BENEDICT ARNOLD'S TREASON AS POLITICAL PROTEST

by

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It is a basic American habit to dismiss Benedict Arnold's act of treason as an aberration, something that only a petty, willful, self-serving person would dare to attempt, especially during the glorious age of the nation's founding. Indeed, the portrayal of Arnold as a totally dishonorable figure began within days of his fleeing the encampment at West Point on 25 September 1780. To his contemporaries, the former apothecary-merchant from Connecticut became the personification of what their Revolution was not. They viewed him as the potential arch-despoiler of all that was good in their cause. He was a man with "two faces" who had listened to "Beelzebub . . . the Devil."[1] Satan, some claimed, had bought the general with nothing more than filthy lucre. That explained why Arnold's act was "one of the blackest pieces of treachery perhaps that time itself has not before evidenced."[2] It proved that he had "practiced for a long time the most dirty, infamous measures to acquire gain." Fortunately, however, the Almighty, as the author of light, had been on the rebel side: "The discovery plainly indicates that the liberties of America are the objects of divine protection."[3]

Historians of our own time have not pushed far beyond the images wrought by Arnold's contemporaries. Certainly, the devil has been removed from the script. And few would still ascribe to divine intervention Arnold's failure to deliver up West Point (and perhaps even George Washington). Most, however, would agree that the general's behavior was an aberration, no doubt caused by serious defects of character. Willard M. Wallace, Arnold's foremost modern biographer, summarized him this way: "Utterly egocentric, he demanded that his moral standards be accepted, while, at the same time, he objected if people resented his breaking theirs . . . . Given his fierce pride and a consuming sense of grievance, the addition of a catalytic agent like the need of money created an explosion."[4]

Historians thus have generally dismissed Arnold as a historical oddity. In doing so, they have measured him through the prism of his act of treason and have concluded that serious flaws of character pervaded his personality from the date of his birth. They have repeated tales of a youthful deviant who strewed broken glass in the streets to cut up the bare feet of playing companions, who robbed birds' nests, and who deserted the British Army during the French and Indian War; of a young adult who destroyed his beloved sister Hannah's one serious attempt at matrimony by threatening to shoot her suitor, and who maliciously mistreated his first wife and perhaps infected her with syphilis; and of a middle-aged man who sent the same love letter to more than one woman when seeking a second wife, who used his position of command to line his pockets with unearned profits, and who siphoned off public funds intended for the war effort for

his own ease and comfort. While a few of these charges contain some element of truth, others have no basis in fact. More important, they may very well be beside the point, since they do little more than support predispositions toward negative caricature.

Indeed, such a litany simply reinforces the conclusion that Benedict Arnold was a thoroughgoing scoundrel who did not understand the Revolution—nor its ideals. It forecloses the possibility that Arnold's actions may have reflected directly on the sorry state of relations between the Army and society in Revolutionary America. In fact, I will argue that Arnold's frustrations with the wartime polity, more than shortcomings of personal character, served as the predominant motivating force behind his act of treason. Arnold was reacting to the shortcomings of the Revolutionary effort (which he knew by intimate experience), and his plotting with the minions of Sir Henry Clinton was the product of deeply held personal grievances related directly to the lack of consistent civilian support for the war, best described as society's failure to live up to the high republican ideals of the cause. In this framework, his act of treason may be comprehended as the most excessive form of individual protest issued by any one person during the War for American Independence. If we view his act of treason as political protest, then it may very well be that Benedict Arnold was anything but an aberrant among his peers in Revolutionary America, until he took his ultimate step. At that point, he became an extremist in his method of defiance—and a very harsh social critic in the statement that he made.

We must begin by noting that the year 1775 marked the high tide of patriot enthusiasm and popular resistance to British policy. Charles Royster has employed the phrase *rage militaire* to describe the early days of Anglo-American martial determination.[5] What must be remembered is that Arnold was one of thousands who came forward with bursting enthusiasm. Having earlier been named captain of the Governor's Guards in New Haven, the future general ordered out his company upon learning of Lexington and Concord. After bullying the town fathers into issuing powder and ball, he marched off with his men to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Before leaving New Haven, Arnold and the fifty men who felt called to go forth with him signed "an agreement" on principles governing their martial stand. Since they had been "driven to the last necessity," they were "obliged to have the recourse to arms in the defense of their lives and liberties." The subscribers compacted to conduct themselves with decorum while in service and to respect the rights of civilians because they were "men acquainted with and feeling the most generous fondness for the liberties and inalienable rights of mankind, and who were in the course of divine providence called to the honorable service of hazarding their lives in their defense."[6] These are words of strong commitment, which indeed represent some comprehension of the Revolution and its ideals, despite the conclusion of James T. Flexner that Benedict Arnold "could kill the strong, spare the weak, succor the wounded, . . . but he could not understand what the American Revolution was all about."[7]

That Arnold was anxious to defend liberty may be dismissed as the desire of an egomaniac for military glory, but that reasoning only serves to water down the level of commitment of all other patriots who rushed to Cambridge in April 1775. The illustrative point is that Arnold was typical of

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those 10,000 New Englanders who unhesitatingly took up arms after Lexington and Concord. He was the same person who had indignantly inquired shortly after the Boston Massacre: "Good God, are the Americans all asleep and tamely giving up their Liberties, or are they all turned philosophers, that they don't take immediate vengeance on such miscreants; I am afraid of the latter."[8] He was the same person who wrote during his legendary march to Quebec: "This detachment is designed to co-operate with General Schuyler to frustrate the unjust and arbitrary measures of the [British] ministry, and restore liberty to our brethren in Canada."[9] At the outset of war, Benedict Arnold's perceptions and actions were those of the model citizen of virtue who willingly accepted the mantle of soldier in defense of his community against the specter of tyranny.

