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### Cover Page Footnote

This research would be impossible without the assistance of the amazing University of Puget Sound History Department and the Collins Memorial Library. The biggest thanks to my dear advisor and mentor Professor Benjamin Tromly and my thesis advisor Professor Douglas Sackman for encouraging me to take my love for history to another level and believing in me.

# The American Revolutionary Intelligence: The Culper Ring and The Notion of Liminality

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## **Abstract**

During the War for Independence, the American Commander in Chief, George Washington, relied heavily on a secret correspondence with his assets on the ground, both from members of his clandestine service and ordinary pro-American colonials, while commanding the Continental Army and deciding on his next move. Why did so many colonials betray their families, social status, religious values, or overlook their apparent differences, such as ethnicity, gender, or race, and risk being hanged to participate in something where the outcome was not certain? Could they have sensed that their moment in history was larger than they were and felt a premonition of the new country before it was born? By analyzing the operations of the most successful American Revolutionary intelligence ring, the Culper Ring, I provide answers to these questions. I conclude that spying not only provided colonials with a venue where they could freely express their dissent and fight oppressive policies incognito, but also allowed them to dissociate itself from the British politics, culture, and language, and come hand in hand with their fellow countrymen and test their “Americanness,” or rather whether they were worthy of being “initiated” into the American family. The notion of liminality was in the center of this process. Hopefully, this research will provide a foundation for future scholarship on the American Revolutionary Intelligence and invite scholars of espionage to investigate other areas of spycraft and not solely focus on techniques employed and other logistical questions.

*Keywords:* American Revolution, American Revolutionary Intelligence, George Washington, Culper Ring, Benjamin Tallmadge, Abraham Woodhull, Robert Townsend, Liminality

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## **Introduction**

Netflix lovers, like myself, probably have gotten in contact with fascinating historical drama, *Turn: Washington's Spies*, based on a remarkable historical monograph on the American Revolutionary War Intelligence written by Alexander Rose. The story features a New England farmer Abraham Woodhull and many other colonials who decided to risk everything they had in their life for a cause that was completely unknown to them and joined George Washington's secret organization, known as the Culper Ring, that undoubtedly helped Continental Army to secure a victory over such a powerful enemy as the mighty British Empire was. Throughout the series, viewers are allowed almost exclusive access to the world of colonial spies, techniques employed, and become active participants in intrigues such as the notorious Benedict Arnold and John Andre affair. Suddenly, almost exclusively political and military images of the Revolutionary war period, we all got to know during our early education, are supplemented with a new narrative, a story of ordinary colonials who never sought being remembered as heroes nor wanted to play a major role in the struggle against the British tyranny except get their own lives back into normalcy.

Since the show aired in 2014, there has been a surge of interest in studying the American Revolutionary Intelligence and the number of scholarly works were written. Today, there are dozens and dozens of monographs, and some articles, written on this topic that provide its

readers with factual data and descriptions of intelligence operations.<sup>1</sup> Scholars, including Alexander Rose, Kenneth A. Daigler, and John Nagy, provide admiring accounts of American spies, including Culper Ring, John Clark, and others, and explain in plain words their accomplishments for the American cause. But, focusing almost solely on techniques employed, the existing historiography on intelligence during the American Revolution frequently bypasses extensive analysis of spies' backgrounds, and espionage's connection with other revolutionary concepts such as liminality, ritual, identity, and broadly nationalism (*See* Rose; Daigler; Pennypacker; Halverson).<sup>2</sup> As Nagy has written in the introduction of his book, "Within these pages the tricks accomplished by those magicians known as spies who performed during the American Revolution will be revealed. This book will be concerned with clandestine operations conducted by spies and the craft they used to accomplish their missions" (xvi.). This (un)intentional ignorance of individual motivation and the impact of specific social and ideological developments on one's life undermines the significance of spies' actions and ultimately weakens the overall argument.

Why did so many colonials betray their families, social status, religious values, or overlook their apparent differences, such as ethnicity, gender, or race, and risk being hanged to participate in something where the outcome was not certain? Could they have sensed that their moment in history was larger than they were and felt a premonition of the new country before it was born? The conventional wisdom, and my previous research, suggests that the combination of ideology that emerged during the Revolution and individual experiences, grievances, and desires,

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the academic research on the American revolutionary intelligence is published in a book format, or as a part of a larger anthology on intelligence. The articles on this topic are usually more intended for popular use, published by popular history magazines such as *American History Illustrated* or *Mankind*, and provide more narrative of the revolutionary spycraft than argument and reliable assessment of primary materials.

