

Whom Can We Trust Now? The Portrayal of Benedict Arnold in American History

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"Whom can we trust now?" asked General George Washington, commander in chief of the American Revolution, shortly after learning of the treason committed by the most brilliant soldier of the Revolution, Benedict Arnold. Arnold was Washington's friend, his trusted comrade in the fight for independence. He had lent his considerable talents for leadership to the American cause time and time again since the onset of hostilities with Great Britain, making him one of the colonial army's most valuable officers. In fact, the commander in chief frequently commended Arnold for his "enterprising and persevering spirit" and relied on him for advice and support during the conflict.¹ After Arnold defected to the British, however, Washington was hurt and angry at his friend's betrayal. He was not the only one. Patriots across America lashed out in fury in reaction to Arnold's treason. Their trust had been broken, and to the present day, Americans have difficulty seeing beyond the word traitor when Benedict Arnold's name is mentioned. In the years since Arnold's death, many biographies and articles have been written about him. The tone and perspective of these writings have changed as cultures and attitudes of historians have changed. While examining the historiography on Benedict Arnold, the phrase "whom can we trust now" takes on a whole new meaning. To gain an accurate understanding of who Arnold truly was, scholars must not only study his life, but the forces that shaped his interpreters.

Arnold, born January 14, 1741, in Norwich, Connecticut, was a man who sought to control every situation. According to James Kirby Martin, professor of history at the University of Houston, Arnold shared similar

¹Washington quoted in Malcolm Decker, *Ten Days of Infamy* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 94, and in James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 184.

characteristics with other Revolutionary leaders: "His profile was that of an individual ambitious for achievement, with low levels of tolerance toward those who threatened the full realization of his personal aspirations." After the death of their parents, Arnold and his sister, Hannah, moved from their family home to New Haven, Connecticut. Determined to rebuild the reputation of the Arnold name after his father's descent into alcoholism and poverty, the young man soon established a successful mercantile business and quickly became a prominent resident. When British-imposed trade restrictions and taxes began to affect his business ventures, Arnold spoke out against them. He believed complacency regarding the actions of the mother country "would result in the loss of liberties, including so fundamental a right as earning a livelihood."²

Therefore, after the battle at Lexington and Concord in April, 1775, Benedict Arnold began his fated military career. With Ethan Allen, who simultaneously received an identical commission, he led an extremely successful raid on Fort Ticonderoga, a defense built during the French and Indian War, to obtain desperately needed heavy artillery for the colonial forces. Later, Arnold headed a long and laborious trip up the Kennebec River to attack Quebec. The objective was to take the city, thereby eliminating the British access and supply line to the sea. Although the battle failed in this aim, Arnold, who was shot in the leg during the fight, was promoted to brigadier general. In the fall of 1776, the recovered soldier provided a great service to his country by stalling British forces on Lake Champlain before the onset of winter, thereby preventing the recapture of Fort Ticonderoga. The fort, had it fallen into British hands, would have allowed the redcoats to march to Albany, and in the spring, to seize control of the Hudson River Valley, effectively ending the war.

Frustrated and angry over his lack of further promotion, Arnold finally received the rank of Major General after the Battle of Ridgefield in 1777. The battles at Saratoga later that year, however, were the real turning point, not only for the American army in the war, but for Arnold as well. At Saratoga he fought bravely, leading his troops through heavy fire. He was wounded again, in the same leg as at Quebec. To complicate the situation, his horse fell, trapping the injured appendage beneath it. After a long recovery, Arnold, not yet well enough to resume active duty, was posted as military commandant at Philadelphia. It was here that he made his first offer of assistance to the British.

²Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 39, 45.

While stationed in the city, Arnold met and married Margaret "Peggy" Shippen, who became his partner both in life and in treason. Also, the hero of Saratoga made several financial deals during this time that were perceived as inappropriate. Court-martialed and subsequently reprimanded by George Washington for his actions, Arnold was humiliated and angry. It was this "straw," plus his newly formed belief that America should remain within the British empire, that led Arnold, on May 10, 1779, to make contact with Major John André, an acquaintance of his wife and a leading British officer. The exchange of messages between André and Arnold culminated with an offer by Arnold to deliver to the British the vital post of West Point, which guarded the Hudson Valley.