At the end of 1776, Arnold was just as loyal and dedicated to the cause, even though there had been personal feuds and setbacks. One can point to the contention with gangling Ethan Allen at Ticonderoga; to his vituperative quarrel with Lieutenant Colonel John Brown; to his failure to seize Quebec and the severe leg wound he sustained in the attempt; to the petty criticism he endured for losing the small Champlain flotilla in standing up to Guy Carleton at Valcour Island; and to his failure to settle his public accounts satisfactorily. However, there is no evidence that Arnold was less of a committed patriot by the end of 1776. His qualities of fortitude and courage were still much in evidence. Indeed, what was different was that great numbers of rebels, who had not been through as much as Arnold, had lost that initial blush of enthusiasm—and were less interested in service and sacrifice over the long term.

Thus Arnold *was* an aberration of sorts. He was among the few citizen soldiers who remained committed in the field, whatever the personal cost. He was among those few who understood from first-hand experience that the most distressing dilemma now facing Washington was a serious shortage of manpower. Indeed, even before the British government gathered for its concentrated effort of 1776, Continental Army officers were aware that they faced an ominous problem. The sunshine patriots of 1775, those who in the beginning had rushed to the American standard, found that determined military commitment (as befitting the virtuous, property-holding citizen) was much more demanding and difficult than they had at first counted on. Great numbers refused to reenlist for the 1776 campaign. Recruiters urged them to remember "the bountiful rewards of the industry of our worthy forefathers" and asked "whether we will see our wives and children, with everything that is dear to us, subjected to the merciless rage of uncontrolled despotism." They reminded the citizenry that "we are engaged . . . in the cause of virtue, of liberty, of *God*."[10] To little avail, as it turned out. More citizen-soldiers rushed home from the war at the end of 1775 than agreed to stay out for yet another year of fighting.

If the trend of disdaining Continental service was already evident, the massive British campaign of 1776 all but buried lingering signs of the *rage militaire*. Before the year was over, Washington was pleading for "a respectable army," one built on long-term enlistments, thorough training, and acceptable standards of discipline. If the casual army life of 1775 had held little appeal for Anglo-American citizens, then that which Washington now thought mandatory held much less. What was becoming obvious to the Army's leadership was that the rhetoric of citizen virtue and moral commitment lacked deep roots. Thus, compared with the broad generality of citizens at the end of 1776, particularly in terms of their thoughts and actual service in the field, Arnold had persistently demonstrated a strong sense of virtue and commitment. The gap between him and those citizens who had eschewed long-term service would contribute materially to his (and many other officers') coming disillusionment.[11]

In 1777 Washington's Army started to take on a striking new appearance. There was a dramatic shift downward in the social origins of recruits, as the Revolutionary society turned more frequently to the

downtrodden in its midst to fight the war. It was in the same year that Continental Army protest against the civilian sector assumed clearly identifiable forms. In order to put Arnold's unusual act of protest in perspective, we must take a brief look at Washington's new-modeled Army, the broken promises made to that Army, and the resulting acts of defiance directed against the civilian sector.

Only in recent years, with the advent of quantitative analysis, have scholars ascertained that the social composition of Washington's soldiers shifted dramatically after 1776.[12] The first Army, which lasted into 1776, had a middle-class character. Men (and a few women) left behind hearth and freehold farm to stand up against perceived British tyranny. Most of these enthusiasts had gone back home by the end of 1776, if not long before. (Some of them went on to perform valuable service as militia auxiliaries after that time.) As a group, they were unwilling to accept long-term service, harsh discipline, or the rigors of survival in camp and field.

At this critical juncture, as the full brunt of William Howe's army was being felt in New York and New Jersey, Washington and Congress had little choice but to turn to the "poorer sort." These new regulars came largely from the disadvantaged classes, whose actual numbers had been rising dramatically for at least two decades before the Revolution. Many, including slaves and indentured servants, were not free, and they made convenient substitutes for their masters. In regard to age, those who were not free were most often in their late teens and early twenties, although a small handful entered the ranks when they were fourteen and younger. Lack of personal property and economic standing, moreover, was not just a function of age; the families of most recruits and conscripts were also quite poor. Among post-1776 Continentals, then, poverty (and lack of opportunity)—before, during, and after the war—was a common characteristic.[13]

By the spring of 1777, it was more than clear to the rebel leadership that state manpower quotas, so long as abstract notions of virtuous citizenship were the incentive, would remain unfilled. This is not to argue that those who made up the new-modeled ranks were incapable of virtue or of believing in the ideals of the cause. Certainly they were, and their actions proved it. But that is not the point.[14] What we must recall here is that respectably established citizens did not remain for the long-term fight, and officers like Benedict Arnold were well aware of that. These citizens preferred to let others be the cannon fodder in their place—essentially on a contractual basis. Their legislators and congressional delegates gave bounties and promised regular pay, decent food, clothing, and even handsome land grants after the war as rewards for service. The central fact for the Continental Army was that the civilian population did not do a very effective job of keeping its part of the contract. One need only think of the disastrous supply shortages that plagued Washington's Army for the remainder of the war to establish the obvious.

