

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

Nathaniel Philbrick (Viking, 2016), 427 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Most Americans, even those with a shaky grasp of American history, have a visceral reaction when they hear the name “Benedict Arnold”—understandably so, given the scope of his treachery so early in the life of the struggling American republic. Nathaniel Philbrick’s latest book, *Valiant Ambition*—a title inspired by an appropriate and cited quote from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*—charts the unsettling history of the relationship between “His Excellency,” George Washington, and the mercurial, detached general, against the backdrop of a war whose outcome was anything but certain. *Valiant Ambition* focuses on the period from 1776 to 1780 in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, a period when, as Philbrick notes, one protagonist achieves fame, the other infamy.

Philbrick’s theme throughout the book, first introduced in the preface, is the tantalizing assertion that “In his treason, Arnold may actually have saved America,” which he follows up with, “If, by some miracle, George Washington should find a way to win the war against the British, the real question was whether there would be a country left to claim victory.” (xvi–xvii) While *Valiant Ambition* closely follows the personal and professional interactions of Washington, Arnold, and others, it is the fractious nature of the American populace that truly concerns the author.

The book opens with the hanging of Sgt. Thomas Hickey, a member of Washington’s hand-picked security force, the Life Guards, for conspiring with the British, followed by the appearance the next day of 450 British ships off Staten Island, the first two of the seemingly innumerable challenges Washington faced. As the British actively plan to sever New England from the rest of the colonies, Washington finds himself compelled to evacuate New York from the encroaching “lobstermen.”

Philbrick then turns his attention to Arnold and the “Mosquito Fleet” operating on Lake Champlain, a critical asset, given the lack of roads for the British to use in a Canada-based invasion operation. Here the future turncoat

distinguishes himself in battle, demonstrating the first of several occasions in which he blurs the line between bravery and foolhardiness. This episode demonstrates a minor theme of Philbrick’s, discomfiting to some readers, namely his assertion that Arnold proves to be a more adept military commander than does Washington, whom the author decries as tactically indecisive and whom he describes as at heart more a “backwoodsman” than a “great general in the European mold,” and “not a good battlefield thinker.” (68). In late 1776, when British admiral William Howe did not attack, as Washington expected, the latter planned an assault for early on Christmas morning against the 1,900 Hessian mercenaries huddled against the cold and snow in Trenton, New Jersey. In describing Washington’s victory, Philbrick is quick to point out that it was not the Hessians who were drunk, as widely believed; rather, it was Washington’s army that raided the Hessian’s liquor supply and became inebriated.

At this point Philbrick introduces one potential reason for Arnold’s treachery—being passed over for promotion, superseded by those whom many beyond Arnold felt were not qualified, highlighting the problem with Congress’s being in charge of such administrivia as army promotions. In part because he was not promoted, Arnold had been considering a naval career instead, his previous battlefield success having been on water. He decided to stick with the Army, however, welcoming a belated promotion, but still resigning in July 1777—which Congress refused to accept. Meanwhile, he proved his land-based command abilities at Ft. Edward and Ft. Stanwix, in New York, where he was initially subordinate to Gen. Phillip Schuyler, soon to be replaced by Gen. Horatio Gates, no fan of Arnold.

As the British force led by “Gentleman Johnny” Burgoyne timidly moved south toward Albany in September 1777, hoping to turn the Continental Army’s left flank, it approached the headquarters of Arnold and his commander, Gates, located a mile south. The sound of firing interrupted a meal Gates was hosting for his officers.

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When Arnold volunteered to check on the ruckus, Gates prophetically replied, “I am afraid to trust you, Arnold.” (161–62) In the ensuing battle, Arnold bravely but impetuously led a small force to attack a vulnerable Hessian outpost but was shot in the thigh—of the same leg he had originally injured at Quebec, a nagging, slow-healing injury that sapped him of his physical strength and mental health and, as Philbrick notes, likely hastened his volunteering as a British spy.

By the fall and winter of 1777, Congress—among others—was growing tired of the increasingly expensive, lethargic, and prolonged conflict with the former mother country. Although supplies were a serious problem for them, the British had occupied Philadelphia, compelling the Continental Army to spend a miserable winter at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Food was in short supply, and the war was increasingly being fought by immigrants, whom Philbrick defines in this context as “African Americans, Native Americans, or what one historian has called ‘free white men on the move’ . . .” (187) The few bright spots were the growing personal relationship between the young Marquis de Lafayette and “His Excellency” and the upturn in the morale of the Continental Army provided by Baron von Steuben, whom Philbrick describes as a “Prussian fraud” but a man who proved to be just what the Army needed.