Appointed commander of West Point by Washington, Arnold arranged to meet with André in person to discuss payment for delivery of the fort. The two soldiers, while deep in discussion, lost track of time, and as daylight dawned, André found himself stranded behind enemy lines. Arnold wrote a pass for the British soldier under the alias "John Anderson." Armed with this and a set of papers containing messages and information about West Point, André began his journey back to British headquarters. Enroute, however, he was captured. The papers were sent to General Washington, and Arnold, exposed as a traitor, made his getaway to a nearby British ship. Although he thus escaped punishment by his former allies, Arnold was powerless to escape his infamous legacy in the minds of patriots, future Americans, and even many historians.

When colonial newspapers published General Nathanael Greene's orders of September 25, 1780, in which he stated that "treason of the blackest dye was . . . discovered,"³ a process of "demonization" and the transformation into "nonpersonhood" began against Benedict Arnold. Demonization occurs when all good characteristics of a villain are erased and that person is personified as completely evil. To demonize a person, every aspect of his or her life must be made deviant, which is accomplished by rearranging and retelling the individual's life so that every event inevitably leads to the villainous act that was committed. In Arnold's case, this occurred by establishing a "traitorous" character, eliminating his pre-treasonous identity, proving an absence of virtue, and understanding his

³Quoted in Lori J. Ducharme and Gary Alan Fine, "The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold," *Social Forces* 73 (June, 1995), 1320.

personal motivation.⁴ These views of Arnold, established soon after his treason, still affect his reputation today.

To establish a "traitorous" character that supported his defection, Benedict Arnold's life was examined carefully, and even in cases where no evil existed, it was nevertheless found. His background and exploits were interpreted to support a logical path to treason. For example, stories of his childhood were invented or embellished to emphasize his "inherently mischievous, selfish, and traitorous" character. An elementary school textbook stated that Arnold was "early known as a bad boy. From earliest childhood he was disobedient, cruel, reckless, and profane, caring little or nothing for the good will of others." Arnold's family history was rewritten as the kind of genealogy expected of a traitor. The honor of the Arnold family was discarded and its infamous son was said to come from "low birth and vulgar habits." The origins for Arnold's "revised" youth came from sources which included citizens of Arnold's hometown, a disgruntled acquaintance, and Frances M. Caulkins, author of *History of Norwich, Connecticut: From Its Possession by the Indians to the Year 1866*. Caulkins related tales such as Arnold's pretentious challenge to fight a constable and stories of foolhardy bravery that would be retold by historians for many years. In addition, the author charged that the Arnold house in Norwich was full of "supernatural sounds and sights" that drove occupants away. She was also the source of the freely translated version of Benedict Arnold's motto that appeared on his store sign in New Haven. The motto read *Sibi Totique*. In Latin this means "for himself and for all." Caulkins related, however, that "the first part, *for himself*, is pointedly appropriate. The motto has been rendered by a free translation, "Wholly for himself."⁵ The intent of the original Latin and the standard meaning thereafter ascribed to Benedict Arnold are quite different, thereby fostering Arnold's inherently devilish character reputation.

American citizens and soldiers not only searched for evil in every corner of Arnold's life, but they reacted with rage against the traitor, continuing the process of his demonization. In many cities effigies of Arnold were carried through the streets and burned before large crowds. The residents of

⁴Ibid., 1311-19.

⁵Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Benedict Arnold* (1880; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1979), 18; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 438-39; Frances Manwaring Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut: From its Possession by the Indians, to the Year 1866* (Hartford: Published by the author, 1866), 411, 413.