That mutual trust between soldiers and civilians deteriorated rapidly after 1776 or that rank-and-file protest grew in an atmosphere of unfulfilled promises should hardly come as a surprise. Evidence of widespread anger in the ranks over the broken contract pervades surviving records. Private Joseph Plumb Martin captured the prevailing mood when referring to camp conditions in 1780: "We therefore still kept upon the parade in groups, venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could enjoy themselves while we were keeping a cruel enemy from them."[15]

Common soldiers vented their spleens through such diverse means as swearing, heavy drinking, insubordination, looting, bounty jumping, and deserting. When considered as protest, these actions represent something more than simply "time-honored military vices," to employ the words of Charles Royster.[16] Such an interpretive emphasis has the effect of muting, if not

losing, the impact of what these historically silent troops were explicitly stating about their sense of betrayal by civilians. Over time, moreover, acts of individual defiance took on a decidedly group-oriented quality, ultimately involving large-scale mutinies (the most prominent of which were the uprisings of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey lines in January 1781).

This is not the place for a full discussion of incidents of soldier protest. What needs to be established, however, is that individual and group acts of defiance were widespread—and they mounted to a crescendo in 1779 and 1780. While crops and other food sources were often pillaged, however, there was rarely wanton violence directed against civilians. The behavior of the Pennsylvania mutineers of early 1781 was typical on that count. The soldiery resented the indifferent way in which the civilian sector handled the contract, all of which left a legacy of bitterness that almost inevitably resulted in high levels of rank-and-file protest and defiance.[17]

The officer corps, like the rank and file, resorted to protest with increasing (and patterned) frequency after 1776. In common with ordinary soldiers, their venom gained strength from a gaping sense of civilian indifference, if not betrayal. To complicate the case of the officers, there was also the persistent and nagging fear that their demonstrable moral commitment would never be appreciated—that it would go unrecognized and unrewarded. It rankled them that so many civilians would not participate fully, on the one hand, yet stood to make financial profits from the war effort, on the other. That civilians could benefit from their travail when they were making significant personal financial sacrifices while in service for the sustenance of the whole republican polity was an ultimate test of self-sacrifice for them. As officers made comparisons between themselves and civilians, their perception of hypocritical civilian behavior made for a potentially explosive situation.[18]

There is no way to deny that the officers, as individuals and as a group, were getting into a bad mood. By 1779 and 1780, the tone of their utterances had become particularly strident. General John Paterson wrote indignantly: "It really gives me great pain to think of our public affairs; where is the public spirit of the year 1775? Where are those flaming *patriots* who were ready to sacrifice their lives, their fortunes, their all, for the public?"[19] Alexander McDougall summarized his shattered expectations during March 1779 when writing to Nathanael Greene: "I am sorry to hear of the dissipated manners of that Capital. It 'augurs' ill to America. Can the Country expect Spartan Virtue in her army, while the people are wallowing in all the luxury of Rome in her declining state . . . . The consequence is obvious."[20] Lieutenant Colonel Ebenezer Huntington was as bitter as any other officer. He wrote caustically in July 1780: "I despise my countrymen. I wish I could say I was not born in America . . . . The insults and neglects which the army have met with from the country beggars all description."[21] Benedict Arnold, just thirteen days before fleeing to the British, expressed practically identical feelings: "It is . . . to be lamented that our army is permitted to starve in a land of plenty." He sensed "a fault somewhere" and wanted it "traced up to its authors" who "ought to be capitally punished."[22] Such comments were the product of very real frustrations with the civilian sector. They also reflected the officers' failure to gain appropriate concessions and support from society as a result of various forms of individual and group protest.

Before the end of 1777, some officers, especially those in the lesser ranks, had expressed their disgust by resigning. Here was a fundamental form of individual protest. Even more important, by the end of 1777 the officer corps had started to rally around the demand for half-pay pensions. This issue did more than promote solidarity. It encapsulated frustrations—and held out the prospect that tensions could be alleviated. If the officers could get Congress to approve postwar pensions, then there would be the prospect of long-term financial security in the face of short-term sacrifice. There would be a tangible reward for virtuous behavior, a

quality which deserved special recognition from the point of view of the officers, especially since they had come to believe (with some good evidence) that so few citizens truly measured up to Revolutionary ideals.[23]

The Continental Congress, in its turn, seemed caught between ideology and reality. Many delegates considered the officers' demand for pensions as nothing more than blackmail. As they debated the issue in the spring of 1778, many agreed with the sentiments of James Lovell of Massachusetts, who spoke about "a wish or design to put our military officers upon the footing of [the] European." Lovell openly wondered why these citizen-soldiers had "forgotten that this *was* in its beginning a *patriotic* war."[24] Other civilian leaders worried about "a total loss of virtue in the Army," about officers who were not "actuated by the principles of patriotism and public spirit," and about the implied "idea of a standing Army in time of peace."[25] Washington, who initially opposed the notion of pensions, came around in early 1778. He was blunt with Congress. "Motives of public virtue may for a time . . . actuate men to the observance of a conduct purely disinterested," he wrote. However, days of "continual sacrifice" without attention to "private interest" had passed. Washington thus declared the officers' demand to be necessary and just.[26]