<sup>2</sup> Whether due to the profitability of more "dynamic" works exploring intrigues, spying innovations, and spy craft in general or something else, the espionage historians often avoid getting involved into an extensive study of more "academic" issues.

induced colonials to join the cause and ultimately participate in the clandestine activity. While these answers help us explain why the Culper Ring was successful and what pushed civilians such as Abraham Woodhull, Robert Townsend, or Austin Roe to join the cause, they are not solely particular to the Revolutionary spies. In the long history of espionage, four traditional motives, known as ‘MICE’—money, ideology, compromise/coercion, and ego—have been the main factors that triggered clandestine activity and behind each of them was hiding the most crucial element: grievance (Hughes-Wilson 73). But, the espionage during the War for Independence was different than any other. It not only provided colonials with a venue where they could freely express their dissent and fight oppressive policies incognito, but also allowed them to dissociate themselves from the British politics, culture, and language, and come hand in hand with their fellow countrymen and test their “Americanness,” or rather whether they were worthy of being “initiated” into the American family. The notion of liminality was in the center of this process.

To understand this process, we first have to look at the notion of liminality and its resemblance to a development of nationalistic zeal leading to the War of Independence and, ultimately, sovereign American state. Then, drawing on a range of primary materials, including letters, personal memoirs, military journals, newspaper articles, like professional detectives, we look at each member of the Culper Ring to understand what might have motivated them to join Washington in a clandestine business and betray their allegiance to the British crown. I ultimately conclude that colonials utilized spying as a way of going through liminal rites, in other words, to cross lines and gradually erase their Britishness. This activity provided them with an

opportunity to experience what being an American entailed and to develop an appreciation of the still not born nation necessary to claim and acquire American identity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework: Nationalism and Emerging American Identity in The Revolutionary Period**

Unlike their European counterparts in the nineteenth century, the colonials did not possess cultural heritage, including language, religion, or literature, distinct from the sovereign authority they protested nor was their ethnic membership exceptional in any way from the British, except maybe in their belief of quasi-autonomy of the colonial settlements. Influential scholar of nationalism Benedict Anderson has argued, “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of immemorial past” (11). Although fabricated in the present, the British, for instance, contributed their ancient origin to their national institutions (Hattem 302). Austrians derived their warrants for European dominance from being successors of the Western Roman Empire. And, the nationalistic Serbs in the nineteenth century attempted to enter power politics by claiming to be the legitimate successor of the ancient world building on the ruins of the Eastern Roman Empire (*See* Garasanin 238-43). Without a similar notion of “deep history,” precisely inability to claim distinctively different tradition from the British one, the American colonials had to rely on civil and political assets, or rather a political will of its members, to create a nation and hold it together (Hattem 302-355). “As former colonial settler societies,” Don Doyle and Mario Pamplona have argued, “the new American nation-states had to stake their claim to

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<sup>3</sup> Although the story of how the Culper Ring was structured, what tools they used to accomplish their mission, and how they were able to trick the British resulting in recall of the fleet back to New York while the much needed French military support was arriving is interesting and remains unknown to the wider American public, for the present purposes, it is not necessary to ponder into these questions. If the reader wants to understand the structure of the Culper operations and logistics, s/he can look at Rose, Daigler, or Pennypacker.

independence on grievances and interests rather than on ethnonationalist ideas of primordial differences with the mother country or myths of some previous common history as a nation” (Doyle and Pampona 3; Hattem, 302). Indeed, if we closely look at the Declaration of Independence, Summary View of the Rights of British America, and any other letters circulating among colonials prior and during the conflict, for instance, we notice that there is no reference to history, or more precisely, in Anderson’s words, “immemorial past” (Hattem 302-3). Instead, they invoked progressive ideas of the Enlightenment, utilized rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and vivid personifications, and tried to appeal to the “Common sense” and the Western culture as a whole. As Bernard Bailyn has argued, the colonials “liked to display authorities for their arguments.... ‘Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Euripides, Herodotus... among the Greeks; Cicero, Horace, Vergil [sic] among the Romans’—all are cited in the Revolutionary literature; many are directly quoted” (23-4). Yet, when we probe deeper into rituals, literature, and even colonial actions, we realize how not only were the colonials “re-imagining,” or rather building from scratch a new nation on a political grounds, but they were systematically, bit by bit, creating the “deeper past.” Eventually, the indigenous roots of the continent and Christopher Columbus would become American “time immemorial,” as Michael Hattem has argued (302-355). But, to achieve that, the colonials first had to release themselves from their own old British roots.

