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Arnold's Treason: The French Connection

Norman Desmarais
2nd Rhode Island Regiment

Historians ascribe several reasons to Benedict Arnold's treason. Chief among them is Arnold's constant need for more money and his resentment of the slights he perceived from Congress. He felt that Congress lacked confidence in him and did not recognize him for his heroism in previous battles as he saw himself passed over for several promotions.

One of Arnold's enemies once said of him "Money is this man's God." After his marriage to his second wife, Margaret ("Peggy") Shippen, a prominent Loyalist, his expenses increased and he needed more money to keep her in the style in which she was accustomed to living. A month after his marriage in 1779, Arnold offered to sell military information to General Henry Clinton. Clinton appointed John Andre, recently promoted to Major, to serve as his contact with Arnold. Not only was Major André the head of General Clinton's spy ring, He was a personal friend of Peggy Shippen.

Another possible reason for Arnold's treason was his growing hatred of the French. There is no documentary evidence of this hatred before his treason, though. In fact, after the Battle of Saratoga convinced the French to join the American War for Independence against England, Arnold wrote to General Philip Schuyler on March 8, 1777, welcoming the prospect of France's participation:

The amazing preparations making for war, in France and Spain, leave little doubt of their hostile intentions against Great Britain. I hope and believe we shall have the burden Of the war taken off our hand, this summer. [Schuyler Papers. New York Public Library in Wallace, Willard M. *Traitorous Hero: the life and fortunes of Benedict Arnold*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954 p.195]

If Arnold mistrusted the alliance between France and America prior to 1780, he never admitted it. However, after his treason Arnold justified his action by claiming that the Americans were now fighting for the interests of Catholic France. He noted that the American cause was being supported by a Catholic kingdom against whose soldiers he

had once fought. What happened in the interim?

The Count de Rochambeau landed in Newport, RI with 5,800 French troops on July 10, 1780. Arnold, a resident of New London, CT whose grandfather of the same name had been a governor of Rhode Island, now saw the French too close to home. This may have been a factor in precipitating his treachery.

Three months later and two and a half weeks after Major John André's capture at Tarrytown, NY, with evidence of the treason, Arnold issued the following proclamation to the officers and soldiers of the Continental Army inviting them to join him. Although dated October 10, 1780, it was printed in the *Royal Gazette* two weeks later on October 25, 1780.

Proclamation of Brigadier-General Arnold, formerly Major General in the service of America and now head of a band in the service of Great Britain.

To all the officers and soldiers of the continental army which he claims to seduce.

Having reason to believe that the principles I have avowed in my address to the public of the 7th instant, animated the greatest [part] of this continent, I rejoice in the opportunity I have of inviting you to join his Majesty's Arms.

His Excellency Sir Henry Clinton has authorized me to raise a corps of cavalry and infantry, who are to be clothed, subsisted, and paid as the other troops are in the British service; and those who bring in horses, arms, or accoutrements, are to be paid their value, or have liberty to sell them: To every non-commissioned officer and private a bounty of three guineas will be given, and as the Commander in Chief is pleased to allow me to nominate the officers, I shall with infinite satisfaction embrace the opportunity of advancing men whose valour I have witnessed, and whose principles are favourable to a union with Britain, and true American liberty.

The rank they obtain in the King's service will bear a proportion to their former rank, and the number of men they bring with them.

It is expected that a Lieutenant-Colonel of cavalry

will bring with him, or recruit in a reasonable time, 75 men,

Major of Horse	50 men,
Captain of ditto	30
Lieutenant of ditto	15
Cornet of ditto	12
Serjeant of ditto	6
Lieutenant-Colonel of Infantry	75 men
Major of ditto	50
Captain of ditto	30
Lieutenant of ditto	15
Ensign of ditto	12
Serjeant of ditto	6

N.B. Each field officer will have a company

Great as these encouragements must appear to such as have suffered every distress of want of pay, hunger, and nakedness, from the neglect, contempt, and corruption of Congress, they are nothing to the motives which I expect will influence the brave and generous minds I hope to have the honour to command.

I wish to lead a chosen band of Americans to the attainment of peace, liberty, and safety, (the first objects in taking the field) and with them to share in the glory of rescuing our native country from the grasping hand of France, as well as from the ambitious and interested views of a desperate party among ourselves, who in listening to French overtures, and rejecting those from Great Britain, have brought the colonies to the very brink of destruction.

Friends, fellow soldiers, and citizens, 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.

Your country once was happy, and had the proffered peace been embraced, your last two years of misery had been spent in peace and plenty, and repairing the desolations of a quarrel that would have set the interest of Great Britain and America in its true sight, and cemented their friendship; whereas, you are now the prey of avarice, the scorn of your enemies, and the pity of your friends.