After lengthy debate (and out of some fear that the officers might carry through on threats of more resignations), Congress reluctantly passed a circumscribed pension plan in May 1778. That did not close the issue or end protest, however. The officers persisted in pressing for lifetime half-pay pensions. In July 1780, they issued their most extreme statement yet: "Exposed as" they were "to the rapacity of almost every class of the community," they demanded full pensions, or they "should be obliged by necessity to quit the service." And if "ill consequences should arise to the country, they [would] leave to the world to determine who ought to be responsible for them."[27] In October 1780, Congress finally conceded on a full postwar pension plan, should funds become available. (Ironically, the traitorous course of Benedict Arnold helped to get the central government to act favorably.) Even with that promise, the pension issue kept cropping up again, culminating in the implied threat of coup d'etat at Newburgh in 1783—certainly the most potentially volatile confrontation relating to civil-military differences during the wartime period.[28]

While Benedict Arnold was only at the perimeter of the group that spoke loudest for pensions (a curious note, given standard assumptions about Arnold and greed), he was at the storm center of controversies over rank. The ink had hardly dried on the first commissions of June 1775 before disputes were breaking out over why this or that person should be senior to some other. Such maneuvering for favored position certainly should not be construed exclusively as protest. But in time, individual general officers began to confront Congress over its standards for promotion—using the threat of resignation to carry home their objections to absolute and arbitrary civilian decision-making in such matters.

Because of all the turmoil over rank, Congress tried to establish appropriate guidelines governing promotions, as enunciated in its Baltimore resolution of early 1777. "In voting for general officers," the delegates pronounced, "a due regard shall be had to the line of succession, the merit of the persons proposed, and the quota of troops raised, and to be raised, by each state."[29] The question was whether Congress could be as objective in applying the guidelines as would have been hoped.

Benedict Arnold's tribulation in 1777 was only one instance of many confrontations between particular officers and Congress over rank. Because of his service in the Quebec venture, Congress recognized Arnold's merit by commissioning him a brigadier general early in 1776. A year later (on the same day that the Baltimore resolution had been promulgated), the delegates passed him over and named five other brigadiers, all junior to Arnold, to the rank of major general. Washington was prominent among those in the Army who felt

strongly that Arnold did not deserve such treatment, given his outstanding record of service in the field. In explaining itself, however, Congress defended its decision by pointing out that Connecticut already had its complement of major generals, based on that state's proportion of troops in rank. In dismay and anger over what he called his besmirched honor, Arnold protested by threatening to resign. There can be no doubt that many delegates did not like Arnold personally, and they clearly came to resent the fact that he had the audacity to question congressional authority openly.[30]

Events soon took an unusual turn. Late in April 1777, Arnold, while visiting in Connecticut, rushed to the defense of his state by helping to quash a foray by British soldiers that had resulted in the sacking and burning of Danbury. Arnold personally rallied local militia, fought brilliantly (on one heated exchange his horse was shot out from under him while another bullet tore open his uniform), and was instrumental in driving the marauding British column back to the coast. Shortly thereafter, a red-faced but still proud Congress belatedly promoted Arnold to major general. To prove their superior hand, however, the delegates did not restore his seniority.

Arnold found it degrading to have to cope with such congressional reasoning—slapping while rewarding, rewarding while slapping. Between 20 May and 14 July 1777, he wrote six letters of protest to John Hancock, then President of Congress. He specifically appealed for justice, explaining: "Honor is a sacrifice no man ought to make, as I received so I wish to transmit [it] inviolate to Posterity."[31] He had earlier written 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."[32] Congress, he believed, had called his personal character into question. Now they were offering an insult in the form of a reward. As a gentleman, he felt duty bound to remove the stain from his record.

The congressional delegates did not view Arnold's letters of protest in that light. They resented his personal meddling, considering it an infringement upon important civil prerogatives. Finally, at the end of November 1777, Congress, in acknowledging Arnold's vital role at Saratoga, awarded him the seniority that he had thought his due. But by that time, Arnold was seriously questioning why anyone should adhere to a code of selfless dedication, since from his perspective Congress and the general population were making a mockery of that tenet.

Such incidents of individual officer protest over congressional decisions abetted the deterioration of relations between the civil and military sectors.[33] To officers like Arnold, any needless tampering with rank became an attack upon one's personal honor—now seemingly more important than pure self-sacrifice in the cause. In turn, Congress, enduring unremitting pressures from all sides, did not always use good judgment. The delegates generally viewed protesting officers, in the pithy words of John Adams, as "Mastiffs, scrambling for rank and pay like apes for nuts."[34] Washington's lieutenants wanted the respect they thought due them as responsible citizens and newly emergent professional soldiers. Congress, however, treated them more as aspiring mercenaries—with all the threats to civil society that such a term implied. Washington continually worried about these tensions, writing at one point: "We should all be considered . . . as one people, embarked in one cause, in one interest; acting on the same principle and to the same end." Yet the "very jealousy" of Congress regarding the Army's proper "subordination to the supreme civil authority is a likely means to produce a contrary effect."[35]

In this setting, it cannot be emphasized enough that Benedict Arnold was not alone in his protest. He was one among many high-ranking officers whose enthusiasm for republican self-sacrifice had been dampened by the course of events. He was one among many who was coming to resent civilian indifference and perceived congressional arrogance. In Arnold's correspondence, the preservation of personal honor, above all

else, had begun to take on central meaning; purity of concern for the cause and the preservation of liberty, reminiscent of 1775, was losing its importance.[36] Even in early 1778, Arnold was typical of other general officers. He was not yet psychologically ready to break from his peers and become an extremist in terms of methods of protest.

