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International Intrigue in the American Colonies

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1.1 Background

The intrigue that surrounds modern day grey zone activities, terrorism and even large scale wars, reminds us of the importance of intelligence. Despite advances in remote spy capabilities, the advantages and disadvantages of human gathered intelligence are as important as ever. In a country divided between Loyalists and Patriots, Subjects and Citizens, information is essential. But spying was then seen as a dishonourable business that only belonged to desperate and uneducated individuals, a gentleman could never be a spy. George Washington though proved to be visionary, his previous experience during the Franco - Indian war allowed him to understand the essentiality of intelligence, especially timely intelligence. The Culper Ring was established in 1778, created by the exceptional minds of Benjamin Tallmadge and George Washington. The six spies from Long Island proved to be an important addition to Washington's resources, with them Washington finally had eyes and ears inside the most important city of the United States. The Culper Ring's success was also built on previous experiences, both successful and unsuccessful. Nathan Hale's failed mission taught a lesson on discretion and preparation, while John Clark's Philadelphia spy ring was a successful example. The Culper Spy Ring was formed by six agents all from Long Island. Benjamin Tallmadge, code named John Bolton, was the head of intelligence and one of Washington's favourite men. Abraham Woodhull, also known as Culper Sr, was from Setauket and a friend of Tallmadge. Woodhull alongside Robert Townsend, Culper Jr, was Washington's most important source of information. Caleb Brewster, Anna Strong, and Austin Roe were the other members from Setauket who passed the various intelligence to Washington. The ring's exceptional system was also aided by various methods and techniques. These methods and techniques did not go lost in time after the Revolution. As a matter of fact the methods used by the Culper Ring became more refined during the centuries, during WW2 and the Cold War, invisible inks and ciphers were highly used by any nation. This intelligence organisation of the past is extremely relevant today as well, by understanding how intelligence shaped the outcome of the American Revolution it is possible to understand how to use intelligence better. Washington's use of intelligence can be a constant reminder of how nations use intelligence to defend their integrity and democracy, if used well intelligence can be more powerful than actual weapons. In this dissertation, I will analyse what makes a good or a bad spy by comparing Nathan Hale to other spies, not only from the Culper Ring. Then, I will analyse the various methods that made the Spy Ring successful. As well as the methods, the missions provide an example of how these

methods were put into motion. Finally, it is important to underline that the members of the Culper Ring were all humans with their relationships and personalities. Secret agents collaborate with one another, but like in normal life things don't always go well, and the same goes for the Culper Ring. The aim of this essay is to show how thanks to intelligence services/activities, Americans achieved their deserved independence.

1.2 Good Spy/Bad Spy

Intelligence during the American Revolution was extremely important, and George Washington was amongst who understood its usefulness. Washington's experience as a scout during the Franco - Indian war shaped his interest on espionage and intelligence tactics during the revolutionary war. It was during the fight for American freedom that Washington put into action his knowledge. As the British won New York in 1775, the Virginian General was hungry for information on the enemy. In order to satisfy this hunger, George Washington and Major Benjamin Tallmadge established the Culper Spy Ring. The Long Island spy ring allowed the General to have eyes and ears inside the occupied New York. Culper Senior and Junior, alongside the other members of the ring, succeeded in making America independent through espionage. With them Washington was finally able to put in action his plan for the liberty of the country. These secret agents risked their lives but in many ways were luckier than the ones that came before them, for example Nathan Hale. But Washington also learned from other successful missions, like the Clark's spy ring in Philadelphia. By learning from past mistakes, Washington's agents succeeded. Without any doubt, the Culper Ring was a success, and its structured system was one of the many reasons. But before analysing the methods and mission of the Revolutionary spy network, it is important to underline the differences between a successful and an unsuccessful spy, and also the difference between a well devised plan and a chaotic one. The comparison between 1776 espionage and nowadays secret services is obviously impossible. Today's agents are well trained, most of them studied in prestigious universities and received years of training before actually taking part in operations. The operations in which these agents take part are studied in every single detail and the spy knows exactly what to do and when he/she has to do it. During the American Revolution, as previously said, spying was seen as dishonourable. Being a secret agent was something to be ashamed of, something that was relegated to the lower classes or to desperate individuals. Because of the stigma that espionage brought within itself, there was no training or explanation on how to conduct an operation even though many officers and congressmen agreed on the importance of

