

Intelligence in Public Media

Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War

Kenneth A. Daigler. (Georgetown University Press, 2014), 317 pp., illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, and index.

Reviewed by David Robarge

Intelligence during the American Revolution has attracted much scholarly attention in the past decade. Books dealing with British and patriot spies, France's covert assistance to the Continental Army, American and British use of cryptology and steganography, and the patriots' privateer fleet have significantly added to our knowledge of how both sides in the conflict used—or, in the case of the British, generally failed to use—espionage, covert action, and intelligence methods to gain insights into their adversaries' intentions and capabilities and to achieve advantage on the battlefield.¹ All of the new works are valuable to experts in American Revolution and intelligence history, but the general reader needs an overview that synthesizes the detailed historiography and assesses the overall impact intelligence activities had on the war's outcome. Kenneth Daigler, a former CIA operations officer with several US government publications to his credit, has satisfied that requirement admirably with *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors*, the first comprehensive look at the secret War for Independence in nearly 60 years.²

In 13 economical and clearly written chapters that rely mainly on secondary accounts and published documentary collections along with some archival sources, Daigler covers the key specific topics of the intelligence war in the broad areas of espionage, covert action, and counterintelligence: the Boston Mechanics spy ring and the British penetration agent in its midst, Benjamin Church; martyr-spy Nathan Hale; France's *sub rosa* provision of essential military aid; Benjamin Franklin's propaganda and other covert activities as "chief of Paris Station"; George Washington's intuitive grasp of the intelligence business and his clever use of deception and disinformation to choose the right moment to strike at while keeping away from the always stronger British enemy; the operations of the Culper Ring in and around New York City³; Benedict Arnold, the epitome of self-interested treason; John Jay's adept counterintelligence apparatus in New York; the contributions of African-Americans as patriot spies; and the overlooked importance of intelli-

gence in the guerrilla-style combat in the southern theater. Daigler's main contribution to these mostly familiar stories is providing an intelligence practitioner's perspective to the patriots' sources, methods, and operational management. Using the tradecraft terms he provides in a helpful glossary but without lapsing into insider jargon, Daigler explains the various paraphernalia of spycraft—including types of agents and covers, covert communication techniques, encryption systems, and categories of intelligence.

When Daigler weaves these specialized concepts into narratives of well-known political and military events, the hidden history of the American Revolution appears prominently. The decentralized quality of the patriots' intelligence organizations—the Mechanics in Boston, the Continental Congress' secret committees in Pennsylvania and its agents in Europe, Jay's counterspies in New York, Washington's assortment of operatives wherever he and the Continental Army happened to be—was a product of the fragmented political structure of the emerging United States. Intelligence had important roles in crucial patriot victories at Trenton and Princeton, in enabling Washington to keep one move ahead of his British adversaries and transform the conflict from a conventional war to an insurgency, which the patriots had a much better chance of winning, and in securing vital European support, especially France's. Intelligence probably prevented a disastrous British ambush of French troops at Newport in 1780 and helped maneuver Cornwallis into surrendering at Yorktown the year after. It almost certainly shortened the war and saved lives and property, although how much cannot be readily quantified. Daigler discusses British intelligence only briefly, but his observations about its shortcomings—not understanding the operational environment, not altering preconceived views in the face of persuasive contrary information, not taking advantage of espionage successes—help explain why the Americans were so much more proficient at the intelligence game and sound depressingly familiar today. As Daigler portrays him, Washington was more adept at running agents, double

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agents, and deceptions than at planning battlefield tactics. In the longer term, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison used their direct or indirect knowledge of intelligence's part in winning independence to conduct espionage and covert action operations during their presidencies.⁴

In some instances, Daigler tries too hard to interpret past events using modern intelligence concepts. Nearly all of chapter two about the political agitation of the prewar years, much of it incited by the Sons of Liberty, is an unconvincing attempt to ascribe to a succession of often spontaneous events the characteristics of orchestrated political action that CIA would carry out during the Cold War. In chapter nine, Daigler blames the failure of the André-Arnold plot to turn over West Point to the British to the former's lack of basic intelligence professionalism, but he measures André's judgments and actions against a rigorous canon of practice developed in an organized fashion centuries later. Generally, however, Daigler avoids such *ex post facto* wisdom and lets the reader appreciate that, at least on the American side, intelligence officers then were talented novices who had no accessible institutional history to fall back on and learned their trade through the school of hard experience.