We must ask, then, what led the former Connecticut merchant to his rendezvous with disaster, when other officers, many of whom were just as disillusioned (and at times more outspoken), never gave second thought to going over to the enemy. No doubt there were highly individualized factors in Arnold's case. There were his battlefield wounds that left him half-crippled—a physical reminder of unappreciated sacrifice; his mishandling of his military governorship in Philadelphia and the assault on his personal character by Joseph Reed's Supreme Executive Council; and his marriage to Peggy Shippen, which fed his continuing desire for money, a luxurious lifestyle, and acceptance in the best social circles. Dwelling on these factors would serve to explain part of the pattern. However, there is a neglected dimension, given that Arnold, in his changing perceptions regarding the attainability of republican ideals, was more alike than different from his fellow general officers in 1777 and 1778.

The differences between Arnold and the rest become clearer by considering modes of protest. While the bulk of officers focused their discontent by joining hand-in-hand in the pension drive, Arnold remained at the perimeter, as we have seen. Indeed, Arnold's correspondence rarely reveals much interest in linking with his associates in the pension dispute.[37] Perhaps that is because he perceived collective protest on this issue as nothing more than a fool's errand, given Congress's lack of financial authority. Then again, it may be that he consciously chose to express his protest in individual rather than collective terms. If that is the case, then perhaps we have found a key reason why he eventually selected the traitor's course.

In 1778, Arnold, acting as an individual, did take up the pension cause indirectly when he decided to become the self-appointed champion of the deceased Joseph Warren's children. "About three months ago I was informed that my late worthy friend General Warren," he wrote, "left his affairs unsettled, and that, after paying his debts, a very small matter, if anything, would remain for the education of his children." It bothered Arnold that the children of such a noted patriot had "been entirely neglected by the State"—and that citizens had not felt any obligations to provide for the offspring of one who had so prominently sacrificed his life in their defense.[38] Arnold decided to push Congress for a special pension for Warren's widow and children. (More generally, the officers had demanded the same for their families in their pension drive.) Arnold also committed his personal funds. If Congress proved to be niggardly, then he guaranteed that he would mount a private subscription campaign. Ultimately, he gave at least $500 toward the care and education of Warren's children, and he eventually badgered Congress into conceding a major general's half pay until the youngest child reached majority status.[39]

Arnold's was basically a one-man campaign. When he became sure that a special congressional pension would be forthcoming, he was genuinely pleased. However, the fact that the Massachusetts delegation remained divided on the issue infuriated him. And he could not avoid commenting about the civilian mentality: "Charity, urbanity, and the social virtues seem swallowed up in the tumult and confusion of the times, and self wholly engrosses the nabobs of the present day."[40] These words were written on 3 August 1780, just 52 days before Arnold fled from West Point.

His quest for financial justice for Warren's children served a number of personal needs. Most significant, it allowed Arnold to place himself in the role of a selfless benefactor attempting to overcome an act of civilian injustice that discredited the republic. After all, he was protesting in favor of the progeny of a fallen hero. Arnold could thus hold up to the world the hard-heartedness of a community which, indeed, had failed to attain the mark of public virtue.

In a certain sense, by so visibly demonstrating his concern the general was doing more than just protesting. He was mocking the cause and its civilian leadership for being so shallow in its Revolutionary commitment. At the same time, he was expressing his own disillusionment as an officer who had repeatedly "fought and bled" in the service of his country.[41]

Of equal significance, Arnold chose to challenge as an individual—not as part of the group. Certainly his plea for Warren's children was an indirect extension of the broader officer-congressional clash over pensions, but there is no evidence that he was acting as an agent of the larger movement. It would have been uncharacteristic of Arnold if he had been. He was, if anything, a confirmed individualist in his actions. That had been his trademark as a rising prewar merchant, as a commander in battle, and as an officer in endless petty conflicts with other Revolutionaries. When he protested his passover for a major general promotion in 1777, for example, he took his own case to Congress. By comparison, when the Philippe du Coudray incident occurred during the same year, Nathanael Greene, Henry Knox, and John Sullivan joined in a coordinated petition for redress before Congress.[42] That Arnold was ultimately capable of the most extreme form of personal protest, that of turning completely against a cause which he had once held so dear, should not be mind-boggling, then, given his style of direct, personal, individualized behavior in combination with the broader pattern of mounting disillusionment among the most faithful of Revolutionary military leaders.

Feelings about civilian ingratitude first began to play on Arnold with particular intensity in 1777. Initially, this change in attitude was an outgrowth of his promotion controversy. The debilitating wound that he suffered in the Saratoga campaign seemed to add to his psychological turmoil. Thus when Arnold became military commander in Philadelphia after the British evacuation in June 1778, he seemed to revel in the opportunity of slighting home-front republican purists.[43] When Joseph Reed and the Pennsylvania Constitutionalists accosted him publicly in February 1779 for alleged malfeasance in office, Arnold wrote heatedly: "I am heartily tired with my journey, and almost so with human nature. I daily discover so much baseness and ingratitude among mankind that I almost blush at being of the same species."[44] When the general failed to get a quick court-martial hearing in an attempt to clear his name, he penned these frantic words to George Washington: "I want no favor; I ask only 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 have stamped ingratitude as a current coin, I must take it."[45] Arnold composed these lines in early May 1779, only a few days before he sent his first treason letter to New York City.

Arnold, perhaps more than the other officers, personalized his sense of disillusionment. His grounds for grievance were straightforward in his mind. He had repeatedly displayed public virtue and moral commitment. He had attempted to be a loyal republican. The general citizenry and its leaders, however, had betrayed him and others, which meant that they, in their self-interest, had forsaken the cause—and turned it into a sham.