gathering intelligence from the enemy. Few understood how much intelligence mattered, but most of the time their lack of experience made them act chaotically. Benjamin Tallmadge was an excellent Spymaster thanks to Washington's guide, but also because he had the support of men like Nathaniel Sackett and Lieutenant Clark, both of them able spymasters and agents. The case was different with Knowlton and Hale. In the previous chapter, Hale's mission was described as doomed from the beginning for a variety of reasons; the operation was poorly planned, badly executed, and the agent was not protected. Amongst the reasons, the most important is that a successful mission doesn't come only from the agent's abilities but it is the planning behind it that does all the work. In this case it is important to ask, who was behind the plan? The planning obviously did not come from Hale, who must have been asked basic questions related to how he wanted to present himself. Knowlton for its part was merely following Washington's instructions to find an agent to send behind the British's lines, and was not given any other direct instruction. If the aim is to find the one responsible then one must point to the Virginian veteran¹. Washington did not plan the operation meticulously and did not take any responsibility in planning it. What the General needed was information and he did not have much time to think about how to get it. An important consideration to add, is that the occupation of New York represented Washington's lowest point in the conflict; the army's morale was not the best and the evacuation of New York was so hasty that there was no time to plan. Low morale or not, what is evident is that the plan can nowadays be used as a "What not to do list". The organisation of the mission presented gravios breaches of operational security; the first mistake was discussing the operation in public². Asking for volunteer spies out loud could have ended the mission long before Hale's arrival in the city³, this because Knowlton did not think about the possibility of undercover British agents within his soldiers. The use of double agents was common on both American and British sides. It is shocking that despite Knowlton's abilities as a scout and tactician, he did not take in consideration basic security measures. After choosing an agent, Knowlton should have given him a secret identity and explained how he had to behave in the city. A secret identity could have protected the agent and the commander of the operation⁴. It is important to add that a secret identity would have

¹ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.162., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

² K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.149-150., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

³ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.151-152., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

⁴ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.151-153., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

protected Hale against his own cousin who lived in the city and knew about Nathan's involvement in the Continental Army⁵. In addition, The agent should have been provided with a believable cover, he posed as a school teacher but roamed around camps and fortifications, making his cover not convincing. Spies like Mulligan and Townsend were so successful because of their ability to mix up with all the other Tory citizens without raising any suspicion. To the eyes of the British, they were simple workers who were loyal to the King. Furthermore, unlike Clark in Setauket, Hale did not have a safe house where to go in the city and was left completely to himself. Besides, the success of the Culper Ring resided in the perfectly tailored system that they had, every agent had a specific duty and was aware of who was doing what. Another example can be seen with Clark's network in Philadelphia, so efficient that the names of the agents remain unknown. Clark and his agents knew what they had to do and had specific instructions, fake identities, and collection points. The Connecticut soldier did not have specific instructions and he had no one inside the city. The various agents of the Culper Ring were also chosen in regards to their personality and attitude, something that did not happen with Hale. Nathan Hale was not the right man to send in incognito. Too friendly and talkative, he wasn't able to keep the mission to himself and confided it in Hull. Common sense was shown by Hull⁶, who advised his friend against this mission. Hale, like many other young gentlemen, knew nothing about spying, and broke many important rules that are known to many spies. There are some important rules⁷ that a successful spy must follow, alongside innate qualities that make the agent perfect.