From the beginning of the Anglo-American controversy, the colonials had seen the revolutionary developments as a passage toward a better society. As Bailyn has argued, “what was essentially involved in the American Revolution was not the disruption of society, with all the fear, despair, and hatred that that entails, but the realization, comprehension, and fulfillment, of the inheritance of liberty and of what was taken to be America’s destiny in the context of the



world history” (19). The old ideas of authority, both religious and political, customs, and generally *ancien regime*, gradually faded and almost became an antithesis to the American identity rooted in wilderness and purity (Bailyn 19-21).

Once the Parliament attempted to subdue the colonies under stricter control of the crown, Americans went out on the streets and protested newly imposed British policies. But, at the same time, stayed loyal to the British constitution and the sovereign authority. Surprisingly, Samuel Adams, a revolutionary who often has been remembered in the historiography as a “Lenin of the American Revolution,” acknowledged in his 1768 circular letter protesting the Townsend duties that “his Majesty’s high court of Parliament is the supreme legislative power over the whole empire” (“The Massachusetts Circular Letter to the Colonial Legislatures,” February 11, 1768). So, the colonials simply were demanding an equal application of the British constitution, a gem of Enlightened civilization to be precise, and elevation to full membership in the British society in conjunction with a sort of British recognition of the American exceptionalism, or rather a quasi-independent status. But, with British pride of the “immemorial past” and an unwillingness to accept anything less than unconditional acceptance of their primacy and authority in any of their realms, the colonials were left without a choice. They had to continue to march to government mansions, bang on the door and demand officials’ resignation, and hang effigies on the trees of those who did not comply.

By participating in these acts of civil disobedience, the colonials, however, gradually created a unity, a character, that helped them to overcome the difficulties of the present and deflect their attention toward the future. As critic Michael Bristol describes, “every festival reunites the individual with the collective. It reawakens and strengthens feelings of solidarity among persons who will actually benefit from it” (29). Just imagine listening and repeating “in

freedom we're born, and in freedom, we'll live, our purses are ready, steady, friends, steady, not as slaves, but as freeman our money will give" while marching on the streets against the notorious Townsend Acts (Dickinson). Or, expressing the words of famous female patriot Hannah Griffitts: "If the Sons (so degenerate) the Blessing despise, Let the Daughters of Liberty nobly arise" (Griffitts). But, most importantly, envision participating in the protest, for instance, in front of the house of Ebenezer Richardson, a well-known Bostonian informer for the Customs House, and seeing a British subject firing on a crowd and killing an innocent young boy Christopher Snider. And then participating in a massive funeral procession and seeing children carrying banners that read "innocence itself is nowhere safe" (Langguth 129-130)—and raising your glass during a toast while commemorating that infamous day one, two, three years later. In all of these acts, colonials were learning to see themselves as Americans and not solely as British subjects.

While participating in these rituals of celebration, the rioters often used a disguise, at least temporarily, to disassociate themselves from their British status, but also Whig, Tory, Protestant, Catholic, etc., and to fully immerse itself into a mass. In other words, they wanted to experience and perform two mutually exclusive societal roles of a gentleman and a loyal citizen, and an insurgent. As Harvard University professor Philip Deloria has described in his thought-provoking work *Playing Indian*, it was not a coincidence that the Tea Party members decided to disguise themselves as the Mohawk Indians while dumping British tea into the Boston harbor (6). The disguise allowed them to "cross lines" and to freely express their dissent without worrying about compromising their honor and the established cultural norms (34). Most importantly, as Deloria has noted, "Dressing as an Indian allowed these pretend Mohawks to translate texts, images, and ideologies into physical reality" (6). But it would be reckless to

argue that it provided them with a new identity completely (34-5). They remained attorneys, merchants, tradesmen, and farmers. Instead, it permitted them to enter into a state “betwixt and between’ the categories of social life,” where they were neither Indian nor the British but something else. Their identity suddenly became blurred (Bristol 29-30; Deloria 35). But this notion of being “neither here nor there” helped them to materialize their ideas and define themselves as something else than the British subjects. The anthropologists call this condition “liminality.”

