

The Importance of Spies to Washington's Success

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The American Revolutionary War alluded to as the American War of Independence, and the Revolutionary War in the United States was a clash between Great Britain and thirteen of its North American provinces. The result of this war proclaimed freedom of those colonies as the United States of America. General George Washington's military prowess was instrumental to the military's success during the war. Many strategies contributed to this achievement, but the use of spies had played a pivotal role in the success or failures of armies, nations, governments, and global warfare for centuries and this was no less true during the Revolutionary War. This paper will discuss an overview of the Revolutionary War, intelligence during the war; the role women played during the conflict and other factors of the war. George Washington's dependence on espionage was critical to his overall success.

Overview of the Revolutionary War

The revolutionary war was the defining event that led to the establishment of the United States of America. It began with American colonists' frustration with British rule, which progressed to over six years of them fighting against the superior British military, but resulted in the 1786 Treaty of Paris, with the British finally recognizing the United States of America as an independent nation (Tuchman, 1988). George Washington was a key figure in the war, as commander of the American Continental Army. He suffered many triumphs and setbacks, but his overall strategies and leadership eventually led his country to victory. The American Revolutionary War was unique in that it was the first colonial uprising in the Western Hemisphere and paved the way for many more colonies to gain freedom from British rule (Tuchman, 1988). Through the progression of the war, the use of intelligence would drive operations.

Intelligence During the Revolutionary War

In the initial stages of the Revolutionary War, George Washington focused more on his strategies and keeping his army well supplied, but as the war progressed, he began to feel the intense need for accurate information. As the commander of the Continental Army in 1775, General Washington was a relative novice in the management of large army formations and did not know many details regarding his enemy or his forces (Lengel, 2016). As a result, Washington immediately set about creating an internal communication network to organize his troops, which he managed to do competently. To gather intelligence on his enemy, he initially relied upon subordinates to scout report back with information, but this led to early defeats when these reports were inaccurate (Daigler, 2014). These defeats caused him to recognize the importance of accurate intelligence gathering, though it took a while for his efforts to improve in this area to gain traction.

He eventually put into place a system of spy rings as well as many secret agents who would be able to feed him proper information from behind enemy lines (Misencik, 2014), which was the beginning of the American espionage community. Many of the spies lacked the training of covert agents and often had to develop their strategies and skills. The most famous spy ring during this period was the Culper spy ring which was an espionage network organized by Major Benjamin Tallmadge (Lengel, 2016). While this spy ring has achieved notoriety over the years, it was by no means the only intelligence network of the time. In fact, Washington considered many of the methods they employed to be unreliable and dangerous. Despite this, Washington was able to make use of their efforts and encourage those he worked with to establish their networks for covert information gathering.

These advancements led to the creation and improvement of technologies related to this community and an improvement in spycraft techniques. Of note was the invisible ink developed by Sir James Jay who was a chemist and a physician (Daigler, 2014). Also, other strategies such as the use of coded letters and ciphers, or other ways to hide information in letters were developed given the need for written information to be transported (Misencik, 2014). In addition, agents also made use of disguises and covers to aid in infiltration (Daigler, 2014). Another tactic employed by both sides was the creation of misinformation given to the opposing party in the hope that they would fall for the ruse. Washington also made use of Black Chamber operations where mail and messages were intercepted, covertly read, and then resealed and sent on to the intended recipient (Daigler, 2014). However, both sides employed this strategy.

What this implies is that the British were also using many of the strategies employed by Washington. Washington's focus on intelligence gathering allowed his forces to outmaneuver and outperform the superior British forces. Therefore, his establishment of spy networks and his use of espionage was not only prudent; it was necessary and critical to his overall success. Washington was successful in his use of espionage; it even landed him the title of being a spymaster (Lengel, 2016). Washington used networks that were local as well as those that existed in far off places. He often did not know the identities of many of the people who worked to send him information, though he had a preference of meeting his spies in person so he could judge their measure as people. However, in addition to official spies, there were also numerous other ordinary, everyday individuals such as farmers and merchants who supplied information to these spy rings and worked in tandem with covert agents to aid the cause of freedom. With resolutions passed by Congress, intelligence operations began to spread everywhere and became the foundation for the modern intelligence community where the importance of civilian

observation and mobilization considerations to be of as much importance as a military strategy (Misencik, 2014). Since the inception of the country, espionage has been an important tactic in maintaining an advantage over the enemy. As the war continued, women played vital roles in gathering intelligence.