- 1) **“Ability to deceit”** is something that the young spy did not possess. In his memoirs, William Hull describes his friend as an unfortunate choice for that type of mission, too frank, unable to lie and hold a secret, Hale was also extremely naive. All these aspects of Hale's character shows that he was indeed the wrong choice, even though He believed himself able to carry out such an operation. Different was the case of the Culper Ring. By using her reputation as a woman and his status of slave, Anna Strong and James Armistead were both successful in deceiving British officers. Anna Strong

⁵ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.152, Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

⁶ G.D. Seymour, (1941). “Documentary life of Nathan Hale. Comprising all available and official documents bearing on the life of the Patriot”. 2013 edition. Literary Licensing.

⁷ J. L. Smith Jr (2015). “9 rules of spying that Nathan Hale failed to follow”. *Journal of the American Revolution*. https://allthingsliberty.com/2015/05/9-rules-of-spying-that-nathan-hale-failed-to-follow/#_ednref3

fooled the officers living in her house through acting like a naive woman with no thoughts on the revolution. Armistead's deceit was admirable, he tricked the enemy through his status of an oppressed man and was able to use the tragedy of slavery on his side.

- 2) The Book cites another quality rather than a rule, **“Ability to Blend in.”** Blending in was certainly not something that the Connecticut soldier was able to do. He drew attention everywhere he went through his nosy behaviour and his appearance. Even though he was posing as a schoolteacher, he certainly did not look the part. The scar on his face, his height and physical structure were enough to describe him as a military man rather than a school master. Hercules Mulligan and Robert Townsend were exceptional at blending in. Mulligan's job as a tailor allowed him to be around many British senior officers and took information from them without being caught. His ability to blend in with the officers and their ideals helped his success. Culper Jr on the other hand took advantage of his status as a peaceful Quaker who only advocated for his job and his activity. He blended in with other Quakers who did not want to associate themselves with the Revolution. His discretion allowed him to be an indispensable spy.
- 3) **“Use of forged documents is recommended”.** A fake identity can save a spy's life especially with the help of forged documents. While crafting the doomed plan, Nathan Hale decided to retain his school diploma with his name on it in order to excuse why he was looking for a job as a teacher. Alongside his diploma, the 21 years old also had papers signed by Washington that gave him up to the British. Hale's best friend from Yale, Benjamin Tallmadge understood the importance of forged identities and gave the Culper Ring's members code names, for example Tallmadge became John Bolton and Abraham Woodhull Samuel Culper⁸.
- 4) The fourth rule is extremely important to follow, because it reminds agents of the reason why they must be careful. **“Remember that you are inside the enemy's territory”.** The notion of being inside the lion's den must not be taken lightly, carefulness will secure the safety of the operation, operator and organiser. The amateur spy committed the mistake of moving around suspiciously, he asked many questions regarding the sympathies of New Yorkers for the American cause and did not take in consideration that he was inside loyalist territory. Tories around the city must have been alarmed by a schoolteacher asking so many unusual questions. Perhaps thanks to his taciturn and

⁸ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.75, Bantam Dell, New York.

introverted nature, Robert Townsend was always aware of where he was and never asked uneasy questions related to the rebels.