In his influential work *Les Rites de Passage*, Belgian folklorist Arnold van Gennep argues that individuals are required to undergo rites of passage—that is, liminal rites—in order to change their position and cross into another (Bristol 29-30). There are three crucial parts of this process, as Michael Bristol summarizes it: “rites of passage...may be subdivided into rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation...Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation” (Bristol 29-30; Deloria 35).

Although the rites of divorce and unification are important, in the process of liminality, what really matters is the cathartic experience that occurs during the transition period. This stage facilitates the formation of a new identity while going through a series of preparatory rituals. In life, for instance, while husband and wife are awaiting the birth of their child, they gradually elevate their marriage to another level, both psychologically and physically. They no longer are united solely with the piece of paper. But also, with the child, their own blood. In the same light, by putting a disguise on, the colonials were, at least figuratively, “incorporating” themselves into a new community. They were materializing the “imagined community,” to use Anderson’s words, and developing their new identity before it was conceptualized, at least for a moment, on

July 4, 1776, and then officially with the Treaty of Paris and adoption of the Constitution of the United States.<sup>4</sup> And, once this process was concluded, the American intellectuals—including poets, dramatists and scientists—could start searching for historical claims for the independent United States and, in a way, reclaim the “deep history” lost during the British occupation (Hattem 303).

Overall, the American Revolution created an “imagined community,” both politically and culturally, with the limited territory and democratic government (Anderson). While indeed, the contemporary notion of American identity did not, nor could not exist, during early stages of the American nation-building, the foundation was the same. The “initiate” only had to commit itself to the political principles and ideals based on abstract concepts such as liberty, equality, and republicanism (Trautsch 289-312). National, linguistic, or ethnic background did not matter (although it gets complicated regarding who was a free and desirable person). Particularly, as Charles Royster has described in his work *A Revolutionary People at War*:

When revolutionaries talked about the meaning of being an American—a citizen of the independent United States—they demanded that character matches ideals. The test of patriotism bore some likeness to the test of evangelical conversion: one did not ask, ‘Was I born American? Or even, ‘Do I choose to be an American?’ but rather, ‘Am I worthy to be an American. (160)

Simply, anyone who was afraid or failed to support the American cause of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” was not worthy of becoming a member of the United States of America. But by entering the liminal space many of these colonials were able to mitigate a problem of fear of capture and treason, adopt the new identity, and determine whether they were indeed worthy

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is question of an ongoing debate, for the present purposes, I will assume that the rites of liminality ended with the adoption of the Bill or Rights in the 1790s. See Anderson and Bailyn.

to become Americans. With this view in mind, we turn our attention to the practice of spying and ask ourselves whether these liminal developments on the “macro” level could explain why some colonials opted to enter the “dirty business” of collecting intelligence and betraying their mother country.

### **The Motives for Spying: ‘MICE’ or ‘Am I worthy to be an American’?**

If we look at the literature on the history of intelligence and espionage, we will quickly realize that certain motives for spying appear over and over again (*See* Hughes-Wilson; Andrew; Cherkashin and Feifer; Richelson). Robert Hanssen betrayed the United States during the Cold War because he wanted to be even better than the notorious British traitor Kim Philby. Once captured, he infamously said: “What took you so long?” (Hughes-Wilson 110). On the other hand, Hanssen’s counterpart in CIA, Aldrich Ames, a man who “caused more damage to the national security than any other spy in the history of the [Central Intelligence],” as Colonel Hughes-Wilson put it, was pressured by his constant financial needs entered the Soviet Embassy and offered his service (274). Then, there was famous Soviet officer Penkovsky who joined the Americans and British because he disliked the direction the Soviet Union was heading under Khrushchev, ultimately saving the world from the nuclear war when he passed technical information about the Soviet missile sites in Cuba to President Kennedy. And the list goes on and on. But the bottom line is that throughout history, four powerful motives—money, ideology, coercion/compromise, and ego—induced men and women to betray their countries and embark on secret missions. Whether any of these factors was hidden behind Tallmadge’s, Woodhull’s, Townsend’s, and other Culper Ring members’ decision to spy remains to be solved. Like good detectives, before offering our judgment, we have to lay down the evidence and connect the dots. But we have to remain vigilant; maybe, it was none of these factors at all.

