



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

by Kenneth A. Daigler.

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The American Revolution has provided a litany of personalities and events familiar to young and old. Who hasn't heard of George Washington, Benedict Arnold, Nathan Hale, John Jay, John and Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, Lafayette, and Benjamin Franklin? Less familiar are Gen. John Burgoyne, Lord Charles Cornwallis, Daniel Morgan, and Nathaniel Greene. What they all have in common is their involvement in the use of intelligence gathered in spy operations. In *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors*, retired CIA officer and Vietnam War veteran Kenneth Daigler describes in detail many of the covert actions that enabled British and American leaders to expose their enemy's or disguise their own plans and operations. He has written an engaging account of the birth of America's intelligence gathering:

This book ... educate[s] the general public on the role intelligence activities played in the American Revolution. Covering the period from 1765 to 1783—from the organization of the Sons of Liberty to the British withdrawal from New York City—it discusses how intelligence techniques, operations, and individuals contributed to the cause of American independence.... Individual chapters describe intelligence efforts in British-occupied Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City, and in areas of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Particular attention is given to the Culper Ring,¹ the best-documented American intelligence network of the war, which operated in and about New York City. However the book also provides details of George Washington's background in intelligence, which started prior to the French and Indian War and gave him the mindset and experience to organize and direct intelligence activities while commander of the Continental Army. (xiv)

Daigler discusses counterintelligence operations and covert paramilitary, political, and propagandist activities during the Revolutionary War.

The book succeeds in two ways. First, it describes familiar events of the American Revolution from an unfamiliar perspective. Few people are aware of the effect of spy operations on the Boston Massacre, the battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, the intrigues inside the French and British courts, the Saratoga campaign, Nathaniel Greene's operations in the South, and the British capitulation at Yorktown. Reconstructing such secret activities over 240 years after the fact presents a challenge to any historian. Daigler acknowledges that not every question can be answered and that newly discovered documents and other information continue to force us to revise our earlier conclusions. Nonetheless, he provides a clear picture of the dedication and skill of Revolutionary War spies, based on facts and the occasional assumption. Though some spies failed in their missions, changed sides, or lacked sufficient brains, "That American intelligence activities were a significant factor in defeating the British in the Revolutionary War is well documented by historical record" (241).

1. See, further, Brad Meltzer and Josh Mensch, *The First Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill George Washington* (NY: Flatiron Books, 2018)—with review by Anita Porterfield at *MiWSR* 2019-057.

Secondly, the book stands out because of its author's thirty-plus years as a CIA operative and manager. Daigler enhances the relevance of his historical narrative by using current terminology and alluding to relevant aspects of present-day spycraft. Tradecraft concepts are evoked in phrases like "dead drop," "compartmentation cell," "safe house," "double agent," "cut outs," "plausible denial," and "actionable intelligence" that show readers how, even though intelligence gathering is now far more sophisticated, it has many things in common with espionage in the earliest days of the republic.

In short, the past is prologue. Instead of invisible ink and "stain," we have cybersecurity measures and "computer signatures"; instead of keeping sensitive information in a weighted glass bottle on the side of a boat, ready to be cut away in an instant, we have edible rice paper and capsules; instead of women hanging out "color coded," easily identifiable articles of laundry to pass on information about British activities, we have moles who bug rooms with listening devices. One is painfully reminded of today's Chinese, Russian, and North Korean intelligence operations against the United States or even the espionage and "leaking" by political parties.

George Washington looms large throughout the book as the virtual founding father of American intelligence. His earliest military experiences taught him the critical value of advance knowledge of the enemy's movements, capabilities, and intentions. During the Revolutionary War, he took a personal interest in developing a system of intelligence that could yield victories both on the battlefield and in the political arenas of America and France. This was duly achieved after a long process of trial-and-error to hone the skills of individual agents and improve the speed, accuracy, and quality of intelligence essential to defeating a numerically superior force.

Kenneth Daigler has written a gripping account of intelligence collection during the American Revolution. He demonstrates the skill with which both colonial and British leaders used intelligence and disinformation in their battle plans and strategic thinking. He also reminds us that many of the intelligence principles applied in the interests of national security in 1765–83 continue to be useful in the twenty-first century.