In May 1778, the young United States received the best news—that France had recognized it diplomatically and was engaging militarily against the hated British in the New World, turning the Revolution into a world war. The British pulled back to New York, having to dispatch 5,000 troops to the Caribbean to fight the French there. The impressive French fleet attempted to engage the British off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, though only half-heartedly, missing two opportunities to close quarters with the Royal Navy. Meanwhile, Washington had appointed Arnold as military governor of Philadelphia, an egregiously poor choice for such a hot-tempered personality. More fatefully, in between discovering new quasi-legal ways of enriching himself in public office, Arnold was falling ever more deeply into love with Peggy Shippen, the daughter of a well-to-do Loyalist family, a woman whom Philbrick posits may have initially suggested his defection. Despite Arnold’s heavy burden of debt and his injured legs (the other appendage suffering from gout), the two wed on 8 April 1779. These circumstances—and the opportunity to turn over the critical fortress of West Point, New York,

to the British for cash—were congealing in Arnold’s mind as a rationale for what he was about to do. As Col. John Brown—a foe of Arnold’s since 1775 and the man who had charged him with various crimes and misdemeanors in a letter sent to Washington—had commented about Arnold in 1777, “Money is this man’s god, and to get enough of it, he would sacrifice his country.” (241)

To move along his defection, Arnold—displaying what Philbrick dubs “narcissistic arrogance”—was making arrangements with British captain John Andre, the handsome, well-read, close personal friend of the Shippen family. Arnold might have been powerfully distracted by his courtmartial in Middlebrook, New Jersey, to which Brown’s charges led, but the proceedings had been delayed by British movement toward West Point. In this fast-paced series of events Philbrick points out a characteristic of 18th century American life most readers forget—the absence of speedy communications during military operations.

By December 1779, the Continental Army was in winter quarters in Morristown, New Jersey, beset by 11-foot-high snowdrifts and record-setting cold. Starving and mutinous Connecticut regiments and the loss of Charleston, South Carolina, to the British only deepened the gloom. Arnold’s trial had resumed that month, with the summation in January 1780. Arnold defended himself against Brown’s charges, receiving only a reprimand—as Philbrick notes, Washington had a “blind spot” with regard to Arnold. Meanwhile, the return of Rochambeau with the French fleet and troops prompted British defensive preparations and Washington made plans to attack New York, to relieve pressure on his French ally. Washington envisioned Arnold’s commanding the left flank in this assault, but when General Clinton called off the British attack against Newport, Rhode Island, cancelling Washington’s attack, Arnold finally received command of West Point, the long-awaited critical development in his turn to the British.

In the final chapter of *Valiant Ambition*, Philbrick describes the undoing of both Andre and Arnold. Fearing a potential American cannonade, Andre chose to travel overland for his meeting with Arnold, but encountered three New York militiamen—whom Andre described as “American peasants”—dressed as Hessians who initially accepted Andre’s explanation—until they checked his boots, which contained incriminating documents, hasten-

ing his detention as a suspected spy. On 25 September 1780, Washington and Arnold learned, nearly simultaneously, of Andre's arrest. Upon hearing the news, Washington turned to Lafayette and asked, forlornly, "Whom can we trust now?" (371) Arnold fled to the British fleet, his faithful wife returning to her family in Philadelphia. However, she soon overstayed her welcome there and was reunited with her husband in New York; within a short time, she would be pregnant with their second child. Washington was planning to kidnap Arnold, but Clinton then moved his spy to Virginia. When the British general refused to trade for Arnold, Washington felt he had no choice but to approve Andre's execution as a spy, which took place on 2 October 1780.

In his epilogue, Philbrick focuses on the impact of these events upon the existence and health of the new United States. He notes that a hero alone—Washington—was not enough to unite the country, but hatred of the "despised villain Benedict Arnold" was closer to the mark. He powerfully posits that America's greatest danger was not the British, but rather "self-serving opportunism masquerading as patriotism," an ugly, but accurate truth, as events unfolded. (322)

Valiant Ambition is the 11th book by Philbrick, who specializes in early United States history, especially of the seafaring sort. He credits his mother, who had a lifelong fascination with Arnold, with the inspiration to write *Valiant Ambition*. He is clearly an accomplished writer, especially adept at using just the right word to not only convey the desired meaning but also to stick in a reader's mind. The volume is profusely illustrated, with complete photo captions that a reader will find satisfying. Especially laudatory is the extensive use of first-class maps, to which readers will often refer, and which stress the importance of waterway transportation in late 18th century America.

As compelling a page-turner as *Valiant Ambition* is, readers unfamiliar with nautical terminology are sometimes left befuddled by the terms Philbrick—who lives on Nantucket—uses, such as "leeward." (47) There is also the unwritten expectation that readers are old salts enough to know the difference between galleys, schooners, gunboats, and gondolas. (47) Furthermore, the narrative focuses heavily on battles, often described in minute detail, with one unfamiliar conflict blending into the others—a challenge for non-tactically oriented readers.

In recent years, more books have appeared on early American history, but the number focused on the personal and professional relationship between Washington and Arnold is more limited. Ron Chernow's magnum opus, *Washington: A Life* (Penguin, 2010), which won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for biography, devotes a number of its 928 pages to the subject, as does Kenneth Daigler's 2014 generic overview, *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War* (Georgetown University Press, 2014).^a However, Philbrick has little competition in describing the complex and often tortuous relationship between "His Excellency" and Benedict Arnold, whom CIA Chief Historian David Robarge has described as "the epitome of self-interested treason." Readers who peruse *Valiant Ambition* will find the compelling research and writing they have come to expect from Philbrick—not a surprise—while getting more comfortable inside the heads of the two major actors—which may indeed be a surprise.

a. Kenneth Daigler's book was reviewed for *Studies in Intelligence* by Hayden Peake in 2014 and by David Robarge in 2015: please see Hayden Peake, "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf," *Studies in Intelligence* 58, no. 4 (December 2014): 82–83 and David S. Robarge, *Studies in Intelligence* 59, no. 4 (December 2015): 61–64.