Philadelphia were perhaps the most thorough in their degradation of the former general. There a two-headed figure of Arnold was placed on a horse-drawn cart and led around the city. Next to the Arnold effigy was a figure of the Devil holding a sack of gold to the traitor's ear and poking a pitchfork into his back. Before the effigy was burned one soldier remarked that "it isn't fair to the Devil to join him with a fellow who acted in such a way as to make even the Devil blush." In 1794 a textbook read: "Satan entered into the heart of Benedict. The demons of destruction laugh at thy defection, and enjoy with malicious pleasure the consequences of thy fall."⁶

In the minds of the patriots, all that could be remembered about Benedict Arnold was his treason. Everything else, including his battlefield feats, was neutralized or erased. In Arnold's home state of Connecticut, residents smashed the gravestones of his father and baby brother because the names on their tombstones were the same as that of the traitor. A soldier who had the misfortune of having the last name of Arnold changed his name to something more honorable. Fort Arnold, the main fort at West Point, was quickly renamed Fort Clinton in honor of an American general by that name. To deny that Arnold was ever a member of the Freemason's Lodge in New York, a black line was drawn over his signature in the record book.⁷ In the transformation to nonpersonhood, all reminders of Arnold's name and pre-treasonous existence were deemed unacceptable.

The general's heroic battlefield accomplishments comprised part of this unacceptable pre-treasonous existence. Tradition states that, while commanding a British raid in Virginia, Arnold asked an American prisoner what would happen to him if he were captured by the American army. The prisoner replied that "they would cut off that shortened leg of yours wounded at Quebec and Saratoga, and bury it with all the honors of war; and then hang the rest of you on a gibbit!" In fact, this practice of neutralizing Arnold's battlefield heroics exists today. At the site of the battles at Saratoga there stands a stone marker in the shape of a boot. It is dedicated to "the most brilliant soldier of the Continental army" and lists the part this soldier played in the battles. The name of the soldier, Benedict Arnold, is nowhere on the marker. But perhaps the most significant testament to the neutralization of Arnold's virtue is a second memorial at Saratoga, "an obelisk commemorating the great fighting generals of the Battles of

⁶Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 8; quoted in Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Non-personhood," 1329.

⁷Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1321.

Saratoga.” There are four niches in the obelisk, three of which contain statues of Generals Philip Schuyler, Horatio Gates, and Daniel Morgan. The fourth niche is empty. The place where Benedict Arnold’s likeness should be is inscribed only with his name. “His likeness . . . is conspicuously absent, while the inscription of his name serves not to revere him, but to instruct visitors of the significance of the empty niche.” In this way, “Arnold is simultaneously present and absent in the monuments.”⁸ His heroic deeds have been neutralized, because in the minds of many, Arnold’s virtue cannot co-exist with his treason.

Another way to “prove” that Arnold’s treason originated from a deep, evil and internal force, was to establish a motive that supported this theory. Arnold stated in his memoirs that his motivation was a combination of his disagreement with the French alliance, his difficulties with Congress, and his desire to end the war. Most early interpreters, however, did not accept these as true motives. They argued that the French alliance disagreement was never mentioned by Arnold until after his treason and was therefore only an excuse. It was also noted that Arnold was not the only soldier who had difficulties with Congress. Although a few of the men who held a grudge turned to the British during the war, most did not, and none of these had as much responsibility nor as high a rank as Arnold. If he had remained loyal, these conflicts with Congress would scarcely have been known. As events occurred, however, the charges, and Arnold’s reaction to them, were used to show the poor morality of a traitor. Most writers concluded that the General’s motives for treason were “based on greed, self-interest, and personal insecurity.” Establishing greed as the motivation for treason completed the transformation of Arnold’s character into the “type” of person who would betray his country. He had all the requisite character traits, a lack of virtue, and a selfish motivation. In the words of one historian, “the traitor has now no advocate, and nothing can be said against him that is not readily believed. In every act of his life is found some lurking treason, and every trait of his character is blackened. This cannot be complained of, it is the just reward of his deeds.”⁹

⁸Malcolm Decker, *Benedict Arnold: Son of the Havens* (1932; reprint, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1961), 418; Brian Richard Boylan, *Benedict Arnold: The Dark Eagle* (New York: Norton, 1973), 25; Ducharme and Fine, “Construction of Nonpersonhood,” 1324.

⁹Ducharme and Fine, “Construction of Nonpersonhood,” 1318-20.

