

False Patriots: American Mercenaries and the Fight for Independence

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In November of 1775 Washington's army was settling in for a long, New England winter outside British-occupied Boston. Though firmly entrenched around the city, the Continentals lacked food, clothing, powder, and most importantly, men. Barely three thousand strong, Washington feared that unless Congress issued the necessary funds, the "lines will be so weakened" that the notoriously undisciplined Minute Men would have to fill in the regimental gaps. Decrying a "...dearth of public spirit, and want of virtue" that he saw rampant in the Congress and merchant class, Washington trembled at the "ultimate end of these maneuvers." Even worse were his own men; the Connecticut troops were refusing to reenlist without pay, a reaction that severely undermined Washington's faith in the army. "Such a dirty, mercenary spirit pervades the whole," he wrote his personal secretary, Joseph Reed, "that I should not be surprised at any disaster that may happen."¹

Washington's fear of a "mercenary spirit" was certainly justified, but money was not the only insidious motive that jeopardized the great undertaking. Six months earlier, Benedict Arnold captured Fort Ticonderoga and secured the canons that would liberate Boston; but just four years later he would become early America's most infamous defector. How could one who risked life – and in Arnold's case, *limb* – or liberty change sides? I argue that many revolutionaries were in fact mercenaries – that is, when independence collided with their primary motivation, be it honor, prestige, or self-preservation – their true colors were shown. An examination of two lesser-known traitors – Ethan Allen and Herman Zedtwitz – as well a consideration of Native Americans and African slaves will show that a "mercenary spirit" drove many to both join and abandon the war effort, a motivation stronger than revolutionary ideology.²

Treachery is by nature visceral, cutting deep grooves into the collective memory of a society. Traitors are the antithesis of heroes, bereft of virtue, and doomed by posterity.

¹ George Washington to Joseph Reed, November 25, 1775, in *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, by Edward G Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 449, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-03-02-02-0406>. For the sake of clarity I have altered the spelling and capitalization of primary sources, but left all other elements untouched.

² For an exhaustive study on the conflict between revolutionary ideology and wartime reality, see Charles Royster's *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Williamsburg, Virginia: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

They are vilified in conversation, print, and in the modern world, film; Ralph Fiennes's recent adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* illustrates the power that betrayers still command and the awe that they stir within us.³ They plague societies around the globe and libraries are full of books that detail their scurrilous actions.⁴ But treachery is determined by perspective, and in revolutionary America perspective was anything but static. As the King's subjects marched toward independence, opposition to the crown would eventually give way to wholesale treason. Allegiance was the issue – whether to a distant monarch or local legislature – and while Gordon Wood has argued that most Americans had a superficial and distant understanding of the King, betraying him was a most serious issue.⁵ Patrick Henry learned this in 1765 when he famously insinuated before the Virginia House of Burgesses that King George III ought to tread carefully, lest he suffer the fate of Caesar and Charles I.⁶ Cries of “traitor” reigned down upon the novice legislator, and while historians quibble over his witty response, the weight of his assertion laid bare the seriousness of the charge.⁷ Even in Virginia, where revolutionary fervor would be outdone only by New England, treason was a somber business.

³ In this frequently overlooked tragedy, Shakespeare tells the story of Caius Marcius Coriolanus, the legendary Roman General who is exiled for assaulting the concept of popular rule. Filled with self-righteous indignation, Coriolanus offers his services to the rival Volscians and prepares a spiteful attack on Rome. But after a convincing plea from his mother, though, Coriolanus signs a peace treaty, for which he is eventually murdered by the Volscian military. The similarity between Coriolanus and Arnold cannot but be overstated; the grain riots in Rome, for example, mirror almost exactly those that occurred in Philadelphia while Arnold was military commander. His archrival, Joseph Reed, could very well have been one of Shakespeare's tribunes who stirred up the people and accused him of treason, much like Reed excited the Radicals of Philadelphia against Arnold. Though Arnold did not suffer Coriolanus's eventual fate, he never received the honor or revenge he sought by switching sides, and ended his days as an odious afterthought to both.

⁴ For an example in Russian history, see my essay “Friend and Foe: The Agent Provocateur in Late Imperial Russia.” *Madison Historical Review* 9 (May 2012): 57-77, where I examine the mercenary nature of double agents who did far more damage to the fight against political subversion than good.

⁵ Gordon S. Wood. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 16. Wood argues that a sense of Brutishness pervaded American society, including an ingrained hierarchical status of which the king was the head. However, he references David Hume's humorous observation that colonists may have been so taken with the king precisely because they lived an ocean away and rarely felt his presence.

⁶ Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Williamsburg: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 94.

