George Washington's Culper Spy Ring: How Silence Won the War

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After their call for independence in 1776, leaders of the American Revolution realized that the brutality of traditional warfare could only get them so far if they were to triumph over the British. Out of the need for innovation came the idea and creation of 'The Culper Spy Ring,' headed by General George Washington. A young Major named Benjamin Tallmadge was given the role as 'Director of Military Intelligence.' His intelligence was based out of the then-military headquarters in New York City. Tallmadge cleverly worked with a group of his childhood friends within the Long Island Sound to interfere, intercept, and spread intelligence communications of utmost importance throughout the Ring in order to help preserve and eventually aid in the creation of a new country.

Tallmadge, a recent Yale graduate and former resident of Setauket, New York, had been given the duty to host the Ring's location in New York City as well as the surrounding area. New York was the very same area where the British held their own military headquarters. Tallmadge made sure his informants were versed in the numerical code system he crafted for them and supplied them with pseudonyms to hide in plain sight. This code system was so astute that later historians did not discover and decode the members until the 1930's. The Ring is often praised for halting British General Henry Clinton's Attacks as well as the capture of The British spy, Major John Andre. Andre was in cahoots with notorious American traitor Benedict Arnold. During this time, not one of Tallmadges' spies was revealed. The impact of the Ring on the eventual winning of the American Revolution cannot be understated, as they achieved many great firsts in American history and intelligence.

One of the most important and intricate parts of 'The Culper Spy Ring' was the long-term relationships between Major Tallmadge and a group of his childhood school friends whom he solicited in the fight for liberty. He rallied his friends to transport and retain information from the enemy while under the fear of imminent enemy inception. Tallmadge had grown up around the Long Island sounds and attended school with his future informants, Caleb Brewster, Abraham Woodhull, Anna Strong, and Austin Roe. Other members of the Ring existed, such as Robert Townsend. Townsend worked as an undercover loyalist coffee shop owner and journalist, and he was a business partner with the publisher James Rivington, creator of *The Royal Gazette*. It served as a publishing house that was in service from 1778-1783 during the height of the revolution. Through this, newspapers were published with previously agreed-on codes to inconspicuously beat the British from the inside out. This allowed an inconspicuous space for communication physically and in published loyalist newspapers without detection.[1]

Techniques of early American intelligence used by the Culper Spy Ring were both seemingly intricate and stupidly simple. Roe would ride out from Setauket, enter Townsend's establishment, and place an order for the code name of 'John Bolton,' under which Tallmadge would later sign off. This message would contain encoded messages from General Washington himself, which Tallmadge would decipher, encode, and send back off. Roe would secretly carry the information back to the Long Island Sound, where he planted it on the farm of Abraham Woodhull, who would continue the route. The only known female member of the Ring, Anna Strong, would retrieve the information from Woodhull's farm and would hang her drying laundry. Strong would hang a specific number of black petticoats to indicate what cove Caleb Brewster could find the information in. After this reception, Brewster would relay the

1 Victoria Williams, *Culper Spy Ring.* Mount Vernon Digital Library.

information to Tallmadge, and with new information, the tedious route would start all over again.[2]

Though the route itself was a tedious trek from New York City to Setauket, Tallmadge even entertained his chances on the Long Island sound on occasion per his own Ring duties, he stated in his memoir "...I determined to cross the sound myself and go over to Long Island myself for the purpose of obtaining intelligence. This I accomplished and returned in safety."[3] Though the actions of the ring were of vast import to the Continental Army, The Culper Ring's secrecy allowed for no public praise but created an advantage for the cause of liberty under the realm of secrecy.

To withstand the prying eyes of British intelligence, Benjamin Tallmadge himself went about creating the most intricate and covert ways of communication he could muster at the time. Tallmadges' numerical codebook allowed for members to easily communicate in secrecy, without fearing British interception and easy decoding. The code books Tallmadge created were so valuable, only a few were ever created in fear of the code being deciphered. In Donald E. Markle's, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying*, he states, "only three copies of the original codebook were created: one for Tallmadge, one for Robert Townsend, disguised as [the alias] Culper Jr., and one for George Washington. The system consisted of code groups numbering from 1 to 710 with word values arranged in alphabetical order from *Entick's Spelling Dictionary.* There were an additional fifty-three code values from 710 to 763 for personages and locations." [4] Though the numerical system itself could seem relatively easy to decode, the small number of people in the Ring helped prevent leaks and encoding on the part of the British.

2 Williams, *Culper Spy Ring*

3 Tallmadge, Benjamin. *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*:1858. New York: 1968.

4 Donald E. Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying.* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2014.)