A persistent problem for historians of American Revolution intelligence has been the relative lack of documentation compared to the massive volume available to chroniclers of political, social, diplomatic, and military events of the time. Much of that lacunae can be attributed

to the understandable security concerns of those involved in secret work that required them to destroy documents and later to remain silent about their actions. As Daigler concludes, "There is little doubt that today, over two hundred years after the war, details of the vast majority of American intelligence activities undertaken during the conflict still remain out of public view." On occasion, however, the unexpected appearance of previously unknown records adds immeasurably to our knowledge of the clandestine American Revolution, such as Morton Pennypacker's discovery of the Culper Ring's operational correspondence in the 1920s⁵ and the Library of Congress' acquisition in 2000 of a contemporary manuscript history of the American Revolution written by a member of a Tory family that described why and how Nathan Hale had fallen into a counterintelligence trap arranged by legendary English commando leader Robert Rogers.⁶ As Daigler hopes, "Perhaps a musty New England attic or the reconstruction of an old wall in the southern colonial mansion will provide additional insights into what we do know or provide the first details of a new intelligence operation. The story is not over." (231) In the meantime, he has written the most accessible and authoritative examination so far of the history of American Revolution intelligence. Today's officers who read *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors* will be surprised to realize that, except for the individuals and countries involved, the technologies used, and the clothing and wigs worn, the basics of the intelligence business have changed very little in nearly two centuries.



1. John A. Nagy, *Dr. Benjamin Church, Spy* (Westholme, 2011); idem, *Invisible Ink: Spycraft of the American Revolution* (Westholme, 2010); idem, *Spies in the Continental Capital: Espionage across Pennsylvania during the American Revolution* (Westholme, 2011); Robert H. Patton, *Patriot Pirates: The Privateer War for Freedom and Fortune in the American Revolution* (Pantheon, 2008); Joel Richard Paul, *Unlikely Allies: How a Merchant, a Playwright, and a Spy Saved the American Revolution* (Riverhead, 2009); M. William Phelps, *Nathan Hale: The Life and Death of America's First Spy* (St. Martin's 2008); James M. Potts, *French Covert Action in the American Revolution* (Universe, 2005); Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (Bantam, 2006); Thomas J. Schaeper, *Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy* (Yale University Press, 2011); Michael J. Sulick, *Spying in America: Espionage from the Revolutionary War to the Dawn of the Cold War* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); Harlow Giles Unger, *Improbable Patriot: The Secret History of Monsieur de Beaumarchais, the French Playwright Who Saved the American Revolution* (University Press of New England, 2011). Unger's book is the only one of the recent crop that the volume under review did not reference in its otherwise exhaustive bibliography.

2. John Bakeless, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes* (J.B. Lippincott, 1959) is the most recent full-length effort, but it deals exclusively with espionage and does not discuss covert action. G.J.A. O'Toole has five useful chapters on all of the war's intelligence aspects in *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* (Atlantic Monthly, 1991). While working for CIA, Daigler wrote his publications under the pseudonym P.K. Rose. They are available on the CIA's public web

site.

3. Daigler's treatment of the Culper Ring is an essential antidote to the inaccuracies and distortions in the television series *Turn: Washington's Spies*, which is supposedly based on Alexander Rose's book cited above but takes huge liberties with the historical record for dramatic purposes.

4. For detailed discussions of the last point, see Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (HarperCollins, 1995), chap. 1; and Stephen F. Knott, *Secret and Sanctioned: Covert Operations and the American Presidency* (Oxford University Press, 1996), chaps. 1-5.

5. Morton Pennypacker, *General Washington's Spies on Long Island and in New York* (first published in 1926; reprint ed., Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005). Not all of Pennypacker's conclusions have proven reliable, notably his contention that an agent encrypted as 355 in the Culper Ring's codebook as "Lady" was the lover of Robert Townsend, the network's key collector in New York City (codenamed Samuel Culper Jr.), and was arrested by the British and died on a prison ship in New York harbor. Their illegitimate child, supposedly named Robert Townsend Jr., survived and went on to serve a term in the New York State legislature. Reputable researchers discredited the story in the 1990s—the child was born after the war, a product of an affair Townsend had with his housekeeper—but the fancy that 355 was an important but unacknowledged female member of Washington's New York spy network persists, such as in a 2011 episode of the cable television series Brad Meltzer's *Decoded* titled "The President's Inner Circle," which enthusiastically, but without any additional evidence, makes the case that 355 was an important female operative in the ring who exposed Benedict Arnold's treachery. She was part of the Culper Ring, but not in the way these "romantic myths" (Daigler's words, p. 189) suggest. As Daigler and others he references have conclusively shown, the clearest indications from the single reference to 355 in the ring's correspondence are that she was Anna Strong, an important support asset whose prominence in the ring, regrettably, has been egregiously overstated in the television series *Turn*.

6. James Hutson, "Nathan Hale Revisited: A Tory Account of the Arrest of the First American Spy," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, July/August 2003, www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0307-8/hale.html.