The case officer Benjamin Tallmadge—a man “well versed in Latin and Greek languages”—was a preacher’s son from Setauket who secured fast track entry to the Yale University, where he became well acquainted with his future brother in arms, and one of the most famous American spies and heroes, Nathan Hale (Tallmadge 8). Their relationship was frank and filled with the dedication to themselves and their native land. On one hand they were idealists, but on the other their love of discussion and learning—in addition to progressive and enlightened ideas—would prove to be unmatched and in turn, elevate them to a higher level during the time of Lexington and Concord (Rose 1-9). With the strong fraternal bond present between Hale and Tallmadge, there was nothing else left than to promise to each other, as Alexander Rose has argued, that “if anything malign ever happened to one, the other would be merciless toward his assailants” (6). But this zeal of radical patriotism, loyalty toward one another, was not out of ordinary for the Yale student body during the years leading to the Revolutionary developments. The university was a bastion of radicalism, or rather intellectual enlightened progressivism, and comradeship (Rose 6). Once the shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, many of the students, and alumni too, rushed to their houses, took muskets, and joined the cause. “I consider our country,” Tallmadge wrote to Hale in July 1775, “a land flowing as it were with milk & honey holding open her arms, & demanding assistance from all who can assist her in her sore distress...[we] all should be ready to step forth in the common cause” (As cited in Rose 7-8). Immediately following the official declaration of war, Hale officially declared allegiance to the American cause, leaving his friend Tallmadge alone to decide whether he was indeed willing to sacrifice his life for something that was still an “imagined” and potentially intangible endeavor. “While I was at Cambridge with my military friends,” Tallmadge narrated years later after the War for Independence, “I was continually importuned to think of the

oppression which was so abundantly exhibited by the British government towards the Colonies, until I finally became entirely devoted to the cause in which my country was compelled to engage” (Tallmadge 9). Although this strong patriotic sentiment exhibited at the beginning of Tallmadge’s career as a soldier in the Continental Army is sufficient to infer that ideology was the main reason why he joined the cause and became a spy, it was actually the death of his friend Hale on the British gallows that pushed him to fight harder and not be able to reject Washington’s offer to be, first, the deputy intelligence and then later the chief officer. “As we progressed on our way Tappan,” Tallmadge wrote in a letter to Colonel Samuel Webb describing his discussion with the captured British case officer John Andre after the infamous Benedict Arnold trajectory was discovered:

Andre was very inquisitive to know my Opinion as to result of his capture. [sic] I endeavored to evade the Question, unwilling to give him a true answer. When I could no longer evade this Importunity, I said to him that I had a much-loved Classmate in Yale College by the name of Nathan Hale [sic] said I, with Emphasis do you remember the sequel of this Story. (Tallmadge 120)

To revenge the death, and fulfill the promise, was indeed Tallmadge’s main motivator.

Caleb Brewster, on the other hand, was a man of adventure at home in the wilderness without whom letters from Abraham Woodhull and Robert Townsend would never reach the headquarters and the desk of the commander in chief. He, like Tallmadge, was a Setauket native who learned to be resilient and overcome any difficulties life can bring in a dark and cold environment of Greenland while working as a whale boatman before he joined the merchant crew (Rose 82-3). He initially exhibited his true colors when his fellow Setauket resident Salah Strong, husband of Anna Smith Strong, another member of the Culper Ring, was running for the

provincial Congress, followed by his decision to join the Patriots after the initial shots (Rose 83). Throughout the war, he would row across the sound regularly to pick up information from the Woodhull and Townsend without any cover and desire to pretend that he was someone other than Caleb Brewster, commoner without gentlemanly manners and not fearing anyone. Indeed, if we have to distill a sole reason, he decided to fight the British because of his desire for adventure and to serve alongside his friends and fellow colonials. If I have to summarize Brewster's creed in a couple of words, it would certainly be, "if not me, then who?"