- 5) Many times an operation can be too much to handle, hence it is fundamental to “**Know when to get out.**” There are a lot of things that can go wrong in action, but it is never too late to withdraw. The martyr’s mission coincided with the great fire of 1776, an event that surely alerted British authorities and increased their presence in different areas of the city. The authorities were looking for an arsonist and the critical situation was not good for the operation. In this case, the young soldier should have understood that it was time for him to go back to American lines. The same situation happened between Townsend and Mulligan. The tailor was held by Arnold for questions, and an afraid Townsend decided to step back for a while in order not to raise any other suspicion⁹.
- 6) As it has been analysed before, the American Revolution put an end to many friendships and good family relations. Enemies were in every corner and especially for a rebel and a spy, it was important to remember that “**no one is your friend.**” When Robert Rogers showed himself at the inn offering his friendship and help, the agent should have recognised the red flags. People like Rogers who appeared over friendly and over sharing were the ones from which a spy had to stay away. Robert Rogers’ abilities as a covert agent are indeed worth praising, he was able to lure the naive boy into his web and use his friendliness against him. Hale, on the other hand, lowered too much his guard, he was glad to have found a fellow comrade that he could trust. His inability to analyse Rogers’ suspicious behaviour led the poor boy to an early grave. Washington specified the importance of not trusting anyone to the two Culpers in the memorandum about their responsibilities. According to the General, they were not allowed to talk about the mission with people outside the Ring¹⁰.
- 7) An agent must be careful and it is important to acquire knowledge on the enemy’s soft spots, but what is even more important for the spy is the ability to “**beware of its own weak points.**” As humans, in almost every situation even when spying is not involved, we tend to concentrate on our stronger points and forget to realise what are our weakest ones. In Hale’s case, the spy was completely unaware of his soft spots. If he realised he was too talkative and with a tendency to over share, he might have survived the mission

⁹ A. Rose, (2006), Washington’s spies. The story of America’s first Spy Ring. P.226-227, Bantam Dell, New York.

¹⁰ A. Rose, (2006), Washington’s spies. The story of America’s first Spy Ring. P.177, Bantam Dell, New York.

instead of becoming a martyred spy. Another important soft spot that Hale did not think about, was his liking of alcohol despite being a pious man. Too much alcohol might have dulled his senses, allowing him to overshare sensible details. While on his collecting mission in the Seven Years' War, Washington discussed the importance of remaining sober during a mission without raising suspicions¹¹. Maybe Washington should have shared his acquired wisdom with Nathan Hale before sending him on his mission.

- 8) Once the evidence has been collected, it doesn't mean that the operation is over and that the spy can relax or lay down its guard. This phase is highly delicate since the agent now must **"take care of the evidence."** The information collected is essential if the aim is to achieve a successful mission, henceforth if the smallest piece of data is taken by the enemy then the entirety of the mission is compromised. By showing his notes to Rogers, Hale jeopardised the mission, putting in danger not only himself but also his fellow revolutionaries. Unlike Hale the members of the Culper Ring were always concerned about the safety of the evidence and did their best to protect it, by using an invisible ink and other tricks.

By this analysis it has been proved why the Hale's operation was a fiasco and turned a young, inexperienced man into a martyr. These mistakes were not only Hale's fault, but also his Commander's; he was supposed to be informed on how to behave in action instead of being sent around with no instructions. The situation in New York changing quickly can be addressed as a major fault, alongside Washington's anxiety to evacuate the city as soon as possible. There was no time to plot an intricate spying plan, the Commander in Chief needed an agent just before leaving the city. What is certain, is that the main difference between 1776 and 1778 was organisation. The Culper Ring was perfectly tailored, the intelligence was timely, and the agents were more efficient through the network of information. If only Hale had other agents to rely on, the outcome could have been different. Through their abilities, personalities, methods, and organisation, the other spies reached 1783 alive. What made the Culper Ring successful, apart from timeliness and efficiency, were the methods employed in their many missions.

¹¹ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, P.27, Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

1.3 Coded Names and Invisible Letters.

One year after its establishment, in 1779, the American network of intelligence was already fighting its battles in the shadows. Tallmadge and Washington's ability to master the Ring and guide it was formidable and through time their craft increased. With its system of delivery, Culper Sr and Jr provided useful information to the American General. One problem that made the two SpyMasters itch, was that if the spies were discovered or their documents lost, the enemy would have known every single detail. Solutions came with time and developed alongside the growing channel of agents. To deliver their information, the spies used many methods, some of them arrived directly from headquarters. Invisible Inks, Coded Books, Propaganda, and Newspapers were all used to deliver messages. These various techniques came from Europe and America as well and allowed the Culper Ring to work with more security, even if stopped by British officers they could hide their operation under their noses.