⁷ William Wirt's famous biography *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (1817) glorified this moment in history, perhaps erroneously. Relying on the third-hand accounts of Thomas Jefferson, John Tyler, and Paul Carrington, Wirt pieced together this speech and cemented Henry's place in posterity. For a detailed argument see Joe Wolverton's “If This Be Treason...” *The New American* 26, no. 20 (October 2010): 35-38). Edmund and Helen Morgan rely on, as I do, an unnamed French observer's recollection, which corroborates some of Wirt's account but omits the famous “if this be treason” line (*The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to*

To better understand the motivations of revolutionary traitors – that is, British subjects who claimed to be Patriots and then reversed their decision – it is essential to understand how revolutionaries rationalized their own betrayal of the crown. The answer is quite simple: they did not believe they were committing treason. Of course in a legal sense they fully understood the consequences of declaring independence;⁸ but in their own minds they believed that it was King who had wronged them. Armed with Lockean principles of contractual obligation that riddled late eighteenth century America, revolutionaries abolished their government with a clear conscious.⁹ But beyond this contractual breach was the potent idea of self-preservation as “the first law of nature”, which not only justified separation from England but demanded it; Rhode Island claimed just this in their declaration of independence, arguing they were “obliged, by necessity” to “oppose that power which is exerted only for our destruction.”¹⁰ Instead of traitors, the colonists were simply good Englishmen acting as they always had – overthrowing a monarch when he had become tyrannical.¹¹

Many who betrayed the American cause would justify treason with notions of self-preservation; nowhere is this clearer than Benedict Arnold. With nearly a century gone since the release of clandestine correspondences between Arnold and British spymaster John Andre, the prominent scholarship covers both extremes: Arnold was both a valiant patriot and a villainous traitor.¹² After battlefield heroics at Fort Ticonderoga and

Revolution, 94). While Henry may not have uttered his dramatic quip, he certainly threatened King George with his allusion, drawing cries of “treason” from the crowd.

⁸ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 59; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 12.

⁹ Maier, *American Scripture*, 87.

¹⁰ Quoted in Maier, *American Scripture*, 87-88.

¹¹ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 13.

¹² Cark Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1941), v; There are numerous studies on Arnold’s life, military exploits, and betrayal. Van Doren’s landmark work sought to tell the bigger story of secret operations involving various operatives including Arnold, and did so convincingly by relying on the recently released Clinton Papers. In this account Arnold is lambasted for his selfishness and greed rather than lauded for his battlefield heroics. John Bakeless follows a similar route in *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 195) by telling various espionage tales (of which Arnold’s dominates), citing Arnold’s “characteristic greed for money and personal extravagance” (Bakeless, 282). A shift in the historiography began to occur with Willard Sterne Randall’s *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (William Morrow and Company: New York, 1990), which challenged the prevailing notion of Arnold as a traitor only. James Kirby Martin continued this trend with *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered* (New York University Press: New York, 1997) by focusing almost entirely on the years before Arnold’s treachery. More recently, Jim Murphy has made Arnold accessible to popular readers of history with *The Real Benedict Arnold* (Clarion Books: New York, 2007), and while the title appears to paint Murphy as an Arnold apologist, the work is fairly neutral and incredibly helpful in clearing out myths passed down from spiteful revolutionaries. The prevailing notion, then, is that Arnold showed incredible patriotism before becoming a blackened traitor, marking him as the true Janus of the American Revolution. On a final side note, Canadian historian Barry Wilson has argued for

Saratoga, Washington appointed Arnold military commander of a politically rancorous Philadelphia in 1778.¹³ Repeatedly libeled by fellow officers and ignored by Congress for promotions, Arnold sought to preserve what he valued most: “I cannot draw my sword until my reputation, which is dearer than my life, is cleared up.”¹⁴ Writing to friend Horatio Gates, Arnold drove this point home by quoting a line from Otway’s verse play *The Orphan*: “But who will rest in safety that has done me wrong? / By heaven, I will have justice / And I’m a villain if I see not / A brave revenge for injured honor.”¹⁵

Arnold’s friendly disposition to Philadelphia Loyalists, his marriage to Peggy Shippen (the upper crust daughter of a prominent New York Tory sympathizer, and the questionable use of military wagons for a personal business venture sealed his fate. Radical revolutionary Joseph Reed, President [Governor] of Pennsylvania, launched an all-out attack on Arnold and repeatedly censured him before the Pennsylvania Council.¹⁶ Under this scrutiny Arnold reached his wits end, and the desperation is hard to miss in his pleading letters to Washington: “When I entered the service of my country my character was unimpeached. I have sacrificed my interest, ease, and happiness in her cause...In justice, therefore, to my own character, and for the satisfaction of my friends, I must request a court of inquiry into my conduct; yet every personal injury shall be buried in my zeal for the safety and happiness of my country, in whose cause I have repeatedly fought and bled, and am ready at all times to risk my life.”¹⁷ Perhaps the most telling letter Arnold penned was to Washington in May of 1779, days before he began his treasonous correspondence with Andre: “I want no favor; I ask only for justice...Having made every sacrifice of fortune and blood, and become a cripple in the service of my country, I little expected to meet the ungrateful returns I have received from my countrymen; but as Congress has stamped ingratitude as the current coin, I must take it.”¹⁸ But he would not bear it for long.

As Gordon Wood has pointed out, eighteenth-century gentlemen such as Arnold did not share our modern conception of egotism.¹⁹ Honor and reputation were synonymous, both begat by fame, “the ruling passion of the noblest minds”, and fame “was what most

the inclusion of Arnold’s Canadian invasion and later settlement into the nation’s historiography. *Benedict Arnold: A Traitor in Our Midst* (McGill-Queens University, 2001) stands as one of the few definitive Canadian studies that does not dismiss “Benedict Arnold as an insignificant figure in Canadian history or accept the American view that he was an unworthy blackguard” (Wilson, xiii).

¹³ James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 426.

¹⁴ Quoted in William Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 331.

