



## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— MIDDLE AGES THROUGH 1799 —

### George Washington, Spymaster Extraordinaire

A Master of Intelligence,  
Counterintelligence, and Military Deception

by Gene Poteat

**A**t the time of the American Revolution, England was the world's strongest military and naval power. Yet it was soundly defeated by George Washington and his rag-tag army of colonial revolutionaries and patriots. How could this have happened? Surprisingly, the British provided the answer. Major George Beckwith, the head of British intelligence operations in the Colonies, upon returning to England in defeat, was quoted as saying, "Washington did not really outfight the British, he simply out-spied us!"<sup>1</sup> Beckwith had thus credited the winning of the war, and thus the creation of our new nation, to Washington's superior intelligence operations.



Lt. Col. Washington on horseback during the Battle of the Monongahela —  
Regnier 1834

Washington had learned a hard lesson when he was a 21-year-old adjutant under British General Edward Braddock during the French and Indian War. Braddock's forces were ambushed in the Monongahela Valley by the French and Indians and virtually annihilated. Washington escaped after his horse was shot out from under him. Braddock was mortally wounded, as were 615 of his officers and 914 soldiers. The French simply had an effective intelligence network and were aware of Braddock's every move well in advance. Washington would never forget this bitter lesson and never again be so surprised.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, Washington knew he needed eyes and ears inside British-occupied cities to spy out its secret plans, and one of his first orders of business was to create his secret intelligence service. His initial hasty attempts to place a spy inside New York would end in the death of his first spy, Nathan Hale, whom the British captured and left dangling from the gallows in his stockings for three days as a reminder and deterrent to other potential spies. The British, nonetheless, begrudgingly acknowledged Hale's now famous last words, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country."<sup>2</sup>

Washington would eventually succeed in establishing extremely effective spy networks inside New York. These kept him well informed, in advance, of the British military tactics, strategies, and plans. Washington established independent spy networks, each without knowledge of the other, a key commandment in the practice of the intelligence trade. His spies committed their identities to memory, using code numbers instead of names, passing encrypted messages, using invisible ink—all the while running the risk of capture and the gallows. Major Benjamin Talmadge, a classics scholar from Yale and a classmate of Nathan Hale, headed Washington's Culper Spy Ring. Washington was referred to only as Code 711. New York became 727, Long Island was 728. Talmadge would use the pseudonym John Bolton as well as the code number 721. The ring succeeded in preventing the British from interdicting the arrival and safe landing of the French

2. Hale probably never said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," which is a paraphrase of a line from Joseph Addison's play, *Cato*. According to the diary of Captain Frederick Macenzie, a British officer who witnessed the execution, Hale's last words were, "it is the duty of every good officer to obey any orders given him by his commander-in-chief." Patriot leaders used stories about his execution to make American angry about Britain's unfairness. At the time of Hale's death, the American army was doing poorly, and the patriots needed encouragement. Hale's example helped strengthen support for the cause of independence. <https://www.historycentral.com/Revolt/stories/hale.html>.

1. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/george-washington-spymaster/>.

fleet in 1778 with its seasick and vulnerable cargo of soldiers intent on helping the colonists.

One of the Culper Ring's most surprising and successful agents was known as Agent 355. Her true identity has remained a secret to this day. She is credited with having helped uncover Benedict Arnold's treachery in surrendering West Point and aiding in the capture of Major John André, the head of British intelligence in New York. Washington offered the British to trade André for the return of Arnold, but without success, so he reluctantly ordered André hanged, as had been Nathan Hale. The British would soon capture Agent 355 as the spy who must have compromised André. She was imprisoned onboard a ship where she would die from abuse, illness, and neglect.

The Mulligan Spy Ring included Hercules Mulligan, the Irish haberdasher to the British officer corps in New York; Mulligan's brother, Hugh, who ran a bank frequented by the British; and Haym Solomon, a Polish Jew who spoke several languages, including German. He became a translator for the British in passing orders to their Hessian troops. Thus, he was Washington's fox in the British hen house. Solomon, too zealous as a saboteur in the cause of freedom, would finally be caught, escape, and become better known historically as a financial supporter of the Revolution.

The true story of Washington's victory at Trenton against the Hessian mercenaries was another inside intelligence operation. Washington had a spy inside Trenton, John Honeyman, working undercover as a merchant selling beef to the Hessians. Honeyman provided Washington all the details about fortifications, weapons, stores, and the critical timing necessary for the swift victory, all without losing a man. The Trenton victory would be the morale booster that reignited the colonials' sagging trust in Washington's ability to engage successfully the superior, better-equipped, and better-trained British army.

During the dark days at Valley Forge (December 1777-June 1778), the British planned a surprise attack to wipe out the Old Fox, Washington, once and for all, and to bring the rebellion to a swift end. Washington was extremely vulnerable at this time, and his bedrag-

gled troops could easily have been defeated—except for his spy network inside British-occupied Philadelphia. Lydia Darrow, another of Washington's spies, eavesdropped on the British strategy session planning the attack, learning all the details. She then drove her wagon hard to warn Washington, claiming to be going to buy flour at Frankfort's Mill. Along their supposedly secret march to Valley Forge, the British troops were ambushed, sniped at, and harassed by Washington's troops. The British would later report that Washington did not seem a bit surprised at the attack.

As the war neared its conclusion, Washington's intelligence services were functioning like a well-oiled machine. His code breakers were intercepting and decoding the British fleet's codes. This permitted the French fleet to control the Chesapeake Bay and successfully keep British reinforcements from reaching General Cornwallis at Yorktown in the Fall of 1781.

Washington used his intelligence information effectively to know when conditions were favorable to stand and fight, and when it was more prudent to avoid a battle. He was, and remains, our nation's past master of intelligence, counterintelligence, and military deception. His words, written for his spies in 1777, are still valid and required reading at the CIA. "The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent & need not be further urged—all that remains for me to add, is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprizes of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated, however well planned & promising a favourable issue."<sup>3</sup> ✂

Gene Poteat, a career CIA Scientific Intelligence Officer, is AFIO's President Emeritus. His career included work with U-2 and SR-71 class of aircraft, and various space and naval reconnaissance systems. He served abroad in London, Scandinavia, the Middle East, and Asia.



Agent 355, as depicted in an 1863 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

3. ---, "George Washington, 1789-97, Portrait," at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/our-first-line-of-defense-presidential-reflections-on-us-intelligence/washington.html>.