

Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the Fate of the American Revolution

Benedict Arnold was a talented military strategist who had led forces to victories at Fort Ticonderoga, on Lake Champlain, at Fort Stanwix, and in the battle of Saratoga. While recognizing Arnold's abilities, George Washington feared that the young officer was at times too bold on the battlefield. Washington cautioned him in March 1777, "Unless your strength and circumstances be such, that you can reasonably promise yourself a moral certainty of succeeding, confine yourself in the main to a defensive opposition".

Seven months later, at the Second Battle of Saratoga at Bemis Heights near the Hudson River, Arnold so recklessly waved his sword that it pierced the head of an American officer. Hours later, he led a charge of riflemen that proved to be decisive in winning the battle. Upon demanding the enemy's surrender, a German soldier fired a musket ball into Arnold's leg, killing his horse.

According to Philbrick, the war effort was marred by division in the colonies, an incompetent Congress under the Articles of Confederation, and weak executive power. In February 1778, Washington authored a plan to reorganize the Army but its implementation was slow. He told Congress of the harsh conditions his men faced, often being poorly clothed and sleeping "under frost and snow". They displayed a "patience and obedience which could scarce be paralleled".

Throughout the war, Congress possessed the power to name officers. In 1777, when Benedict Arnold was denied promotion to Major General, Washington feared that he would overreact. He cautioned Arnold not to "take any hasty steps", telling him that he was not alone in being passed over by the legislature. But Arnold was insulted, believing he had been treated like an officer "of no consequence". Additionally, Congress declined to reimburse him for personal funds he had spent at the outset of the war to recruit troops. Arnold was doubly mad.

In January 1778, he was finally promoted to Major General but there would be no battlefield command due to the leg injury he had suffered at Bemis Heights. A few months later, Washington named him military governor of Philadelphia. Believing that he had been badly treated, Arnold set his sights on regaining the money he had lost. And his new position in Philadelphia would provide, through graft, an opportunity to do just that.

Eventually, Arnold considered the possibility that the American effort at independence might fail. Accused of corruption in Philadelphia, he began steps to switch his "allegiance" to the British, thus setting in motion one of the most famous acts of treason in our nation's history. Among his first actions was to form an alliance with two men: Captain John Andre, head of British intelligence operations, and British Commander in Chief Sir Henry Clinton.

When named commander of West Point, Arnold realized his opportunity to strike a critical blow to the Americans. By surrendering the fortress to the British, he believed that the revolution would be seriously damaged. But soon Andre was captured and the plot was halted. Andre faced a hangman's noose and Arnold was commissioned as a Brigadier General in the British army. Arnold would go on to lead British raids against New London and Groton, Connecticut. He died in 1801 at age sixty and is buried in London, England.