The Invisible Ink

In our day invisible ink is pretty common, in fact at the beginning of the new century this type of ink was even used for children's toys. Every shop in the world sells pens with invisible ink that can be detected through a special light. During the Cold War and WW2, invisible ink was used to hide important messages related to the enemy. This ink, rather than invented, was perfected during the last century. The story of the mysterious ink is as old as time goes on; it can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome. The period in which the ink was used the most was the American Revolution, when it was used by agents to pass information without being caught. The introduction of the ink was revolutionary especially for the Culper Ring in its missions. The first time the ink was recommended to Washington was in 1778 when the Culper Ring was already in action. To inform Washington about such an important creation, was the future co-author of the Federalist Papers and President of the Continental Congress John Jay¹². In November 1778, Jay confided in Washington that his brother Sir James, a Physician, had invented a special ink that was able to disappear. The invention failed many times before succeeding and for this, Jay asked Washington to be extremely secretive about the ink. Sir James¹³ resided in England and was knighted by King George III, Jay at times acted as a spy and sent information to his brother in the Colonies. The mixture reached Washington in the

¹² A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.107, Bantam Dell, New York.

¹³ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.107, Bantam Dell, New York.

Spring of 1779 and Sir James instructed the Americans how to use it. The agent had to write on a white paper and then apply the fluid on the letter, by doing this the ink would become invisible. To retrieve the message, what was needed was a different chemical liquid that revealed the hidden words¹⁴. Sir James' invisible ink was revolutionary for the time because of its ingredients. In the 18th century, invisible inks were not used because of the lengthy and difficult chemical process, these primitive inks were made of cabbage or lime juice and to develop them the recipient had to use an iron on the letter to heat it. This process was expensive and dangerous since it required a lot of time¹⁵. The ink of the Revolution was quite different because it was easier to use, was impervious to heat, and impressed Washington who was constantly looking for timely options. Carrying out a deep research on the materials used in the Culper Ring letters is not possible since the letters could be damaged, but through Washington's advice to the Culper Ring and other evidence, understanding how the ink was produced can be discovered. Washington advised his agents to write only on white new paper and to avoid using cheap ones since the ink had better results on a new paper¹⁶.

"I mean that he should occasionally write his information on the blank leaves of a pamphlet—on the first second &c. pages of a common pocket book—on the blank leaves at each end of registers for the year—almanacks, or any new publication—or book of small value. He should be determined in the choice of these books, principally by the goodness of the blank paper as the ink is not easily legible unless it is on paper of a good quality".

The second advice issued by the General, was to wet the paper with a fine and delicate brush that could avoid any damages. Through these clues and further research on Sir James Jay's studies on the fluid, it is possible to understand how Jay's formula was created. The Agent consisted of a mix of tannic acid and powdered acacia, and this mix would have created the ink itself. The reagent instead was made of ferrous sulfate and distilled water¹⁷. Once the ink was

¹⁴ George Washington's Mount Vernon. "Spy Techniques of the Revolutionary War".

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/spy-techniques-of-the-revolutionary-war/>

¹⁵ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.108-109, Bantam Dell, New York.

¹⁶ Letter from Tallmadge to Washington, December 11th 1778.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0308>

¹⁷ George Washington's Mount Vernon. Spy techniques of the revolutionary war

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/spy-techniques-of-the-revolutionary->

ready to use, the Culper Ring began to store it in Setauket under the guard of a merchant named Lewis Pintard. The latter was asked to work as a spy for Washington, since he was so close to the enemy, but the merchant refused since the request was too dangerous.

The ink proved to be an exceptional resource for the spies but because of how scarce it was, members of the Culper Ring were afraid of abusing it. Woodhull was so afraid of running out of it that began to store it instead of using it, enraging the General. In a letter dated 5 February 1780, Washington expressed his annoyance towards Culper Sr to Tallmadge¹⁸,

“The stain in the small Phial is more than half I have—I wish C— would use it carefully what I have sent for him at different times would have wrote fifty times what I have recd from him”.