¹⁵ Quoted in Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 331.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.

¹⁷ Quoted in Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 329.

¹⁸ Quoted in Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 428.

¹⁹ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 207.

of the founding fathers were after...”²⁰ In this light, then, any assault on Arnold’s military record, his business dealings, or his marriage to a loyalist sympathizer was an affront to his honor. When sparring with Timothy Matlack, one of Reed’s henchmen and secretary of the Philadelphia council, Arnold ironically balked at the idea of the city’s militia refusing to turn out simply because Arnold had demeaned them: “Self-preservation is the first principle of the human race; theirs will induce them to turn out and defend their property.”²¹ A year later, being fully disgraced with no justice in sight, Arnold attempted to preserve what little honor he had left and handed over West Point.

How did once-bosom revolutionary friends interpret Arnold’s treason? John Adams, who had defended Arnold while serving on the Board of War, wrote Dutch nobleman Joan Derk that it was “proof of the weakness of the English and the decisive strength and confidence of the Americans.”²² Adams argued that since Arnold was unable to convince fellow soldiers or even “his own valet” to join in his treason, that “the American army and people stand strong, as strong against the arts and bribes as the arms and valor of their enemies.”²³ Thomas Jefferson responded to the news with rage, attaching several newspaper clippings in a letter Horatio Gates that detailed “Arnold’s apostasy and villainy.”²⁴ To Washington he reported that “the parricide Arnold” was leading a British attack on Virginia, targeted words that denoted a guttural hatred.²⁵ Alexander Hamilton was deeply shaken, telling John Laurens that his “feelings were never put to such a trial.”²⁶ Ever the womanizer, Hamilton lamented the sad plight of Arnold’s wife (who

²⁰ Ibid. While I agree with Wood’s assessment, I argue that fame was not the *primary* motivation of the founding fathers. Rather, they sought it as fiercely as they fought for independence. Men like Arnold, however, when pushed to decide, chose honor over the cause of freedom.

²¹ Quoted in Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 438.

²² John Adams to Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol, January 21, 1781, in *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, by C James Taylor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda , 2008), 65, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ADMS-06-11-02-0045>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Horatio Gates, October 15, 1780, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B Oberg and J Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2008), 41, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-04-02-0042>.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, January 10, 1781, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B Oberg and J Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 335, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-04-02-0408>. In Latin, “parricide” denotes the murder of one’s close relative, a term that umbrellas patricide (murdering one’s father), matricide (murdering one’s mother), fratricide (murdering one’s brother), and even uxoricide (murdering one’s husband or wife). This word choice reveals that Jefferson still saw Arnold as a countryman, making his attack on the tidewater settlements even more base.

²⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *The official and other papers of the late Major-General Alexander Hamilton: compiled chiefly from the originals in the possession of Mrs. Hamilton*, comp. Francis L Hawks (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842), 460, accessed November 2, 2012, <http://find.galegroup.com.ezp1.villanova.edu/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=>

was as yet unsuspected) to friend Catharine Schuyler: “Could I forgive Arnold for sacrificing his honor, reputation, and duty, I could not forgive him for acting a part that must have forfeited the esteem of so fine a woman.”²⁷ Nathanael Greene aptly summed up what most colonists would soon feel: “Never since the fall of Lucifer has a fall equaled his.”²⁸

Fame, which Arnold coveted so badly, had turned to infamy. On October 3rd, 1780 his effigy was paraded down the streets of Philadelphia beside Satan, bringing Green’s allusion to fruition.²⁹ The next day Congress had his name erased from the official rolls and the Connecticut Masonic Lodge where Arnold belonged followed suit.³⁰ The graves of his father and brother were defaced, and many called for a national holiday lest posterity forget Arnold’s disgraceful legacy.³¹ His troubles continued in British uniform, and as late as 1787 he was still attempting to defend his treachery as a matter of principle rather than money.³² Interpreting Arnold’s claims of gratitude as honor and compensation as livelihood, his “mercenary spirit” was laid bare. Independence was not Arnold’s primary goal; rather, he sought advancement, recognition, and when those failed, monetary compensation.

Ironically, one of Benedict Arnold’s early nemeses has survived the Revolution generally unscathed. Charismatic and hot-tempered, Ethan Allen appears to embody all that was good and right with an independent America;³³ yet, as Willard Randall points out, much of what we know about Allen is the result of folklore.³⁴ Few Americans know the historical Allen, who, despite his bravery at Fort Ticonderoga and prisoner-of-war suffering, was a “self-interested individual as well, often no less rapacious than his archenemies, the New York Land barons of the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys”.³⁵ More pointedly, many remain blissfully unaware of his double-dealings with British agents to

MOME&userGroupName=vill_main&tabID=T001&docId=U106139966&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.

²⁷ Ibid., 480.

²⁸ Quoted in Jim Murphy, *The Real Benedict Arnold* (New York: Clarion Books, 2007), 221.

²⁹ See Figure 1, *Burning Benedict Arnold in effigy*, 1780, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building / Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York, New York Public Library Digital Collection, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1223571>.

³⁰ Murphy, *The Real Benedict Arnold*, 222.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Randall, *Benedict Arnold*, 605.