What it all came down to for Arnold by the summer of 1779 was that the quest for republicanism had become meaningless. As Arnold stated to Samuel Holden Parsons on 8 September 1780, the "contracted politics and little sense" of congressional delegates "will not suffer them to admire or reward the virtue they cannot imitate."[46] Without the republican ideal, the Revolution was all but lost. The ultimate form of positive, individual protest, then, would be to recognize reality and to go over to the enemy—which, after all, was the parent state. Effecting a personal reconciliation with Great Britain might, in turn, unleash a wave of similar acts, with Arnold playing the central part of the "pied piper" in leading a hopelessly lost populace back into the arms of an anxious and forgiving parent.

This is not meant to argue that Arnold

perceived his climactic act of personal protest in purely benevolent terms. Fully disillusioned, he expected financial recompense and recognition as a hero for his act. From his perspective, if he had been naive in his enthusiasm during 1775, he now acknowledged that the world was corrupt—and that only fools, such as he believed he had been, would not think of themselves first.

Aboard the British war vessel *Vulture* in the Hudson River on 25 September 1780, Arnold sorted out his thoughts. The Revolution had apparently taught him that mankind was somehow doomed to fall short of achieving an ideal political state. "The heart which is conscious of its own rectitude cannot attempt to palliate a step which the world may censure as wrong," he wrote to his former patron-in-arms, George Washington. "I have ever acted from a principle of love to my country since the commencement of the present unhappy contest between Great Britain and the colonies. The same principle of love to my country actuates my present conduct, however it may appear inconsistent to the world, who very seldom judge right of any man's actions."[47] If republicanism could not work, he was saying, then the only sensible course was to reestablish allegiance with Great Britain.

Arnold hoped that his act of extreme protest would ignite the collapse of the American cause. Thus on 20 October 1780, he called upon "friends, fellow soldiers, and citizens" to "arouse and judge for yourselves—reflect on what you have lost—consider to what you are reduced, and by your courage repel the ruin that still threatens you."[48] By hindsight, we know that few citizens took his appeal seriously. Indeed, the populace had already started to employ him as a source of reinvigorated support for the cause.[49] It is a supreme irony that Arnold's act of treason backfired on him to the extent that it did. For in many ways Arnold was correct in his assessment. The cause was in desperate shape during 1779 and 1780. What he never counted on, however, was that his ultimate act of defiance would function as a rallying point for renewed determination by rebel citizens in attempting to live up to republican ideals. But that necessitated turning Benedict Arnold into the likeness of the devil. And it has been that image which has persisted in historical literature—rather than that of a man who, out of disillusionment, went too far in protesting the people's attitudes toward the military in Revolutionary America.

NOTES

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1. Words taken from a woodcut which reproduced the scene of a Philadelphia parade denouncing Arnold's treason. The parade occurred on 30 September 1780. The parade, which included noted gentlemen, Continental officers and soldiers, and the city's infantry unit, centered on a horse-drawn float. Exhibited on the platform was "an effigy of General Arnold sitting." He had "two faces, emblematical of his traitorous conduct, a mask in his left hand, and a letter in his right from Beelzebub, telling him that he had done all the mischief he could do. . . . At the back of the General was a figure of the Devil, shaking a purse of money at the general's left ear, and in his right hand a pitchfork, ready to drive him into hell as the reward due for the many crimes which the thief of gold had made him commit." Such imagery, which took strength from what might be called the ideology of evangelical republicanism, was pervasive as an explanation of Arnold's behavior. On 26 September 1780, for example, Captain Samuel Frost wrote in the Orderly Book of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment, stationed at Tappan, New York, that "Treason of the blackest dye was yesterday discovered. . . . Such an event would have given the American cause a deadly wound, if not a fatal stab; happily the treason has been timely discovered to prevent the fatal misfortune, the providential train . . . affords the most convincing proof that the Liberties of America is [sic] the object of the Divine Protection." Orderly Book in United States Military Academy Library. Spelling in all quotations has been modernized.

2. William Tillotson to Thomas S. Lee, 28 September 1780, C. E. French Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society [hereinafter MHS].

3. Alexander Scammell to Meshech Weare, 1 October 1780, Weare Papers, MHS. Comments by Tillotson and Weare are typical of dozens of others that have survived.

4. *Traitorous Hero: The life and Fortunes of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Books for Libraries, Inc., 1954), p. 317. This volume remains the only scholarly biography of Arnold in our time. Certainly as revealing is Issac N. Arnold, *The Life of Benedict Arnold* (Chicago: Jansen, McClung, 1880).

5. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 25-53.

6. 24 April 1775, Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th Sers. (6 vols.; Washington: GPO, 1837-46), pp. 383-84.

7. James T. Flexner *The Traitor and the Spy: Benedict Arnold and John André* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953;

new ed., Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), p. xiii. While Flexner did research his subject, his story often embroiders upon the factual record, which may explain why professional historians treat the Wallace biography with more respect.

8. Arnold to B. Douglas, 19 June 1770, *Historical Magazine*, 1st Sers. (1857), I, 119.

9. Arnold to John Manir or Captain William Gregory, 13 October 1775, in Force, *American Archives*, 4th Sers., III, 1062. Arnold was not given to political introspection with pen in hand. But surviving glimpses of his thoughts establish him as a committed republican.