After examining the reaction to Benedict Arnold's treason and the alteration of his reputation, two questions of significance remain. Why did the public react so strongly to Arnold's treason, and how has the perception of Arnold's life compared to the lives of the other figures involved? In their article, "The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold," Lori J. Ducharme and Gary Alan Fine concluded that the colonists reacted as they did to provide an "outlet for collective moral outrage" and to publicize the "social rules of acceptable behavior." At the time of Arnold's treason, the values upon which the Revolution was based were being threatened and support for the war effort was languishing. Patriots knew that to win independence there would have to be a sacrifice of "safety, ease, and self-interest in order to defend liberty." This was very difficult, however, in times when economic hardship exacerbated the feeling that the war had gone on too long. Therefore, the blackening of Arnold's character and the subsequent demonization by historians was a response to an act seen as cowardly and weak. It was also, however, a way for people to reaffirm support for the cause and to see themselves as true patriots once again. Blame for their own weaknesses was placed on Arnold rather than on themselves. The traitor was condemned not only for his treason but for his rich lifestyle, his need for recognition, his abuse of power, and his questionable business dealings. Because many of Arnold's denouncers had participated in all or some of these same things that were contrary to the war cause, Arnold's greed and motivation had to be magnified so that his crimes would seem more evil than their own.¹⁰

Another component of Arnold's portrayal in history is the view historians have taken of other figures involved with him. The three men who captured John André were portrayed as heroes and saviors of the Revolution. In actuality, they probably intended to rob André, but history has seen them differently because of the focus on Arnold's villainous behavior. General Washington, who might have been blamed for his failure to uncover Arnold's scheme, was instead characterized as another victim of betrayal. In fact, his reputation as a hero with a flawless character and unflinching dedication to the cause was actually enhanced by Arnold's treason. Washington's reputation, as well as that of John André, represented the antithesis of Arnold's. Perhaps it is most surprising that André, of all those involved, would be hailed as a hero, because he was Arnold's enemy contact and facilitated the

¹⁰Ibid., 1310-15; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 11; Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1315.

treason. André, however, was seen as a soldier following orders and not blamed for his role in the conspiracy. General Washington faced no choice but to hang André, since he was caught behind enemy lines with detailed plans of West Point, but he greatly lamented the task. Historians have regretted that the handsome, brave, and charming officer was hanged instead of Arnold. Everyone, including the Americans, loved André, and the tragic circumstances of his death have grown into mystic legends. In 1881, a historian mentioned the spot where André was buried, saying that it was marked "only by a tree whose fruit never blossomed."¹¹ Benedict Arnold, therefore, is left the sole villain in his story, which has made his deeds seem darker still.

Since the establishment of Benedict Arnold's evil character in the years following his treason, many studies of his life have appeared. In general writings have become more sympathetic to him with each decade. Every author, however, is influenced by his or her environment, and the text that has been written reflects this. The first published biography of Benedict Arnold was written by Jared Sparks in 1835. Sparks, influenced by the anti-Arnold spirit of the time, believed Arnold to be a self-centered madman destined for treason. As a child, Sparks noted, Arnold spent his time "robbing birds' nests . . . to maim and mangle young birds in sight of the old ones, that he might be diverted by their cries." Another alleged pastime of Arnold was scattering broken glass on the walkway so he could watch other children cut their feet on the way to school. These tales of Arnold's youth were obtained by the author from two citizens in Arnold's hometown of Norwich. Although the memories of James Lanman and James Stedman were prolific and, in some cases, were repeated almost verbatim by Sparks, they were less than accurate. The two men were no doubt influenced by the anger and embarrassment the people of Norwich experienced after their once-vaunted general was exposed as a traitor. Perhaps encouraged by the author, who expected to hear nothing less than dastardly accounts of Arnold's youth, Lanman and Stedman did not disappoint, and the stories that Sparks used in his work were repeated by future biographers as well.¹²

¹¹Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1322; Erastus Brooks, *Arnold, the American Traitor; André, the British Spy; Washington, the Defender of Constitutional Liberty, the Father of His Country, the Commander in Chief of the American Army* (New York: Burr, 1881), 24.

¹²Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1317, 1328; Jared Sparks, *Benedict Arnold*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1902), 5-6; Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 438-39.