³³ William Sterne Randall, *Ethan Allen: His Life and Times* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), xii; Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 245-46. For example, Allen once disobeyed a Connecticut statute that forbade smallpox inoculation because he believed the law was ridiculous. After vaccinating himself, he got drunk at the local tavern, dared anyone to insult him, and did a fair amount of blaspheming; later in life would again take the law in his own hands when he felt personally threatened.

³⁴ Randall, *Ethan Allen*, xxi.

³⁵ Ibid., xiii.

secure Vermont lands and entry into the Union – his *true* objective of the Revolution. Therefore, Allen’s actions, which like Arnold’s were quite heroic, also betray a mercenary impetus.

Embroiled in the vicious, pre-revolutionary politics of property disputes, Allen was no stranger to bribery. By 1770 New York land barons were seeking to expand their holdings into Vermont and pressed the courts to evict New England pioneers.³⁶ Rising to defend the Green Mountain settlers was Allen, but in the face of corrupt Supreme Court justices, he was soundly defeated.³⁷ In the aftermath of the ruling, King’s counselor James Duane offered Allen land, cash, and even a horse if he would persuade his constituents to abide by the ruling.³⁸ Allen accepted the cash and horse, though he used these items return to Vermont and organize a military resistance in the event that an eviction might occur.³⁹

Thus, in 1778 when a Loyalist spy promised Allen a generalship should he sway Vermont toward the crown, he keenly realized the potential.⁴⁰ Although Allen reported the bribe to the Continental Congress, he also urged Vermont Governor Chittenden to keep quiet about the letter and consider how they might exploit the offer.⁴¹ This began a three-year “dangerous game, going back and forth between the British and the Continental Congress, letting each know only part of his dialogue with the other, all the time keeping Vermont on its independent court.”⁴² By 1781, Congress had still not accepted Vermont’s bid for statehood, leading Allen to write his British contact General Frederick Haldimand, “I shall do every thing in my Power to render this State a British province.”⁴³ From Amsterdam John Adams conveyed this exact worry. “That Vermont will plague us a little,” he wrote friend James Searle. “I expect to hear that there are one or two there, Arnoldized.” Although Adams hoped that men like Allen wouldn’t fall for the “tricks and pranks” of the British who made “a great many promises that they [Vermont residents] shall enjoy their lands”, he feared that such ploys would “end in the flight of these Devils a ‘Arnoldoise.’”⁴⁴

Writing a few years after the war, Allen admitted that if England had offered immediate protection for Vermont he “would readily have yielded up their independency

³⁶ Ibid., 222.

³⁷ Ibid., 223.

³⁸ Ibid., 235-236; Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 37-38.

³⁹ Randall, *Ethan Allen*, 239.

⁴⁰ Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 245-46.

⁴¹ Randall, *Ethan Allen*, 480-81; Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 247.

⁴² Randall, *Ethan Allen*, 491.

⁴³ Quoted in Randall, *Ethan Allen*, 493.

⁴⁴ John Adams to James Searle, February 8, 1781, in *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 128, accessed November 11, 2012,

<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ADMS-06-11-02-0085>.

and become a province of Britain.”⁴⁵ While the seriousness of Allen’s double-dealings can be debated, it is clear that the preservation of his people, state, and personal lands was the driving force that compelled both his bravery and treacherous flirtations.⁴⁶ Had Washington not exerted pressure on Governor Chittenden to accept the proposed boundaries of Vermont, one can speculate that the tiny republic would have stayed independent or, as Adams feared, returned to British control. King George was not Allen’s primary enemy; this title was reserved for those who threatened his holdings in Vermont, be they English or American. Therefore, Allen was driven by a motivation stronger than patriotism, marking him a mercenary first, and a hero second, if at all.

As Charles Royster has soundly argued (and as these case studies have shown), there existed an obvious cleavage between revolutionary ideology and wartime conduct. “Americans saw many discrepancies between the two, and these induced deep concern and prolonged tension; for, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, war put to the trial the military ardor and skills as well as the moral assumption which they based their hopes for American independence and liberty.”⁴⁷ In the early years of the Revolution John Adams witnessed this contradiction and it vexed him greatly. “Virtue and simplicity of manners, are indispensably necessary in a republic,” he wrote friend and author Mercy Warren, “but there is so much rascality, so much venality and corruption, so much avarice and ambition, such a rage for profit and commerce among all ranks and degrees of men even in America, that I sometimes doubt whether there is public virtue enough to support a republic.”⁴⁸ While troublesome among the populace, Jefferson found this mercenary nature especially dangerous in the military where soldiers were supposed to be “breathing the pure spirit of patriotism” and remain “untainted by pride or rank, or avarice of pay.”⁴⁹ But rather than take “their post wherever placed” and change “whenever required”, the officers of the Continental Army jockeyed continually for promotion and often feigned resignation to assuage their honor. In 1776, for example, General Sullivan tendered his resignation when General Gates was made head of the Northern Army instead of him. Although he eventually withdrew his papers and went on to have a somewhat successful military career, Sullivan’s actions belay a deceptive aim that would drive many to treason.

Prussian immigrant Herman Zedtwitz desired such prestige, and while his mercenary dealings have not warranted a monstrous biography, his treachery was nonetheless rooted

⁴⁵ Quoted in Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 248.

⁴⁶ For a full discussion on the competing arguments and sources see Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 247-48.

⁴⁷ Royster, *A Revolutionary People At War*, 3.