The Role of Women as Spies

The role of women in winning freedom from British rule was crucial. Women played an important part in support of the way, by nursing the wounded and sick, washing clothing, cooking, and even gathering supplies by being resourceful and coming up with alternatives for goods that were not available (Berkin, 2006). As more and more men joined the war, women took on the roles of managing farms and shops in addition to their regular duties. Women also were essential participants in the boycott of British goods since wives and mothers were the primary purchasers of supplies (Berkin, 2006). Thus, the support of women during the revolutionary war aided their men and their efforts allowed for many of the strategies such as the boycott to take place.

However, another area that women were essential and played pivotal roles was as part of intelligence networks. In fact, Washington often used women as scouts, and spies gave their ability to gain information that was otherwise not easy to obtain access to (Samuelson, 1989). In addition to this, numerous women often rode long distances in heroic fashion to warn American forces of plans being made or carried out by the British (Samuelson, 1989). Thus, in addition to Patriot women who were overtly supporting the war efforts, many female Patriots covertly supported the war by acting as spies, secret messengers, and other intelligence gathering activities.

As mentioned in the earlier section, the Culper Ring was one of the most lauded spy rings of the time, and women played an essential part in this network as well. An example of this was Anna Strong who would hang her laundry in patterns based upon a code to transfer messages (Berkin, 2006). Many wives and sisters of the group also assisted their men in passing information or acting as couriers. One of the most mysterious members was agent 355. She worked as a covert operative. She also discovered the defection of Benedict Arnold and passed on the information to the Revolutionist. She was held captive and died on the prison ship Jersey and then buried in a mass grave along with hundreds of prisoners (Samuelson, 1989). Thus, the efforts of women in aiding the victory of the revolutionary war were no less difficult or dangerous than of their male counterparts.

Women were successful as spies in the war for many reasons. For example, many of them made use of their skills as cooks or house cleaners and used the opportunity to eavesdrop and gather information behind enemy lines (Berkin, 2006). In these roles, they often had unrestricted access to enemy campsites and used it to gain intelligence on equipment shortages, leadership changes, and even on troop movements (Samuelson, 1989). George Washington held the information gathered and sent at great peril to these women operatives in high value. Thus, it is easy to see that the greatest attribute women had was not in flamboyant dealings, but in taking advantage of the attitudes towards them and in using traditional and simple skills to gather accurate intelligence. Though women were a force multiplier, many other factors played into the outcome of the war.

The Importance of Other Factors in Winning the War

The role of spies in the overall operations of the Revolutionary war is certain, many other factors that cemented the victory. These factors imply that the network of spies and spy rings were irrelevant to the eventual victory of America over the British. One of the most important factors of the American Revolution was the size of the United States, which made it difficult for British troops to maintain control (Tuchman, 1988), and therefore restricted their efforts to the more critical geographical areas such as cities and ports. Also, the geography of the United States was something that the British were unaccustomed to, given that it was overly rugged in comparison, and that it was much more humid, with forests and muddy roads that were uncommon in the cooler, rockier country of England (Tuchman, 1988). These characteristics gave the United States the geographical advantage over the British.

Another important factor was the militia and the military strategies employed by George Washington. For example, Washington was aware of the superior British army, and so avoided confronting them head-on given their superior numbers, training, and weapons. The militia often resorted to guerilla warfare, specifically the use of snipers to eliminate British officers (Kelly, 2014). The militiamen were close-knit and knew the territory much better than their enemies (Kelly, 2014) know. While they lacked the training and the experience, they made up for it in passion and the desire for independence. The British faced tactics they had not seen before and fought those who were willing to put everything on the line for freedom.

In addition to these two factors, the most important factor in winning independence might be the aid of other nations such as France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Spain chose to side with the Americans in order for the chance to push Britain out of North America as a force, and therefore supplied the Continental Army with needed supplies, including munitions (Tuchman,

1988). When they entered the war as combatants, their presence forced the British to spread themselves thin. France considered England to be a principal rival and therefore was motivated to send supplies to Americans as they saw it being a way to weaken their enemy (Daigler, 2014). Thus, France, Spain, and eventually the Netherlands were able to assist in the battle for independence by supplying the Continental Army, diverting the efforts of British troops, providing grants and loans, and even providing weapons and combatants.

Conclusion

This paper claims that espionage aided Washington and assisted in his success during the Revolutionary War. Espionage was not a new invention. The British had spies amid the war and used spies as a major aspect of their technique for quite a bit of their history. Therefore, while spies and espionage did not single-handedly win the war, it allowed Washington to mitigate some of the damage that might have occurred had he not been aware of such information. Therefore, the spy networks were critical to the success of George Washington in the Revolutionary war, even though there is a possibility that America could have gained independence without espionage. The fact is the efforts of spies allowed for a more efficient and successful war.

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