The adult Arnold was described by Sparks as "turbulent, impetuous, presuming and unprincipled." His battlefield accomplishments were portrayed as accidents, achieved in spite of his character flaws. Before Arnold requested a commission to take Fort Ticonderoga, Sparks insisted, he probably got the idea for this project from someone else. The author implied that Arnold could never have thought of this tactic himself. Colonel Arnold was given no credit for leading his troops through the wilderness on the march to Quebec, and the reader is subjected to frequent denunciations of Arnold's character and references to his vanity. Arnold's accomplishments at Valcour Island and Saratoga were minimized and soured by mention of possible intoxication and opium addiction to explain his bravery. Although Sparks stated that no proof was found to substantiate these claims, they were nevertheless included in the narrative. In the portion of the biography dedicated to Arnold's career after his treason, Sparks related a tale of Arnold's raid on New London, Connecticut, for the British:

It has been said, that Arnold, while New London was in flames, stood in the belfry of a steeple and witnessed the conflagration; thus, like Nero delighted in the ruin he had caused, the distresses he had inflicted, the blood of his slaughtered countrymen, the anguish of the expiring patriot, the widow's tears and the . . . orphan's cries which kindle emotions of tenderness in all but hearts of stone.¹³

The first writer who made a significant attempt to change Arnold's demonic reputation was Isaac N. Arnold, who grudgingly admitted to a distant kinship with his infamous subject. The writer was careful to point out, however, that his grandfather was "a humble soldier in the war of the Revolution, and was *faithful*." Nevertheless, in his 1880 biography, Isaac stated his intention to show that Benedict Arnold was "not so black as he has been painted." The author's motivation stemmed from a desire to correct the injustice paid the former patriot in ignoring his heroic actions. Isaac Arnold wanted to write about the time prior to the treason, or, in his words, "before the clouds which his defection caused had thrown their dark shadows *backward* as well as forward, and darkened his whole life." In the book, no excuses were made for the traitor. The author agreed that Arnold was guilty of treason but wanted the American people to know the hero, and

¹³Sparks, *Benedict Arnold*, 8-325 passim.

his motives, as well. *The Life of Benedict Arnold* was, however, poorly received by the public and book reviewers. Critics were hostile toward the work and attacked the author for being too sympathetic and writing in pity rather than in truth. One critic stated that "it is just that pity which is dangerous to encourage in this day of lax political morality." In 1881, another historian gave thanks to "Almighty God" for the deliverance of the country from "the blackest traitor named in the records of time." The author noted Arnold's accomplishments but frequently referred to his treason as well. One hundred years after Benedict Arnold's treason, his status as a villain with no redeeming qualities remained the predominant outlook on his life.¹⁴

By 1931, when Oscar Sherwin's *Patriot and Traitor* was published, historians and citizens were more receptive to the idea that something of value might have come from Benedict Arnold's life. As is suggested by the title, the author sought to portray the two sides of the man and, in the process, denounce some of the myths developed by anti-Arnold mania. Sherwin stated that tales about the young Arnold's cruelty to animals and children were invented or exaggerated. The author was not, however, completely convinced of Arnold's lack of cruelty as a boy. He found that none of the stories told about Arnold were "conclusive proofs of total depravity." The use of the word "total" gives the reader a sense that the author was ambivalent in regard to Arnold's character. With regard to the career of General Arnold, however, Sherwin was more forthright. He described the march to Quebec as "bold, rash and brilliant," and gave Arnold credit for inspiring the troops to continue under terrible circumstances by using his "magnetism and power over his men." As one reviewer noted of Sherwin's work: "Everything that can be said in Arnold's favor is said. There is not, however, one page of the 395 that can be set down as 'pro-Arnold.'" ¹⁵

In 1941, a decade after Sherwin's biography, Carl Van Doren, the eminent biographer of Franklin, published his *Secret History of the American Revolution*. This work, described as "one of the most significant books on

¹⁴Arnold, *Life of Benedict Arnold*, 3-7; Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1325; Brooks, *Arnold, the American Traitor*, 19-20; Ducharme and Fine, "Construction of Nonpersonhood," 1325.