You were promised liberty by the leaders of your affairs; but is there an individual in the enjoyment of it, saving your oppressors? Who among you dare speak, or write what he think, against the tyranny which has robbed

you of your property, imprisons your persons, drags you to the field of battle, and is daily deluging your country with your blood?

You are flattered with independency as preferable to a redress of grievances, and for that shadow, instead of real felicity, are sunk into all the wretchedness of poverty by the rapacity of your own rulers. Already are you disqualified to support the pride of character they taught you to aim at, and must inevitably shortly belong to one or other of the great powers their folly and wickedness have drawn into conflict. Happy for you that you may still become the fellow subjects of Great Britain, if you nobly disdain to be the vassals of France.

What is America now but a land of widows, orphans, and beggars? -- and should the parent nation cease her exertions to deliver you. What security remains to you even for the enjoyment of the consolations of that religion for which your fathers braved the ocean, the heathen, and the wilderness? Do you know that the eye which guides this pen lately saw your mean and profligate Congress at Mass for the soul of a Roman Catholic in Purgatory, and participating in the rites of a Church, against whose anti-christian corruptions your pious ancestors would have witnessed with their blood.

As to you who have been soldiers in the continental army, can you at this day want evidence that the funds of your country are exhausted, or that the managers have applied them to their own private uses? In either case you surely can no longer continue in their service with honour or advantage; yet you have hitherto been their supporters in that cruelty, which, with an equal indifference to your's, as well as to the labour and blood of others, is devouring a country, that, from the moment you quit their colours, will be redeemed from their tyranny.

But what need of arguments to such as feel infinitely more misery than tongue can express. I therefore only add my promise of the most affectionate welcome and attention to all who are disposed to join me in the measures necessary to close the scene of our afflictions, which, intolerable as they are, must continue to increase until we have the wisdom (shown of late by Ireland) in being contented with the liberality of the Parent Country, who still offers her protection, with the immediate restoration of our ancient privileges, civil and sacred, and a perpetual exemption from all taxes, but such as we shall think fit to impose on ourselves.

B. Arnold.

So why did Arnold's antipathy toward the French emerge so suddenly and progress so rapidly? During the spring and summer of 1780 Arnold tried to settle financial accounts with the Board of Treasury for his expenses earlier in the war. However, there were missing vouchers and Arnold considered Congress niggardly for underpaying him £2000.

Arnold's efforts to obtain payment indicate his need for money at this time. He tried to obtain repayment as if the sum were much larger than it actually was. He was so hard-pressed to meet his obligations that he turned to several French officers, particularly the Chevalier de la Luzerne. All his requests were denied which may have led to a deterioration of his opinion of the French. Arnold also quarreled with some of the officers. His dislike of several Frenchmen may have quickly developed into a distrust of all Frenchmen and France itself.

Willard Wallace (Wallace, Willard M. *Traitorous Hero: the life and fortunes of Benedict Arnold*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954 p.214) thinks that had the Chevalier de la Luzerne loaned him money to meet his needs in the winter of 1780, Arnold might not have turned to the British in the spring to supply what neither the French minister nor the Continental Congress was disposed to do.

To justify his treason, Arnold could unleash his bitterness toward the French officers who denied his requests for money by impugning their country. He distrusted French motives and considered Catholic France an enemy of the liberties of mankind and of the Protestant faith, the predominant faith in the colonies.

Arnold may also have consciously wanted to recall the Quebec Act of May 20, 1774 to re-ignite the fears that Act aroused. Passed along with the Intolerable Acts, the Quebec Act allowed the French inhabitants of Canada to maintain their traditions in government and granted the Roman Catholic Church a privileged position. As the Act also put the territory north of the Ohio River under the jurisdiction of Quebec, the predominantly Protestant colonists mistrusted Britain's motives and feared that a Catholic bishop would be appointed for the region. Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and

Virginia were particularly alarmed because they claimed much of the territory now granted to Quebec. The Quebec Act angered the colonies and helped push them to armed conflict. Arnold may have wanted to remind his former countrymen of their fears of six years earlier.

An Editorial Response to Arnold's Proclamation

When the French arrived in Newport, many of the officers and men could not speak or read English. The fleet established a newspaper, the *Gazette Française* or French Gazette, which was published at 641 Point Street. The newspaper intended to translate various news items printed in American newspapers to keep the officers and men abreast of political events in this emerging nation.

The first item of the first issue, published on Friday November 17, 1780, was a translation of Arnold's proclamation followed by this response:

"This broadside is characteristic of its author. It claims his treachery by slandering the respectable body which, by drawing him out of the void where the obscurity of his birth should have buried his little being forever, rewarded him with the prize of honor, a few acts of rashness. Such is the fatal impotence of the British that these proud and contemptuous warriors today place at their head, an object so worthy of the true soldier's and the honest man's scorn. But let us not be surprised, they already numbered savages and negroes among their colonels."