Although Woodhull was not a professional warrior and clearly lacked the courage that both Tallmadge and Brewster possessed, he was a man devoted to a family farm and the elderly parents with the deep Setauket roots going back to the famous and influential mayor of that Long Island settlement Richard Woodhull (Rose 79). He joined, like many other colonials, local militia, when the conflict started in 1775 but realized that the professional service was not for him. He soon returned to his home, where he lived a modest and apolitical life while regularly engaging in the notorious London trade to sell his goods. In August 1776, his cousin, American General Nathan Woodhull, who famously refused to sign the New York's endorsement of the Declaration of Independence and was calling for reconciliation, was captured and wounded while overseeing the destruction of crops and other resources the British might need after they conquered Long Island. There are a couple of conflicting stories of this incident that historians have identified thus far. One was the fact that, as Rose observes, Woodhull was "wounded on the head with a cutlass, and had a bayonet thrust through his arm" because he did not want to give up his sidearm (Rose 85). The other one is that the British soldiers ordered Woodhull to say, "God save the King," which was basically swearing an oath to the King. But his response was "God save us all," and thus he provoked the British who hit him with the sword (Rose 85). No matter



how he was arrested, he was taken to the British boat prison, harassed, and died probably in grave pain, given the conditions on these notorious ships (Rose 85-7). This episode left a permanent mark on Abraham Woodhull's view of the British control of the American colonies and probably prompted him to join the American cause (Rose 84). As Rose has described, he, unlike Tallmadge and Brewster, did not see a loss in a conflict as a sacrifice for a greater good, or in St. Augustine's words, a "better state of peace." Rather, he saw it as a murder and a proof of British barbarism (Rose 84). In his letter to Tallmadge, dated April 10, 1779, certainly motives such as harassment, tyranny, murder, and so forth, are present:

I indeavour to collect and convey the most accurate and explicit intelligence that I possibly can; and hope it may be of some service to toward alleviating the misery of our distressed Country, nothing but that could have induced me to undertake it, for you must readily think it is a life of anxiety to be within (on a such a business) the lines of a cruel and mistrustful Enemy and that I most ardently wish and impatiently wait for their departure.  
(Woodhull to Tallmadge, April 10, 1779)

Thus, there is no doubt that the desire for revenge, or rather grievance, probably in conjunction with belief in the American cause, was the primary reason why he had decided to join Washington, and why indeed many were inspired by him to do the same. Robert Townsend was one of them.

Townsend was an extremely intriguing fellow. His life was interwoven with depression and contradictions. Rose assesses his seemingly contradictory position: "Half-Quaker, half-Episcopalian, partly secular, partly devout, somewhat idealistic, somewhat mercenary, Townsend was not wholly pacifist nor entirely. He was an American who refused to fire a musket for his country, a Loyalist who struggled against the British" (132). This duplicity was not accidental;

rather, it was a product of his own background. His father, Samuel Townsend, was often seen as an antithesis to Quakerism (Rose 134-6). He would get in trouble because he enjoyed luxury goods, like good shoe buckles or canes, and openly expressing his opinions. As Rose described, Samuel Townsend “resembled, in a way, a modern Jew who eats pork but strongly identifies with humanistic Judaism, or a secular Catholic who, much to his dismay, can’t help but perceive the world in terms of sin, confession, and good works” (136). Although he protested the imposition of the taxes on colonies from the moment the notorious Sugar and Stamp Acts were introduced, he mainly remained moderate during the conflict until the news of the incident at Lexington and Concord arrived. From then on, the older Townsend was openly supporting American Independence and participating in political shenanigans (139-43). Robert Townsend, similarly, accepted the offer to be provisions commissioner under Abraham Woodhull’s cousin, Nathan Woodhull, while retreating from Long Island (Pennypacker 13-4). But he was quickly captured by the British and forced to swear the oath to the King, likely avoiding harsher punishment because he was a Quaker. This incident forced him to keep his beliefs for himself and to devote time to a business career, particularly trading, with both Loyalists and Patriots. With this conflict between the “public” and “private” face, it was just a question of time until one had to win over others. But he would not have to wait for too long; the views that induced him to join the American Revolution in the first place were too powerful to be avoided.