¹⁵Oscar Sherwin, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: Century, 1931), 5-67 passim; Marion A. Knight and others, eds., *Book Review Digest: 1931* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1932), 968.

the Revolution which has been written," was extremely important to Arnold scholars because it contained the newly revealed "Clinton papers" from the British Headquarters files. These papers gave historians the correspondence between Arnold and André and included important details of many events. One enthusiastic reviewer even predicted that, because of Van Doren's work, no author would ever again try to justify Arnold's actions. Yet *Secret History* is similar in tone to Sherwin's biography. Van Doren pointed out that Benedict Arnold was not the only traitor sending information to the British, a fact overlooked by many previous historians. The author also recognized Arnold's true strengths and weaknesses in noting that he was "original" and "quick in forming plans. He had a gift for command when the object was clear . . . but in the conflict of instructions and of officers of rank equal or nearly equal with his Arnold was restive and arrogant." Neither Sherwin nor Van Doren made excuses for Arnold's treasonous behavior, but they respected his accomplishments as well. The emotions conveyed to the reader through these works are probably best told through the words of a soldier who was with Arnold at Saratoga: "Arnold was our fighting general and a bloody fellow he was. He didn't care for nothing. He'd ride right in. It was 'Come on boys!' Twasn't 'Go, boys.' He was as brave a man as ever lived. They didn't treat him right. He ought to have had Burgoyne's sword. But he ought to have been true."¹⁶

Traitorous Hero by Willard M. Wallace and *The Traitor and the Spy* by James Thomas Flexner were both published in the 1950s. A later historian noted that they were written "about a traitor in an era when treason had turned America into a nation of neurotics." The era's Communist hearings and the conviction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg of spying for the Soviets influenced these biographers. This was especially true of Wallace and resulted in a less sympathetic portrayal of Benedict Arnold than that of the 1930s and '40s. For example, Wallace stated of Arnold's childhood: "There are tales of cruelty by him . . . but most children can at times be cruel, whether innocently or mischievously." The author noted that these stories might not be true, but, in essence, the reader is left to conclude that Arnold was the same cruel boy described by his earliest biographers.¹⁷

¹⁶Mertice M. James, ed., *Book Review Digest: 1941* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1942), 913; see Carl Van Doren, *Secret History of the American Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1941), v; James, *Book Review Digest*, 913; Van Doren, *Secret History*, 146-47, 150; Sherwin, *Benedict Arnold*, 198.

¹⁷Boylan, *Benedict Arnold*, 259; Willard M. Wallace, *Traitorous Hero: The Life and Fortunes of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 322, 4.

In contrast, Flexner, who despite the title of his book was less condemning than Wallace, acknowledged that the childhood tales long told about Arnold were not true. He did, however, repeat other established falsifications such as that as a young merchant, Arnold was thrown into debtors' prison. A major focus of *The Traitor and the Spy* was the role of Arnold's wife, Peggy, in his conspiracy. The author even asserted that the initial treasonous suggestion did not come from the general's lips, but from hers. Both Wallace and Flexner gave Arnold credit for his accomplishments, and Wallace admitted that he was "not entirely lost to honor," but both included denunciations of Arnold's character among the praise. Wallace's reviewers, also influenced by the politics of the time, were even less sympathetic than the author concerning America's most famous traitor. One reader, displeased by the title *Traitorous Hero*, protested: "Certainly Mr. Wallace doesn't think Benedict Arnold was a hero," and suggested a less offensive phrase. Flexner added an element of tolerance, expressing regret at the loss of Peggy's innocence and Arnold's nobility. "Pure villainy lies forgotten," he wrote, "while we mourn a broken sword, tarnished honor, the glory that descended."¹⁸

One of Wallace's goals was to develop an understanding of the motivation for treason in the twentieth century by studying Arnold's career. This was accomplished, in part, by comparing Arnold to other actual and suspected traitors in United States history. In *Traitorous Hero*, Arnold was compared to Clement Vallandigham, the Copperhead leader in the Civil War, to Mildred Gillars, who left the United States during the depression to "find love and work in Hitler's Reich," and, of course, to the Rosenbergs. Wallace believed that all traitors' crimes were deplorable, but "Arnold's treachery . . . is harder to forgive He was a general officer in a position of great trust who sought to betray . . . for great mercenary gain."¹⁹

In the late 1960s and '70s, the philosophy of Americans evolved to a more liberal, "make love, not war" mentality. This movement, like any cultural change, influenced historical writers. Brian Richard Boylan, who published *Benedict Arnold: The Dark Eagle* in 1973, was no exception. Early in his book Boylan stated that Arnold was "no saint, but then he was no devil either." In fact, the narrative in Boylan's work leads the reader to believe that, in the author's opinion, he was more the first than the latter. A

¹⁸James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 409-10, 11-12, 254; Wallace, *Traitorous Hero*, 253.