⁴⁸ John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, January 8, 1776, in *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C James Taylor (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 398, accessed November 18, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ADMS-06-03-02-0202>.

⁴⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Congress, July 29, 1776, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B Oberg and J Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 478, accessed December 9, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-01-02-0197>.

in Adams's "avarice and ambition".⁵⁰ A Prussian cavalry officer during the Seven Years War, Zedtwitz moved his wife and children to New York City in 1770 where he tried his hand at several business ventures, most of them poorly. At the outbreak of war, Zedtwitz volunteered to raise his own regiment of Pennsylvania Germans, but was instead given the lesser rank of major in New York's Continental regiment. Doubtlessly disappointed, he nevertheless joined General Montgomery's expedition to Canada and was wounded after he "fell down a rock" which left him "so disabled by a rupture...that he [was now] unfit for active duty."⁵¹

Physically lame (and therefore humiliated), Herman Zedtwitz could no longer pursue personal glory. Thus, he resolved to chase "avarice" in treasonous form: a debt owed to him by a British officer. According to Zedtwitz, the Marquis of Granby had asked him to raise a company of riflemen during Britain's dispute with Spain over the Balkans seven years prior; but the noblemen died, leaving Zedtwitz to foot the bill for the entire regiment.⁵² Now, unable to acquire further military standing due to his injury, he became obsessed with recollecting this debt and formulated a treacherous plan: give the British fabricated intelligence in exchange for the two thousand pounds that Granby owed him.⁵³ With fame out of reach, Zedtwitz was willing to commit treason by hounding the enemy for money – another objective he put above independence.

Zedtwitz's letter to royal New York Governor William Tyron, which was quickly intercepted, reads like a mercenary manifesto. Claiming to be a "forced man of a rebellious mob" who joined the Americans out of fear that he would become "ruined...with my wife and children", Zedtwitz swore his loyalty to the King – forgetting of course that he volunteered in the Continental Army.⁵⁴ His claims were equally outlandish: he had an informant who could supply the British with weekly updates on the American forces; he had overheard Washington talking about poisoning the New York water supply to rid the city of the British; and most ostentatious, he was about to be given

⁵⁰ Zedtwitz's career has been briefly surveyed by Lorenzo Sabine in *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution, with an Historical Essay* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub., 1979), 456-66, and more recently by Harry Thayer Mahoney and Marjorie Locke Mahoney in *Gallantry in Action: A Biographic Dictionary of Espionage in the American Revolutionary War: XA-GB* (Lanham, Md. [u.a.]: Univ. Press of America, 1999), 334-35. Carl Van Doren discusses Zedtwitz in *Secret History of the American Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 15-17, stressing the confusion of his treachery though avoiding his elongated imprisonment and mental illness. The most recent and in-depth analysis is Eugene R. Fingerhut's "From Revolutionary To Traitor: The American Career of Herman Zedtwitz," in *The Other Loyalists: Ordinary People, Royalism, and the Revolution in the Middle Colonies*, ed. Joseph S Tiedemann, Eugene R Fingerhut, and Robert W Venables (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) which pieces the story together using court documents, letters, as well as Sabine's work. I have relied primarily on Fingerhut and Van Doren.

⁵¹ Quoted in Fingerhut, "From Revolutionary To Traitor," 182; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Fingerhut, "From Revolutionary To Traitor", 184; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 16.

the command of several Hudson forts.⁵⁵ In his court martial Zedtwitz argued that these were simple manufactures designed to reclaim the money owed him; but what is interesting is that he ostensibly had no regard for his honor at this point. The opening lines of his letter to Tyron state, “By giving you this intelligence the world will ardently blame my character”, a statement that shows Zedtwitz was ready to commit *pretend* treason – that is to say, trade whatever honor he had left using fabricated information – for money.⁵⁶

Eugene Fingerhut has succinctly compared Zedtwitz and Arnold’s near-identical journey from hero to villain, but it is their shared motivation that unearths the mercenary within: “Both men thought and (more importantly) felt they were trivially rewarded for their efforts,” Fingerhut observes, “considering that they were permanently injured and forced to retire from field duty.”⁵⁷ When military glory was unattainable, each man turned to profit as a means to secure honor, bypassing the primary goal of independence that propelled *true* patriots. The absence of “avarice and ambition” that Adams’s utopian republic required was not to be found in either man, nor did they breath “the pure spirit of patriotism” that Jefferson lectured Continental officers for lacking. Rather, they pursued selfish ambition in varying forms to gain something other than victory over the British.

Zedtwitz’s military career understandably caused the revolutionaries great worry, for what would become of a country where men fought for money and fame? “I do not wish to have the army wages raised,” General Sullivan wrote Adams in 1777, as merchants were gouging colonial troops for basic supplies, “but I wish to strike at the root of the evil...or I fear we are undone.” Soldiers were deserting because the meager pay could not provide for “their poor families”, yet founding fathers like Sullivan were concerned that offering more money would fill the ranks with mercenaries like Zedtwitz. Throughout the conflict revolutionaries balanced these two evils with much angst, and while they lamented the vice that was “so prevalent in the country” they hoped that virtue would rule the day instead of the destructive “mercenary spirit.”⁵⁸