10. "To the American Soldiery," Cambridge, 14 November 1775, in *ibid.*, III, 1557-59. See also "To the Worthy Officers and Soldiers in the American Army," Cambridge, 24 November 1775, in *ibid.*, III, 1667-68.

11. On paper, the Continental Army consisted of 46,197 soldiers (including militia and troops under Philip Schuyler in the Northern Department) during September 1776; and the total for October 1776 was 48,017. By comparison, Washington had 10,003 troops in May 1777; and the Northern Department totaled 5193 in July and 8300 in August 1777. It is safe to conclude that the overall manpower pool had dropped by at least 50 to 60 percent, if not more, between the summer of 1776 and the summer of 1777. See Charles H. Lesser, ed., *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 32-49.

12. Mark Edward Lender, "The Social Structure of the New Jersey Brigade: The Continental Line as an American Standing Army," in *The Military in America: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, ed. Peter Karsten (New York: The Free Press, 1980), pp. 27-44; John R. Sellers, "The Common Soldier in the American Revolution," *Military History of the American Revolution: Proceedings of the Sixth Military History Symposium, USAF Academy*, ed. S. J. Underdal (Washington: GPO, 1976), pp. 151-61; Sellers, "The Origins and Careers of the New England Soldier: Noncommissioned Officers and Privates in the Massachusetts Continental Line" (paper delivered at the American Historical Association Convention, 1972); and Edward C. Papenfuse and Gregory A. Stiverson, "General Smallwood's Recruits: The Peacetime Career of the Revolutionary War Private," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Sers., 30 (January 1973), 117-32.

13. It was not just that these soldiers were young and, therefore, not yet in their prime earning years. Their families were also quite poor, which suggests a limited range of economic opportunity, unless one was possessed of unusual individual talent. Lender, for instance, found that 46 percent of the Jersey soldiery or their families (for those underage) owned no taxable property whatsoever. Fifty-seven percent of the Jersey Continentals were landless, not an attractive condition in that state's largely agricultural economy. Sellers' case studies reveal distinctly similar patterns; and among the Maryland troops of 1782, half of those with traceable wealth, according to Papenfuse and Stiverson, came from family units holding less than £45 in assessed wealth. Leaning upon the poor and underprivileged in society for long-term fighting was already a well-engrained American tradition. See the relevant sections of Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979).

14. This is the point made by Charles Royster in the appendix to *Revolutionary People at War*, pp. 373-78. It is my contention that Royster has construed the Lender-Sellers-Papenfuse-Stiverson studies more narrowly than necessarily should have been the case. From my reading, these studies question an all-pervasive ideological force as posited in the rather deterministic explanations of Bernard Bailyn and others. At some point, such generalizations must be comprehended as tendencies rather than as absolutes. For a balanced statement, see Robert Middlekauff, "Why Men Fought in the American Revolution," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 43 (Spring 1980), 135-48.

15. George F. Scheer, ed., *Private Yankee Doodle: Being a Narrative of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), p. 186.

16. Royster, p. 71.

17. The patterns of individual and group protest, both of the rank and file and of the officer corps, is discussed more fully in James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *'A Respectable Army': The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago: AHM, forthcoming), *passim*. See also James Kirby Martin, "A 'Most Undisciplined and Profligate Crew': Protest and Defiance in the Continental Ranks, 1776-1783," which will appear in *Arms and Independence: The Military Character of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, forthcoming).

18. Although differing somewhat in emphasis, important secondary studies of officers' attitudes include Royster, pp. 82-95, 197-218, 295-330, 343-60; Richard H. Kohn, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint," in *Reconsiderations of the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, ed. Don Higginbotham (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 104-23; and Jonathan Gregory Rossie, *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1975), *passim*.

19. Paterson to William Heath, 31 March 1780, *The Heath Papers*, MHS *Collections*, 7th Sers. (5 vols.; Boston: MHS, 1898-1907), V, 44-45.

20. McDougall to Nathanael Greene, 24 March 1779, Greene Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

21. Huntington to Andrew Huntington, 7 July 1780, "Letters of Ebenezer Huntington, 1774-1781," *American Historical Review*, 5 (February 1900), 725-26.

22. Arnold to Nathanael Greene, 12 September 1780, Peter Force Transcripts, Library of Congress.

23. See in particular "Remarks on Plan of Field Officers for Remodeling the Army," November 1777, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (39 vols.; Washington: GPO, 1931-41), X, 125-26. See also George Washington "To the Committee of Congress with the Army," Valley Forge, 29 January 1778, in *ibid.*, 362-65, 400-03.

24. Lovell to Samuel Adams, 13 January 1778, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (8 vols.; Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1921-36), III, 31-33.

25. Henry Laurens to James Duane, York, 7 April 1778, in *ibid.*, III, 153-55; and Thomas Burke to Richard Caswell, York, 9 April 1778, in *ibid.*, III, 160-63.

26. "To the Committee of Congress with the Army," 29 January 1778, in Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, X, 363.

27. The pensions promised by Congress in 1778 had a seven-year limitation ("Memorial of General Officers," 11 July 1780, quoted in Roger J. Champagne, *Alexander McDougall and the American Revolution in New York* [Schenectady: Union College Press, 1975], p. 160). Champagne's study, while featuring McDougall, represents the best published attempt to piece together the pension controversy in the years 1778-80.