¹⁹Wallace, *Traitorous Hero*, 4, 318-23.

reviewer maintained that the first part of the book sounded like a “press release, with Boylan retained by Arnold to make a case for his . . . niche in history.” In discussing Arnold’s treason, Boylan frequently noted the motives that drove the soldier and the false accusations against him. The purpose of *Dark Eagle* was to restore the “romantic, heroic Benedict Arnold” that was “lost in the vilification of the traitor.” The author completed this task in several ways. When Arnold was shot at Saratoga, Boylan wrote, the soldiers who saw the man shoot their general wanted to kill him instantly. Arnold, however, stopped them from doing so because the German mercenary was only doing his duty. Boylan also believed that Arnold was not dishonest in his business dealings but was simply too impatient to take care of his debts as they accrued, a position that greatly differed from the opinions of previous historians. The greatest difference between Boylan and previous writers, however, lay in his comparison of George Washington to Benedict Arnold. He commended Washington for his loyalty to the cause but also noted that “in many ways he was a terrible general. Perhaps wishing that he possessed some of Arnold’s magnetism and enthusiasm, the commander in chief questioned Arnold closely about his achievements.”²⁰ Few, if any, previous historians had taken this view of Washington’s relationship with Arnold.

Although escalating liberalism led some writers to portray Arnold as an increasingly sympathetic character, the treason issue nevertheless remained. Clifford Lindsey Alderman, a writer of juvenile literature, published *The Dark Eagle: The Story of Benedict Arnold* in 1976. Alderman appreciated Arnold’s talents and his invaluable assistance during the war. He could not, however, forgive Arnold his crime. He noted that some historians believed that Arnold’s past should be forgotten. Boylan, also writing in the 1970s, observed that America was entering an era where patriotism and treason would “lose some of their black and white” connotations. One reason for this belief could have been the prevailing attitude toward the war in Vietnam and the growing support of men who chose to leave the country rather than fight in a war they saw as immoral. During World War II, this act would have been considered traitorous, but in a more liberal time some even called it noble.²¹ Although historians of this

²⁰Josephine Samudio, ed., *Book Review Digest: 1973* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1974), 136; Boylan, *Benedict Arnold*, 17, 32-37, 81-87.

²¹Clifford Lindsey Alderman, *The Dark Eagle: The Story of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), vi; Boylan, *Benedict Arnold*, 254.

period were not ready to call Arnold's treason noble, they were open to new ideas about the forces that shaped his life.

In the last two decades a more conservative, yet nonjudgmental and "politically correct" trend has emerged among Benedict Arnold's interpreters. In an effort similar to that on behalf of the Native Americans, historians have attempted to correct the injustices paid Arnold in past interpretations of his life. They have written with gratitude about the hero of the Revolution and with pity about the traitor. They have also acknowledged Arnold's historical legacy. In his article entitled "Benedict Arnold and the Loyalists," Esmond Wright, a British historian, maintained that Arnold has been considered a traitor only because he chose the losing side in the war. Wright believed Arnold's portrayal was not related to treason or loyalty but to "victory on the field." As an old couplet stated: "Treason doth never prosper--what's the reason? If it doth prosper, none dare call it treason." During the Revolution one in five Americans remained loyal to England. In the eyes of King George III, the loyalists were the only patriots in the colonies. Men such as Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin were traitors to the British. Where Arnold made his mistake, however, was in changing sides in the middle of the war. It was one thing to switch loyalties, but it was another "to continue professing loyalty to one side while secretly working for the other."²² This tactic made Arnold a despised man in one country and a mistrusted man in another.