To recast traitors as mercenaries naturally widens to scope of culpability; indeed, there were two other groups who had a stake in the fight for independence, participants that changed sides at a whim to secure personal objectives. Native Americans and African slaves did not always share the white aims of the Revolution or the political inclusion, but that did not prevent them from aiding the cause; in many cases, it did just

⁵⁵ Fingerhut, “From Revolutionary To Traitor” 184; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 16.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Fingerhut, “From Revolutionary To Traitor” 184. As mentioned above, I have corrected the spelling and capitalization for all primary sources for reasons of clarity. However, Zedtwitz’s original writing is so rife with grammatical errors and some syntax issues, the original my look quite different.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁸ John Sullivan to John Adams, November 13, 1777, in *The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, ed. C. James Taylor (Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2008), 327, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ADMS-06-05-02-0193>.

the opposite. The Mahican peoples of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, for example, fought bravely for Washington (and received minimal recognition or compensation), though most natives would side with the British.⁵⁹ Likewise, both slave and free blacks volunteered for the colonials after Washington encouraged the measure and Congress begrudgingly acquiesced, but an overwhelming number of slaves fled to British lines for freedom and served in a military capacity.⁶⁰ This dichotomy illustrates the varied beliefs about who could offer Indians and slaves a better future, or perhaps more importantly, a better present.

As Native American historian Colin Calloway has made clear, neutrality during the Revolution was a veritable pipedream for Indian peoples;⁶¹ few felt this more than the Abenaki, whose Odanak community would support the British and Americans at different points in the war. On the surface their alliances seem unclear, but underneath the “confusion and ambivalence, all Abenakis at all times shared the goal of preserving their community and keeping the war at arm’s length.”⁶² Because of their proximity to Canada, the Odanak community understood that they would have to live with whoever won the war; much like Ethan Allen, then, they undertook a “‘play-off system’ between two powers” to secure the best possible future.⁶³ Some Abenaki agreed to scout for the Americans, though often they ignored this duty along with other, pro-British Abenaki who were scouting for the Crown.⁶⁴ Considering their circumstance, this strategy was “ideal...for people who wanted to give the appearance of commitment but whose main concern was to keep the war away from their homes and families.”⁶⁵

One can hardly blame Indian peoples like the Abenaki for changing their allegiance with the prevailing winds. Most tribes who sought neutrality during the war suffered dearly; the Maquachake Shawnee, for example, repeatedly lobbied their fellow Ohioan brethren to pursue peace with the Americans but had their villages burned nonetheless.⁶⁶ Likewise, the Moravian Delawares allowed themselves to be removed by the British to

⁵⁹ Collin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 94. For Washington’s opinions on their service, see 100.

⁶⁰ Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 63, 77-78.

⁶¹ Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, 65. For an example of the Iroquois Confederacy see Robert W. Venables, “Faithful Allies of the King: The Crown’s Haudensaunee Allies in the Revolutionary Struggle for New York,” in *The Other Loyalists: Ordinary People, Royalist, and the Revolution in the Middle Colonies, 1763-1787*, ed. Joseph S. Tiedemann, Eugene R. Fingerhut, and Robert W. Venables (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 137-139.

⁶² Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, 65.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 158. For a similar experience following the war, see David Andrew Nichols, *Red Gentlemen and White Savages: Indians, Federalists, and the Search for Order on the American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

only be slaughtered by the settler militias; their capital town of Coshocton was summarily razed by American troops in 1781 despite their attempts to “accommodate conflicting tensions and keep out of the war”.⁶⁷ Self-preservation as a motivation for double-dealings, then, was a fervent among Indian peoples, yet it appears that most Americans did not consider this to be traitorous. Rather, both British and American governments saw the natives as advantageous allies and sought to cultivate their allegiance no matter how insecure. Perhaps they did not see the Indians as political members of their society, or possibly the precedent of shifting wartime alliances was so engendered in the colonial mindset that it did not qualify as treason.⁶⁸ Whatever the case, the actions of many Native peoples during the war exposes the fundamental principle of self-preservation that drove other patriots to treason.

African slaves during the Revolutionary War shared both the liquid fidelity and political exclusion of Native Americans. As Michael Groth has illustrated, slaves in New York’s Mid-Hudson Valley adopted a similar “wait and see attitude” hoping to maintain a cautious neutrality as long as possible.⁶⁹ Striving for personal freedom, they “made decisions and pursued courses of action that best served their personal interests or improved their own positions.”⁷⁰ For some, such as a slave named Jack from Dutchess County, this meant joining up with a Loyalist gang led by Teunis Peer and taking part in ongoing sabotage campaigns against former owners. For Jack’s friend of the same name, personal interest was best served by feigning allegiance to Peer’s gang before informing his master of the Loyalist’s plans.⁷¹ Much like Native Americans, African slaves were driven by competing circumstances rather than conflicting revolutionary ideals.

Like Indian peoples, geography was often the greatest determinant of allegiance for slaves. As British armies invaded the south slaves flocked to their lines, even more so after the Dunmore and Philipsburg Proclamations offered freedom to those who deserted

⁶⁷ Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, 180.