The conventional wisdom attributes Townsend’s decision to fight for the American cause to influential American pamphleteer, a fellow Quaker, Thomas Paine, which is not surprising (Rose 155-58). By portraying the British King as a tyrant and the whole system of government as a corrupt, Paine did not only reaffirm the patriotic sentiment but was also able to convince the skeptics that the fight was just and requisite. “The sun never shined,” he wrote, “on a cause of

greater worth...every quiet method for peace hath been ineffectual...wherefore, since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake, let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats, under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child" (Paine 18-25). If these words were not enough to justify the patriotic demands as a defensive action against the tyranny undermining rights that every human being, including Quakers, cherished, then the Quaker's leadership response was the final nail in the coffin for many of the Friends. In their response to Paine's pamphlet, "It hath ever been our judgment and principle, [s]ince we were called to profess the Light of Christ Jesus, manife[s]ted in our consciousness unto this day, that the [s]etting up and putting down kings and governments, is God's peculiar prerogative; for causes best known to himself" ("The Ancient Testimony and The Principles of People called Quakers"). But, with the destruction of personal property and British draconian policies, including those of the notorious *Coercive Acts*, the Quakers could not deny that the Paine's call for insurrection was appropriate and certainly not contradictory to their religious principles. Ultimately, by seeing Colonel John Graves Simcoe quartering at his father's house and sexually harassing his sister, Paine's words reemerged in Townsend's mind and induced him to replace his politics of restraint with action.

As it seems, the ideology interwoven with personal grievances was the principle cause that drove the main members of the Culper Ring to join the American side, which is in accordance with the 'MICE' doctrine. But if we bluntly accept this inference, we would also equate Tallmadge, Brewster, Woodhull, Townsend, with Hanssen, Penkovsky, and, most importantly, traitor Benedict Arnold and his handler John Andre. The Culpers did not betray their country because they thought they deserved better, as Arnold or even Hanssen did, nor did they hold pride in their country's "immemorial past," and bright future, like Andre. They also

never requested compensation for their services, except reimbursement. And, contrary to France's greatest generals Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne, Viscount de Turenne, who once said, "when [spies] propose anything very material, secure their persons, or have in your possession their wives and children as hostages for their fidelity," (As cited in Nagy xii) the Culpers were trustworthy partners to Washington, without whom the patriotic dream was certainly less achievable.

In the environment thus where the local New York and Long Island population suffered "the needless annoyances, and saw their homes occupied by the British officers, some of whom had more than one residence," (Barck 88) spying became a performance of two distinct identities. Like the Boston residents "playing Indian" while dumping tea in the Boston harbor or elite wearing commoner clothes while protesting new taxation policies, the Culpers wanted to showcase their disappointment with the state of their "country," and legitimize their "Americanness" (Deloria 1-37). But, at the same time, they wished to remain lawful subjects or simply gentleman. While no one, except themselves, would know their alias—who Culper Sr. (Abraham Woodhull), Culper Jr. (Robert Townsend), John Bolton (Benjamin Tallmadge), and so forth, were—they never removed or even disguised their true identity completely. Abraham Woodhull, for instance, remained a farmer regardless of whether he was engaged in the collection or was plowing his field. Robert Townsend, similarly, remained in charge of his business endeavors, managing Oakman & Townsend, a supplier of the British military and civil authorities, and a coffee shop he had with the pro-Tory journalist James Rivington (Daigler 178).

On the other hand, they also did not remain fully themselves. Once Woodhull or Townsend returned back to their regular everyday routine, or rather "took off" the disguise, they knew that they were neither. They no longer were able to find joy in old everyday routine nor

were able to fully understand what a new “imagined” community was alike. To illustrate, in a letter dated April 21, 1779, to George Washington, Tallmadge explained while Woodhull was working on an intelligence report, two people unexpectedly stormed into his private room (Tallmadge to Washington, April 21, 1779). Not knowing who it was, Woodhull immediately destroyed the secret ink. Later on, he realized that “the guests” were local girls who just wanted to surprise him. Although it was highly unlikely that the ladies or even British officers quartered at the house knew that he was engaged in a clandestine business, Woodhull nevertheless could not be simply a farmer nor could he openly be an American. In a sense, both identities canceled out, and he was left somewhere in between. If the spying activity provided the Culpers with the avenue to, at least temporarily, forget their true identity and intuitively become Americans, it also provided them with a tool that gradually was removing their notion of, and relation to, the “Britishness.” This left them with a blurred image of themselves, or rather an ambiguous identity (*See Deloria 34-7*).