For quick decoding on behalf of the Americans, Tallmadge also focused on including the proper names of his agents, places, and major British officials. In *Washington's Spies, The Story of America's First Spy Ring,* Alexander Rose listed some of the major codes, "General Washington: 711, General Clinton: 712, New York: 727, Setauket: 729." [5] and so on. The emphasis on communication strictly through code and the British lack of access to any deciphering helped the Americans continue their access and spread of intelligence within the Ring. In fact, the lack of any complete code system and communication was highly disadvantageous for the transmission of intelligence or valuable information through a universal code. Markle states, "Evidence doesn't reveal that the British ever had a complete code system during the American Revolution" [6] Highly advantageous for the Americans was that the British lacked continuity in their coding and ciphers, unlike as the Culper Ring. Americans outsmarted the British in another form of secret intelligence in 'spy ink.' Thanks to the British lack of use of 'Sympathetic ink,' an invisible ink technique that Americans used that did not require a heat source to decode their messages.

Doctor James Jay, a chemist and brother to the founding father, John Jay, began to use his skill to make an invisible ink for the rebels that would not be seen through the process of heat, making it nearly impossible to find. His technique included one fluid, 'the agent,' for the writing, and 'the reagent,' which would bring the invisible writing to light. The ingredients James Jay used are unknown, but believed to be rare, which helped American agents in their vow of secrecy.[7] On July 25, 1779, General Washington sent a letter to his Director of Military Intelligence, Tallmadge, regarding the use of 'Sympathetic ink', "these you will send to C. - Jr.

5 Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*. (New York: Bantam trade pbk, 2007.)

6 Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying.*

7 Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying*

As soon as possible, and I beg that no mention may ever be made of your having received such liquids from me, or anyone else. In all cases and always, this prudence & circumspection is necessary; but it is indispensably so now." In fact, Washington was so sparse with the 'sympathetic ink' that if he was aware that his correspondent had not yet received the 'reagent,' he would send it separately to prevent suspicion. [8] The exclusiveness of the 'sympathetic' ink was crucial in the transfer of information in plain sight for the Americans; As for British intelligence, there was no proof they created a 'sympathetic' ink. Instead, they focused on the use of acid or heat to reveal invisible ink, which the Americans could easily find if they knew where to look.[9] The limited but highly efficient use of a very specific ink allowed the Ring to have assurance of secrecy through their encoded letters, a privilege the British could not achieve.

The effort to create ciphers was used as part of the War effort by both sides in this conflict. The British Army, Specifically, General Thomas Gage, was tasked with creating a cipher to send secret correspondence. Gage himself had no codes or ciphers, and none of his staffers knew how to create one. When General Henry Clinton arrived in America, he brought staff members who were presumably well-trained with ciphers. However, upon arrival, it was evident they were not sufficiently trained to decode and encipher. In contrast, the Continental Army had codes and ciphers before the conflict even started. George Washington himself "…even personally trained his staff members in how to use the various systems." [10] Washington's attention to detail in terms of espionage may be one of the reasons the Continental Army was able to hold out against the British and eventually win the War despite the massive numbers and power behind the British Army. One of the Washington's main priorities was

8 Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying*
9 Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying*
10 Markle, *The Fox and The Hound, The Birth of American Spying*

cataloging and using the intelligence he received about the British to avoid unnecessary conflict for his men and live to fight only meaningful battles to maintain numbers.

The use of intelligence in major cases guaranteed the American cause would survive another day. In Kenneth A. Daigler's. *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors, American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, Daigler explains how solid intelligence against an enemy can be the great equalizer for a smaller force in combat. He states, "…intelligence… gave Washington the confidence to attack Trenton and Princeton in late December 1776 and early January 1777…[then] enabled him to save his army from dissolution and keep it in the field, at least for that winter." [11] These uses of intelligence were a clever way for the Continental Army to avoid major casualties and assess a much bigger enemy from an underground perspective they were not aware of. In this case, information with things such as the amount of enemy ammunition, supplies, and location reported back to Washington by Samuel Culper or Samuel Culper Jr. based on their inconspicuous findings of the British in New York harbor, would greatly affect the battles that did, and did not occur in the Revolutionary War.

During the Revolution, members of the Ring were tasked with receiving and returning decent intelligence, as well as preventing any potential enemy espionage they encountered in the process of incurring freedom. One of the major plots thwarted by the Continental Army was near the turning over of the Continental Army's West Point camp by Brigadier General Benedict Arnold to John Andre, British head of intelligence. The two men had been in communication since Spring of 1779. Brigadier General Arnold, who had lost patience with his years of backlogged pay from the Continental Congress, was embarrassed by his stagnant progress in the Continental Army's military ranks and became a traitor to his own country for wealth and status.