Willard Sterne Randall, who published *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* in 1990, and Clare Brandt, who released *The Man In The Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold* in 1994, expressed similar views about Arnold's life. Randall, according to one reviewer, passed "no judgment on Arnold's treason" but deemed it "comprehensible." The author believed that no treason could erase or cancel the good that Arnold did for his country prior to the defection. Brandt was also careful to refrain from judgment. The driving force of Arnold's treasonous behavior, she noted, stemmed from the loss of honor that Arnold felt when his father, an alcoholic, went bankrupt and disgraced the entire family. From that point, Arnold's self-esteem came from outward approval instead of from within. He built a "house of mirrors" around himself "in which the reflected image always outshone the reality."

²²Esmond Wright, "Benedict Arnold and the Loyalists," *History Today* 36, (October, 1986), 29-35; Clare Brandt, *The Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold* (New York: Random House, 1994), 236, 29-35; Edmund S. Morgan, "The Disloyalist," review of *The Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold*, by Clare Brandt, *The New Republic* (February 21, 1994), 35-36.

Like Randall, Brandt never questioned Arnold's military accomplishments. She depicted him as a great hero who made many mistakes that cost him his reputation. The reader of Brandt's biography is left with a feeling of pity for an unfortunate hero, for at the end of his life, after being ignored and snubbed by military men and politicians in the twenty years following his betrayal, Arnold had become "nothing but a man whose papers other men mislaid."²³

Historian James Kirby Martin's book, *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero*, was published in 1997. The remarkable title of this work testifies to the metamorphosis that has occurred in the more than two hundred years since Arnold's actions. Martin proposed to tell the story of the "warrior hero of the Revolution" and to set aside the tale of the "American villain." Benedict Arnold's most celebrated accomplishments were related with fervor. The author emphasized, for example, Arnold's important role in the battles of Saratoga, which led to formal "military and diplomatic relations with France." He also noted such things as Arnold's financial generosity and his religious belief in a "humane and enlightened God." There is, however, one issue concerning Arnold's life that the author excluded. The events of Arnold's treasonous act at West Point are not included in *Revolutionary Hero*. Martin's narrative began with the hero's childhood and ended in Philadelphia just prior to his initial contact with the British. When the reader leaves Arnold in Martin's book, the general was struggling with feelings of ingratitude and rejection from his former American allies. Convinced that widespread apathy toward the patriot war effort would lead the people to "applaud his boldness in forging the pathway to revived imperial allegiance," Arnold made a decision to lead them. Ironically, the general's actions had the opposite effect, and while inadvertently revitalizing the patriot cause, Martin noted, the hero cast himself into damnation.²⁴ The author's attitude toward Arnold's impending treason and his lack of attention to the actual events of September 25, 1780, must seem foreign to many Arnold scholars, some of whom could not imagine mentioning Benedict Arnold's name without the word "traitor" following it.

²³John Wauck, "Ambiguous Defection," review of *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor*, by Willard Sterne Randall, *The American Scholar*, (autumn 1991), 621-24; Morgan, "The Disloyalist," 34; Geoffrey C. Ward, "The Great Traitor," review of *The Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold*, by Clare Brandt, *American Heritage* (May/June, 1994), 16.

²⁴Martin, *Benedict Arnold*, 25, 424-431 passim, 6.

"Whom can we trust now?" The numerous biographers of Benedict Arnold have presented various interpretations of the general's life. Historians may never free themselves from temporal influences that shape their attitudes toward his deeds and misdeeds. He has been depicted as a demonic traitor, a misguided hero, and, as has most often been the case, a man whose character lies somewhere between. The traitorous action of Benedict Arnold should not be forgotten, nor should the heroic man be lost. Soon after Arnold's treason was revealed, General Nathanael Greene paralleled Arnold's life to that of Lucifer, the fallen angel of God. The description of Lucifer's fall in the book of Ezekiel, noted historian James Kirby Martin, presents striking similarities to Arnold's plight: "You were . . . full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you You were anointed as a guardian cherub." Then, "wickedness was found . . . so [God] threw you to the earth," and "all the nations who knew you are appalled at you." Thereafter Lucifer, now as Satan, tormented God's people.²⁵ When Nathanael Greene made his comparison of Lucifer and Benedict Arnold, he did so with intended malice. What he and many of Arnold's subsequent interpreters failed to realize, however, was that even Lucifer was not the devil in the beginning.

²⁵Ibid., 9; Ezekiel 28: 12-17 (New International Version).