In any case, while being “betwixt and between,” the Culper Ring members, and many other colonial spies, were allowed, or rather acquired a kind of immunity, to participate in a “dirty business” of collecting intelligence, and were free to construct their own limits to and image of American identity.<sup>5</sup> Particularly, throughout their daily interactions, especially in their reports, they could have expressed their perceptions of American destiny. Abraham Woodhull, for instance, was never shy to express his idealistic views of the war. In a letter dated November 12, 1780, to Tallmadge, Woodhull said, “Depend my endeavours shall continue, as I hope never to lose sight of our cause, truly sensible our is all at stake” (As cited in Pennypacker 77).

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<sup>5</sup> As critic Michael Bristol has described, during the rite of passage, or rather liminality, the individual acquires “immunity for otherwise unlawful acts; [sic] an alibi and excuse,” and “[fulfills] wishes that ordinarily could not be satisfied,” in a way entering a state of utopia. *See* Bristol, 30.

Similarly, in a letter dated October 29, 1779, he expressed the following: “I most impatiently wait the arrival of the Count of DeEstang, and your operations, and as the season is so far advanced, I greatly fear nothing will be done, but am not altogether without hopes” (As cited in Pennypacker 36). Much more realistic Townsend expressed similar “patriotic” beliefs in his correspondence. But, most importantly, the intelligence writing provided the members of the Culper Ring with an ability to shape American strategy; they became active participants in the analysis and planning future moves. Indeed, the Commander in chief was the person who made the final decision and disliked it when his assets engaged in a long discussion, was certainly in some sense, influenced by their observations (Washington’s instructions for the Culpers, as cited in Pennypacker 20-22). Woodhull, for example, in his letter incorrectly dated June 31, 1779, advises, “You must keep a very good look out or your shores will be destroyed. It is a pity that a company could not be destroyed at Lloyd’s neck. Their refugee boats are continually coasting along and much endanger 40 [one of the post riders]” (As cited in Pennypacker 18). In a later dated, October 29, 1779, a similar sentiment is visible. “I cannot put up with a such a wanton waste of property,” Woodhull wrote, “I know they are enemy’s to our cause, but yet their property should not go amongst such villains. I beg you would exert yourself and bring them to justice” (As cited in Pennypacker 37). In a sense, by allowing them to express their views, the spying became a ritual for the Culpers, like the protests and commemorations for the colonials protesting British taxation policies, through which they solidified their loyalty to the American cause with each and every assignment or better report they wrote.

## **Conclusion**

The contributions of Woodhull, Townsend, Tallmadge, and many others, known and unknown members of the Culper Ring, in the fight against the British tyranny were immense.

But, unfortunately, unlike stories of heroism of American revolutionary generals and soldiers, their sacrifices, and even names, are not part of our American collective memory. These individuals gave all they possessed, including money, time, friendships, family, for something that was unknown to them, and never had asked for compensation nor recognition for their services. Men and women of the Culper Ring were ordinary patriots whose strength laid in their belief of American ideals and their desire to become an American. Their service amounted to a rite of passage. With each assignment, they erased part of their old British identity and developed an appreciation for a new country. Once they were deemed to be ready to be initiated into a new nationality, they exited their service as quietly as they entered it.

Indeed, the view of American Revolutionary intelligence presented in this paper is very progressive and might not be convincing for some given that it is extremely hard to know true motivations for spying the same as it is hard to procure any sources on intelligence operations and spy's personal observations. When I was collecting primary materials for my previous work on the American revolutionary intelligence, for instance, I was surprised when the archivist at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., told me that it would be extremely hard to find out what was the main reason besides ideology that induced the colonials to join Washington's clandestine service and remain there until the end of the War. And he was right. It was impossible to find any document or memoir stating explicitly that Woodhull, for example, betrayed the crown because he wanted to cross lines, become American, or simply wanted to avenge the death of his late cousin Nathaniel Woodhull. But, by analyzing in detail official correspondence and background of particular spies, we can construct theories and get a clearer picture of what was going on. And, I believe that notion of liminality is the best explanation for Culper Ring's clandestine activity.

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