and fellow Patriots, and monetary on the British. However, these factors should not be seen as singular motivators. They were entwined with spies’ personal experiences, desires, and grievances.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Chisum Research Award for funding this research.

References


Benjamin Tallmadge

The American Intelligence Officers

George Washington

Nathan Hale

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Tallmadge

Abraham Woodhull

Caleb Brewster

Austin Roe

Anna Smith Strong

Arnold-Andre Affair

Benedict Arnold

John Andre

Sir Henry Clinton

Robert Townsend

Why did colonials join George Washington?

With people moving from their homes to someone’s else, and then doing it all over again when some other British official decided to use that house for his private chambers, pre-American colonials, and especially Loyalists, who were not exempt from the policy, were losing patience. Not only that caused the shift in loyalty, but also the presence of a considerable number of refugees on their streets and soldiers who were excessively drinking, assaulting women, and harassing their husbands.

The British, fundamentally, were antagonizing one a friendly relationship and, thus, rapidly losing support for their view of the conflict. “The people in general [were] becoming indifferent, if not possible,” said Patrick Ferguson, a Loyalist military officer, “to a government which in place of the liberty, prosperity, safety, and plenty, under promise of which it involved them in this war, has established a thorough despotism.” (Rose 159). The British arrogance had a tremendous impact on the population, and the number of Loyalists, who departed with the army, after the surrender (one in every twenty), shows that many believed that the new government was better than the old one (Rose 164).

“While I was at Cambridge with my military friends, I was continually impressed to think of the oppression which was so abundantly exhibited by the British government towards the Colonials, until I finally became entirely devoted to the cause in which my country was compelled to engage. I finally began to think seriously of putting on the uniform, and returned to Philadelphia full of zeal in the cause of my country.”

-Benjamin Tallmadge

“I endeavoured to collect and convey the most accurate and explicit intelligence that I possibly could, and hoped that it may be of some service toward alleviating the misery of our distressed Country, nothing but that could have induced me to undertake it, for you must readily think it is a life of anxiety to be within (on such business) the lines of a cruel and mistrustful Enemy and that I most ardently wish and impatiently wait for their departure.”

-Abraham Woodhull (aka Samuel Culper Sr.)

The Culper Ring Members

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The Testimony of Marmaduke Ste-...