⁶⁸ For political interaction between Natives and state/federal emissaries after the war see David Andrew Nichols’s *Red Gentlemen and White Savages: Indians, Federalists, and the Search for Order on the American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). I agree with Nicholas that the new American government frequently engaged in the political through various treaties and negotiations, though I argue here that the poor behavior during those meetings and the frequent disregard of those treaties show that to most American politicians, Natives were not considered members of the political spectrum. The ninth article of the Constitution, as Nicholas notes, would eventually state that Natives were “not members of any states”, followed by James Madison’s suggestion that Congress have the authority to whatever they pleased with Indian lands inside and outside the United States (93).

⁶⁹ Michael E Groth, “Black Loyalists and African American Allegiance in the Mid-Hudson Valley,” in *The Other Loyalists: Ordinary People, Royalist, and the Revolution in the Middle Colonies, 1763-1787*, ed. Joseph S Tiedemann, Eugene R Fingerhut, and Robert W Venables (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Groth, “Black Loyalists and African American Allegiance,” 93.

rebel owners or Continental units.⁷² The effect was profound, for by war's end over sixty thousand slaves had fled plantations in Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia alone.⁷³ Once in royal service, slaves usually served as military laborers, carried supplies, or cleared roads for British regulars, though a few black units did see action.⁷⁴ During the Franco-American siege of Savannah, for example, a few hundred former slaves bravely defended the city and were even heralded by Governor Wright.⁷⁵ But a love for King George's monarchical rights over his subjects was not the motivation for these runaways; their goal was "personal freedom...the most powerful inducement to flee one's owner."⁷⁶

Likewise, many slaves enlisted in Continental units and fought bravely for the American cause, but did so with competing motives.⁷⁷ In the summer of 1778 Stephen Haight allowed his twenty-eight-year-old slave Caesar to join a company in Colonel Cortlandt's American regiment, but a year later was unable to locate his bondsmen. Apparently Caesar had been discharged at Valley Forge for health concerns, and rather than return to his master, chose personal freedom. Having no plans to return to bondage, Caesar's actions demonstrate that "allegiance could be fickle" and that "those who actively supported one side at one point in the conflict did not hesitate to shift or even betray allegiances when necessary."⁷⁸

The great irony, of course, is that slaves had more at stake than any other Americans during the war. Forcibly brought to a foreign land they endured *real* enslavement, not the political kind that Jefferson bemoaned in his early drafts of the Declaration – language that was eventually omitted precisely because it made southern delegates (and a few northern ones) so uneasy. George Washington experienced this paradox in 1781 when

⁷² In 1775 Governor Lord Dunmore of Virginia issued a proclamation offering freedom to any slave who fled a rebel owner and joined the British army. In 1779 General Henry Clinton would issue a similar decree from his headquarters in Philipsburg, New York that applied to all slaves: any slave captured by British soldiers would be resold, but any who deserted the Americans and joined the royal army would be free. For further reading on the motivation of the Philipsburg's Decree see Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 113.

⁷³ Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 211n.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷⁶ Groth, "Black Loyalists and African American Allegiance," 94.

⁷⁷ Alan Gilbert has recently argued in *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) that blacks on both sides of the conflict fought with distinction and bravery, perhaps to a much larger extent than has previously been acknowledged. While I concur, my focus is African slaves who I argue saw their role in the war as a means to an end even more than their free brethren who likewise served the cause of freedom. Gilbert also explores the provocative idea that many southern patriots fought to secure the institution of slavery rather than independence, a claim that would mark them as the mercenaries I have studied herein; further scholarship on this particular element is certainly warranted and hopefully forthcoming.

⁷⁸ Groth, "Black Loyalists and African American Allegiance," 94. Groth's interpretation of Caesar's flight is that he was seeking freedom, and I concur. However, it is important to note that other motives could have propelled him to flee, such as finding a loved one.

twenty of his slaves flocked to the HMS *Savage* as it landed across the Potomac from Mt. Vernon. The Marquis de Lafayette, fighting in Virginia at the time, relayed the events to Washington in blunt terms: "When the enemy came to your house many negroes deserted to them."⁷⁹ Lund Washington, the General's cousin and estate manager, prophesied this sentiment six years earlier on the eve of Revolution when slave escape was already brewing: "...there is not a man of them, but would leave us, if they believed they could make their escape...liberty is sweet."⁸⁰ That the chattel of General Washington flocked to the enemy is not surprising, then, and sheds light on what the conflict meant to many enslaved Africans.⁸¹

My purpose has been to show that treachery during the American Revolution was mercenary in nature – that is to say, that traitors were actually mercenaries feigning allegiance, false patriots in the fight for independence. Benedict Arnold, Ethan Allen, and Herman Zedwitz may have fought and even sacrificed to overthrow Great Britain, but that was not their primary objective. Instead they sought honor, money, and esteem – venal aims that only emerged when threatened. Native Americans, who were brought into the conflict against their will, naturally shared this mercenary strain and tried to stave off disaster by shifting their allegiance frequently. Similarly, slaves saw the war as a vehicle to freedom and joined whichever side could assure them liberty. I intended to highlight the competing motives of these latter two groups in hopes of bettering understanding their wartime experience rather to pass judgment on the paths that they chose. Moreover, I contend that contemporary observers did not consider these groups traitorous precisely because they existed outside the body politic. That Indians and slaves *were* in fact political members of the society is clear; failing to report roaming enemy troops or fleeing a plantation to join rival forces is without question a political act. In the contemporary sense, however, these two groups were not accepted as such and therefore not castigated for shifting their allegiances to suit personal circumstance. Rather, both British and American leadership often coaxed Natives and slaves whom they viewed as beneficial allies.