11 Kenneth A. Daigler, *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War. (*Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2014.)

The deal was secured in part that Arnold would receive adequate payment for his information while in cahoots with the British. In return, Andre had convinced Arnold that General Clinton had agreed for him to become a turncoat to take military control over West Point. Andre, in September 1779, dressed as a plain-clothed civilian in the process of meeting General Arnold, was captured by three American militiamen and identified as John Andre, head of British military intelligence. This was due to a letter found hidden in his boot that was from General Clinton himself to Benedict Arnold. This message was relayed to Benjamin Tallmadge who was in camp at West Point, who quickly alerted General Washington to the treason and fled him to safety.

After Andre was captured, Arnold fled to New York.[12] Andre was court marshaled, charged with treason, and was hanged as a spy in New York on October 2, 1780. Correspondence between Andre and Arnold set the stage for the ill-fated rendezvous. Their correspondence contained details of import, such as the monetary value of West Point, the significance of its location, and seizing West Point to end the War. Arnold wrote to Andre, "...If I point out a plan of cooperation by Sir Henry. Shall Possess himself of West Point, the Garrison, etc. etc. etc. twenty thousand pounds sterling I think will be a cheap push case for an object of so much importance." [13] If the plot between Andre and Arnold had not broken up, the consequences could have ended the War. The turning over of West Point, where the majority of the Continental Army was, as well as General Washington himself, would have had dire consequences in terms of. It could have halted the growth of not just the Continental Army and even prevented the creation of the United States. The use of decoding intelligence may have made one of the most

12 William L. Clements Library, *Benedict Arnold Letter to John Andre, July 15, 1780 (coded & decoded) Henry Clinton Papers*. (University of Michigan.)

13 William L Clements Library, *Benedict Arnold Letter to John Andre, July 15, 1780 (coded & decoded) Henry Clinton Papers.*

significant differences in the tide of the War and revealed one of the highest-ranking traitors ever.

The necessity for secrecy meant life or death if found out within the world of espionage and war in Revolutionary America. Even those in the Culper Ring, like General Washington, were intent on keeping the highest levels of intelligence to slip information past the British. Per instructions from General Washington in 1799, due to heightened British activity, he insisted on quickening the spread of intelligence and improving the Ring's efficiency.[14] Washington writes extremely tedious directions for Robert Townsend, (Alias: Samuel Culper, Jr.) as to how to craft and send off intelligence that was critical to tipping the scales of the War. "'should occasionally write his information on the blank leaves of a pamphlet; he may write a familiar letter, on domestic affairs, or on some little matters of business to his friend at Setauket…interlining with the stain, his secret intelligence or writing it on the opposite blank side of the letter.' [15] This almost obsessive need to procure and send perfectly encrypted intelligence was something Washington was intent on nurturing if the War raged on. This shows his intensity for acquiring enemy intelligence, as well as his understanding of just how crucial intelligence and halting or procuring of intelligence can be in all aspects of international conflicts.

Often, Washington and his camp were able to pick up whiffs of intelligence from his Ring, in digestible waves over many weeks, "Thanks to the Culper warnings over the previous months, Washington had long been aware that Clinton was up to something and hard-heartedly did not budge from his Hudson strongholds. [16] only did the intelligence that the Culper Ring decoded help in small ways in terms of intelligence reports, but also long term, as useful

14 Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*.
15 Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*.
16 Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*.

intelligence could be held onto for months at a time before becoming of use strategically. In a relatively slow time for travel, with reception of information in weeks or months before it could be deemed appropriately useful, allowed for ultimate planning on behalf of the thousands under Washington's commands in the Continental Army.

Thus, a small group of childhood friends would end up mostly - unsung heroes of the American Revolutionary War. They held a major role in the defeat of the British through the halting and spread of intelligence in a sophisticated way. The use of highly technical processes for the time, such as sympathetic ink or hand-crafted ciphers, helped widen the gap in America's favor in a game of time and intelligence. The intensity and thoroughness of General George Washington and head intelligence officer Benjamin Tallmadge helped create a ring that was so inconspicuous it wasn't discovered by modern historians until the 1930's, when a letter was eventually decoded.

This group used what tools they had as an advantage over the British. The familiarity of the land in Setauket and the lifelong connectivity of the group aided in the eventual defeat of the British Army. On the slinking back routes and colonial trails of Revolutionary America, the fight for independence was molded through the many journeys of those who will never be named or who are yet to be discovered. To remain within a vow of secrecy and secure victory over the British, many risked everything with no validation or achievements for the country they helped forge. Their actions and long-term effects are invaluable for the country they helped create in the shadows.

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