

1999

Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered

Cole C. Kingseed

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kingseed, Cole C. (1999) "Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 1 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss1/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

But change was coming. In 1890 Rear Admiral Alfred Tirpitz took command of the Baltic station. Tirpitz saw that there was no connection between a shore-bound admiral's sparse operational plans (focused on fighting Russia, France, or both together) and the fleet's tactical abilities to carry out such plans. Tirpitz "argued that the best tactics were worthless if the captains and crews of the fleet could not execute simple maneuvers." Officers and crews had to be able to "operate individual ships competently, as a prerequisite to maneuvering with other ships in a squadron." (This new emphasis on shiphandling and tactics was to last; at Jutland in 1916 the High Seas Fleet demonstrated both fine individual ship skills and excellent large-formation tactics.)

Not because he was well liked, nor because he was a man of principle (he was neither), but because he was brighter and more forceful than any of the kaiser's other admirals, in 1897 Tirpitz became state secretary of the Imperial Navy Office and the most influential officer of his time. Sondhaus tells us that his political victories in the Reichstag in 1898 and 1900 "set Tirpitz on a course to become the most successful political figure in the history of the Second Reich, after Bismarck."

Adept as he was at both political and naval tactics, Tirpitz was not a strategist of any sort, diplomatic, military, or naval. But his vigorous activities in those lines pleased his emperor, the unsuitable Wilhelm II, and made the admiral world famous. As Sondhaus illustrates, Tirpitz's naval strategic thought was that of a child, his diplomatic strategic thought that of a

lunatic. Though it is just beyond the scope of this book, between them Tirpitz and the kaiser built in German shipyards, with German engines, armor, and weapons, a great fleet. They also created out of a once-friendly Great Britain an even greater enemy, an achievement that made their great fleet unemployable.

Sondhaus brings these people and events (most of them unknown in the United States) to our attention in this handy-sized book, a book written clearly, concisely, and interestingly. Moreover, he has made sure that his publisher provided both sufficient illustrations of the people, ships, and events of which he writes and enough maps of the areas that his readers will need to know. Together Sondhaus and the Naval Institute Press have given us an excellent book.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Martin, James Kirby. *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 1997. 540pp. \$34.95

No military officer has received such universal condemnation as Benedict Arnold, the Continental general who sought to deliver George Washington and Fortress West Point to the British in 1780. Arnold has attracted his share of biographers in recent years, including Clare Brandt (*The Man in the Mirror*) and Willard Sterne Randall (*Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor*). Adding his name to this list is James Kirby Martin,

160 Naval War College Review

a professor of history at the University of Houston and author of *A Respectable Army*, who succeeds admirably in presenting the most comprehensive view of his controversial subject.

Martin seeks not to remodel our perception of Arnold but to place Arnold in the context of historical realism, as part of his overall objective of reconsidering all the evidence and avoiding facile judgments. Too frequently, Martin posits, our perception of Arnold has been shaped by the retrospective prism of his treason. To comprehend Arnold more completely, the author reckons properly with Arnold's times. Arnold was hardly the only patriot who returned his allegiance to the crown, but the magnitude of his contributions to the revolutionary effort made his treason all the more reprehensible. What Martin does effectively is restore balance to our study of Arnold and explain Arnold's subsequent treason.

The beginning of Arnold is not 1780, the year of his treason, but 1741, that of his birth. Detailing his troubled childhood and his ascent to social and economic prominence as a New Haven merchant, Martin chronicles Arnold's emergence as the finest tactical commander in the Continental Army during the initial years of the Revolution. Along with Ethan Allen and his "Green Mountain boys," Arnold participated in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775 and later commanded a wing of the American army that invaded Canada. Though he was wounded in the unsuccessful assault on Quebec, Arnold returned to a hero's welcome.

Promoted to brigadier general, he enhanced his martial reputation by

destroying a British flotilla on Lake Champlain in 1776. Though denied a promotion that he felt he deserved, Arnold put personal bitterness aside to rout the right wing of "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne's army at the crucial battle of Saratoga. Had Arnold been among the slain at Saratoga, he would have been remembered as an American Hannibal. Instead, Martin's Arnold is an embittered officer, smarting from congressional bickering and favoritism that repeatedly led to promotion of officers far junior to him and far less conspicuous in battle.

It is with Saratoga that the reader begins to see the darker side of Arnold's character. By Arnold's standards Congress was corrupting the ideals of the Revolution, as evidenced not by his personal humiliation but the near deification of Horatio Gates as the "hero of Saratoga." Whereas Gates obtained a gold medal to commemorate the victory, Arnold sustained a debilitating wound that left him a cripple and "defamed his personal honor."

Arnold's post-Saratoga career validated his worst conceptions of the Continental Congress. By the spring of 1778, Arnold had evolved into a disenchanted patriot. Given command of Philadelphia after the British evacuation of the American capital in June, he again ran afoul of Congress when several delegates accused him of improprieties and demanded a court-martial. Though he was exonerated on all but two minor charges, Arnold's disillusionment was complete. In the eyes of this officer, who had put aside personal prosperity and family obligations to serve the Continental cause, Congress had abandoned its principles.

His final descent into treachery was problematic and needs little scrutiny here. Indeed Martin reserves but a few pages to address the actual betrayal at West Point. By 1780 the Revolution had reached its nadir, and Arnold himself had discarded its ideals. With his commitment to virtuous service completely eroded, he forsook the cause to which he had dedicated so much energy. Therein lies the true tragedy of Benedict Arnold.

COLE C. KINGSEED
Colonel, U.S. Army

Shenk, David. *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*. San Francisco, Calif.: Harper Edge, 1997. 250pp. \$24

For most of history, the quest for knowledge and its component, information, promised to improve the quality of people's lives. In this century many in the national security community have come to believe that more information will increase the quality of policy makers' decisions. But is information *power*? Shenk argues that technology has increased the amount of information available to such an extent that very little of it is of any use. Scholars, researchers, and decision makers can become stricken with "analysis paralysis"—either swamped in too much information that is of too little use, or forever waiting for the next piece of information to come in before taking action or making a decision. Shenk is not antitechnology but rather a technoskeptic: technology allows us to do what we do faster and in more abundance, but not always better. Technology does

not fix systemic organizational problems; applying it as a cure-all increases implementation costs and does not lead to solutions of management difficulties. Moreover, it is not a substitute for sound thinking and good policy.

For the first time in history, then, increasing the amount of information is not the automatic solution to a problem. While this book is written for a general, almost "pop," audience, it should be of interest to crisis decision makers and the intelligence community in particular. It is written in easy-to-understand, conversational language, which makes the author's points easy to generalize to other contexts.

What the book lacks, however, is a satisfactory suggestion for dealing with today's increase of information. The author suggests limiting our overload by decreasing our use of technology (the Internet, e-mail, faxes, etc.) to gather information, and increasing the amount of time set aside for reflection about a *reasonable* amount of data. This is a good start, but what is needed to deal with "data smog" is more rigorous thinking *about* the information and where a given piece of information "fits." In short, we need better theory and policy regarding what is being observed, sought, and so on. Pieces of information are like grains of sand—you should not need to see each grain to know that you are on a beach, and you should not need to see each grain to know that there will be high and low tides on that beach. We can know these things because we have a general theory of the sea. The result is the development of "rules of thumb," or shortcuts to information, which speed up its evaluation and interpretation and