Ultimately, "avarice and ambition" would not bring about the ruin that so many revolutionaries predicted. While their fears were not unsupported, the founders

⁷⁹ The Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, 23 April 1781," Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution: Selected Letters and Papers, 1776-1790, Vol. 4, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 60-1.

⁸⁰ Lund Washington to George Washington, December 3, 1775, in *The Papers of George Washington*, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 480, accessed November 27, 2012,

<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-03-02-02-0434>.

⁸¹ This episode is cogently explored in the Digital Encyclopedia provided by the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, a trust that sponsors the preservation and restoration of the estate. For a full discussion including the sources, see *Digital Encyclopedia*, s.v. "HMS *Savage*," accessed November 28, 2012, last modified 2012, <http://www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/HMS-Savage>.

underestimated the constitution of their people at large. Disastrous losses at New York, cold winters at Valley Forge, and occupied cities became the crucible for the Americans, boiling off the ranks that enlisted for venial aims. Though a few mercenaries remained, they would eventually be exposed as traitors when their true intentions failed, outlasted by Washington's army of "men fighting for everything worth living for."⁸²

⁸² George Washington to James Bawdoin, August 14, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Edward G Lengel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 19, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-03-06-02-0014>.

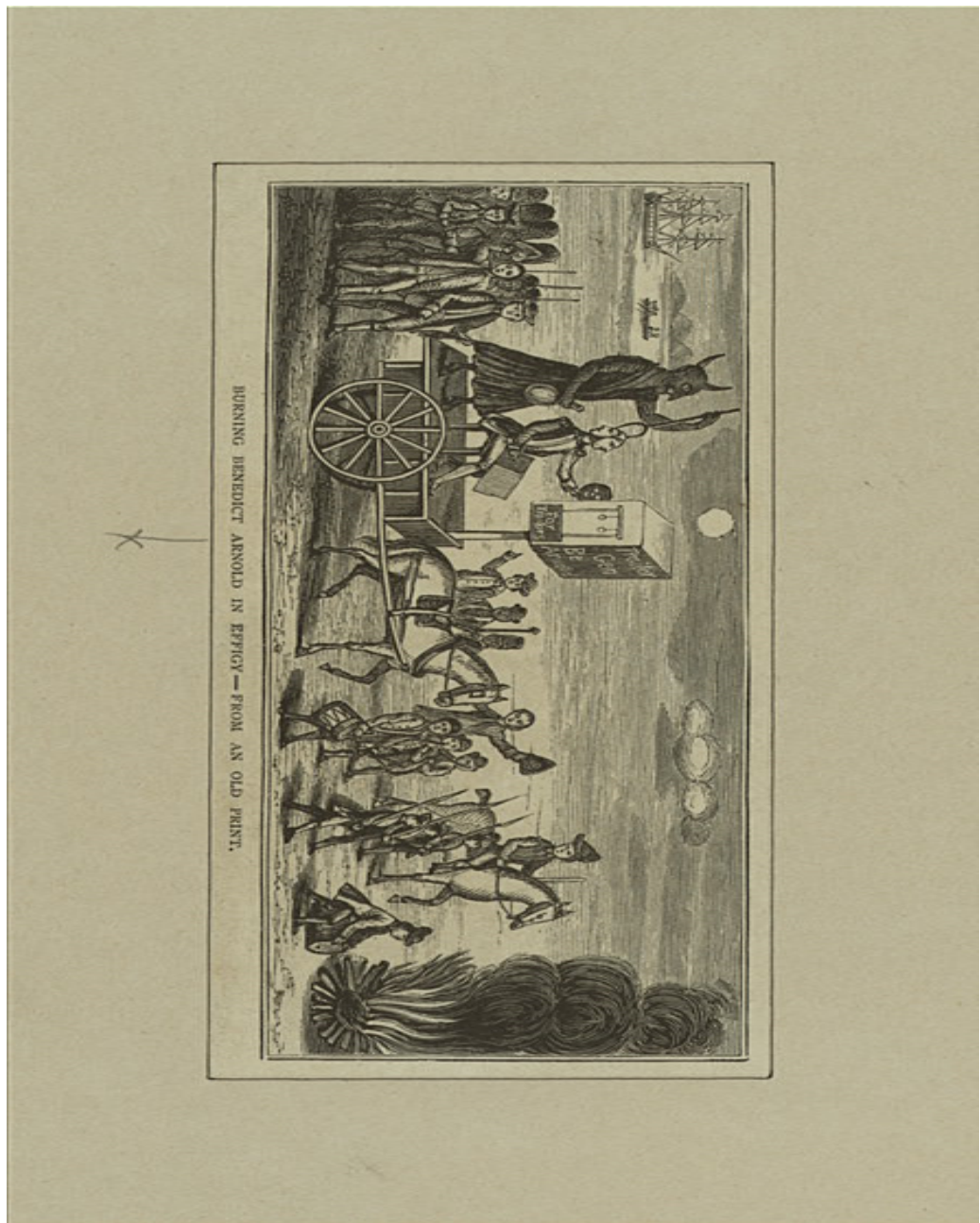


Figure 1, Burning Arnold in effigy, 1780, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building / Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York , New York Public Library Digital Collection.

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