28. See in particular Richard H. Kohn, "The Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy: America and the *Coup d'Etat*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Sers., 27 (April 1970), 187-220. One should also look at the criticisms of this presentation along with Kohn's replies in Paul David Nelson, "Horatio Gates at Newburgh, 1783: A Misunderstood Role,"

William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Sers., 29 (January 1972), 143-58, and C. Edward Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Sers., 31 (April 1974), 273-98.

29. 19 February 1777, Worthington C. Ford *et al.*, eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress* (34 vols.; Washington: GPO, 1904-37), VII, 133. For additional commentary, see "Abstract of Debates" by Thomas Burke, in Burnett, *Letters of Members*, II, 262.

30. Some of this anti-Arnold sentiment reflected upon his personal disputes with John Brown and Moses Hazen in which Arnold had accused Brown of plundering officers' baggage and Hazen of disobedience and possible theft of goods seized from Canadians for the support of the American army retreating from Canada. Ultimately, a military court of enquiry cleared Hazen and rebuked Arnold for having cast aspersions on the former's character. Brown never got the hearing he wanted, but both men carried their cases to Congress, insisting that it was Arnold who was the thief. None of this helped Arnold's reputation, and it no doubt influenced Congress's decision to pass over him on 19 February 1777. Typical of direct lobbying against Arnold is John Brown to Theodore Sedgwick, 6 December 1776, Sedgwick Papers, MHS. In this letter Brown wrote: "And now in my turn I think proper to transmit to Congress, the Petition Complaint Answers & Evasions of General Gates, and demand General Arnold to be arrested and brought to trial on said complaint." All of this, according to Brown, was for Sedgwick's "amusement."

31. Arnold to Hancock, 11 July 1777, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives. See also Arnold to Hancock, 20 May, 10 June, 13 June, 12 July, and 14 July 1777.

32. Arnold to Washington, 11 March 1777, Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution* . . . (4 vols.; Boston: Little, Brown, 1853), I, 353-56.

33. See note 18. A good example of such protest is found in a letter from William Maxwell to John Hancock, 28 August 1776, Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives. Maxwell presumed "that Col. St. Clair's friends will not pretend . . . he has served his country with more zeal than your memorialist has done; but what will the continent think, where a younger officer is preferred, but that the older one is not fit for it." Maxwell also noted that he "would have quit the service immediately but that the present alarming state of his country requires his presence in the field." Congress elevated Maxwell to a brigadier generalship in October 1776. Such individual protest, whether from Arnold, Maxwell, or others, did have a ritualistic cast to it.

34. Quoted in Kohn, "American Generals," pp. 118-19.

35. Washington to John Bannister, 21 April 1778, Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, XI, 290-92.

36. It is impossible to pick a precise date when Arnold started putting more emphasis upon personal honor than on the pursuit of liberty for the community. My reading of his extant letters would suggest that his change in outlook clearly appears during the period of the promotion controversy in 1777.

37. In July 1778, Arnold related to Nathanael Greene that he was in ill health and tied up with his duties as military commander of Philadelphia. The implication was that he was too busy to get involved. See Arnold to Greene, 25 July 1778, Henry Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

38. Arnold to Mercy Scollay, 15 July 1778, MHS. See also Mercy Scollay to Benedict Arnold, 5 August 1778, and Benedict Arnold to Dr. David Townshend, 6 August 1778, MHS.

39. Arnold, *Life of Arnold*, 216-21, attributes Arnold's apparent good deed to a "heart . . . warm with gratitude and generosity." While this may have been the case, there can be no doubt that the general had found a perfect pedestal on which to display civilian ingratitude.

40. Arnold to Mercy Scollay, in *ibid.*, 218-19. In this letter Arnold made passing reference to the officers' pension drive, referring to widows and orphans. That he tied his ad hoc campaign to the broader effort is interesting. Besides seeking to embarrass Congress, it may be that Arnold wanted to believe that his efforts would result in gains for families of the slain more generally. This was a curious concern for a man about to commit treason.

41. As Arnold became more disillusioned, he took to repeating the "fought and bled" phrase with regularity. At the least, he was emphasizing his self-sacrifice in the face of attacks on his character and honor. A good example may be found in a letter he wrote to Timothy Matlack (from which the quotation is taken) while in Philadelphia, 6 October 1778, Joseph Reed Papers, New-York Historical Society. In this case, Arnold was defending the actions of his aide, David Franks, who had sent Matlack's son to fetch a barber. The son, William, complained that this duty was unbecoming a militia sergeant. For further details of an incident that would eventually become a public charge against Arnold by the Joseph Reed group in Pennsylvania, see Timothy Matlack to Arnold, October 1778, Joseph Reed Papers, New-York Historical Society.

42. Kohn, "American Generals," pp. 112-20. See also Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 214-16.

43. For more detail on Arnold's controversy, see Wallace, *Traitorous Hero*, pp. 170-92; Robert L. Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1942), pp. 64-68; and H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 231-37.

44. Arnold to Margaret Shippen, 8 February 1779, Arnold, *Life of Arnold*, pp. 230-31.

45. Arnold to Washington, 5 May 1779, Sparks, ed., *Correspondence American Revolution*, II, 290-92. For the chronology, see Carl Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution* . . . (New York: Viking Press, 1941), pp. 191-95.

46. Peter Force Transcripts, Library of Congress.

47. "On Board the *Vulture*," 25 September 1780, David Franks Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

48. "To the Officers and Soldiers of the Continental Army . . . ," Arnold, *Life of Arnold*, pp. 332-34.

49. This theme is developed in Charles Royster, "'The Nature of Treason': Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Sers., 36 (April 1979), 163-93.