The fluid was usually used between the lines of casual letters, in any type of book and newspaper. Using a common book or newspaper was a better choice than a letter, the ink placed at the extremities of the book or on the entry of a newspaper was not as suspicious as a letter.

“He may write a familiar letter on domestic affairs, or on some little matters of business to his friend at Satuket or elsewhere, interlining with the stain his secret intelligence, or writing it on the opposite blank side of the letter. But that his friend may know how to distinguish these from letters addressed solely to himself—he may always leave such as contain secret information without a date or place (dating it with the stain); or fold them up in a particular manner, which may be concerted between the parties. This last appears to be the best mark of the two, and may be the signal for their being designed for me.

The first mentioned mode however, or that of the books, appears to me the one least liable to detection¹⁹”

Agents were always warned to use it for critical messages that could have altered the course of a campaign or battle. It had to be the last resource in case of highest necessity.

[war/#:~:text=During%20the%20Revolutionary%20War%20invisible,heat%20or%20a%20chemical%20substance.](#)

¹⁸ Letter from Washington to Tallmadge, February 5th 1780.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-24-02-0308>

¹⁹ Letter from Washington to Tallmadge, 24th September 1779.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0414>

The ink was in fact treated as the most precious resource not only by the Americans, but also by the British who used it a lot in their correspondences. Furthermore, it wasn't only difficult to find the ingredients, but buying a great amount of them would have been suspicious. The ink was nicknamed "stain" or "medicine" by Washington and his agents to hide the real identity of the fluid. Because of its preciousness, the stain was a luxury that could not always be used. Despite its usefulness, because of all the reasons aforementioned, the ink wasn't the only method used by the spies, the Culper Ring needed another way to communicate in secret, code names were what the American Spy Ring needed.

711 and 722.

In our modern imagination, coded names are strictly linked to famous blockbusters like James Bond and other action films, where spies have unforgettable names and fake identities. Coded names are not at all fictitious, actual spies use them to safeguard themselves during operations. During the American conflict for independence, code names were used to describe not only spies but also places and other important key words.

Since the ink was too expensive and difficult to find, Tallmadge had to work on other methods to ensure the safety of the Culper Ring and its success. The Spymaster lacked experience and knowledge to be able to create a code book from scratch, so he had to rely on code makers of the past.

Coding was highly used in Europe by professional foreign ministers, who sent secret information to their sovereigns by using secret names and numbers to hide crucial information. Diplomats, as stated in the first chapter, could be able and successful spies. For his Code Book, Tallmadge was inspired by the Ave Maria cipher written by Johannes Trithemius²⁰, author of the "*Polygraphiae*" written in 1518. The Code was a table that paired the 24 plaintext letters of the alphabet with various nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The sender had to replace these corresponding words for every letter of the plaintext message to form a prayer²¹. This code was indeed useful but extremely laborious and hard to use, and for this reason it wasn't the only example used by Tallmadge.

²⁰ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.114, Bantam Dell, New York.

²¹ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.114, Bantam Dell, New York.

An important figure in coding during the American Revolution was Charles Willim Frederic Dumas, who was a firm believer in the American Revolution, Dumas was in Holland and corresponded with Franklin. Dumas established a new cipher in which any letter in the passage had a number assigned to it from 1 to 682, in this way a single letter can be enciphered in as many ways as the letter is in the text. The Code was extremely hard to decipher and it proved to be difficult to decode for the Continental Congress as well²². Tallmadge, by using these excellent examples, was able to create an easier code for the Culper Ring. The Code used by Washington's spies wasn't intricate and hard to understand, Tallmadge devised a simple code that his agents could understand and learn how to use in a little amount of time.

Creating the Culper Code was a hard task, but the spies were already using a sort of Code before the Code book was established where the number 10 represented New York, 20 Setauket, 30 and 40 the two raiders including Austin Roe.

Tallmadge on the other hand, used Entick's Spelling Dictionary as a source for his Cipher. His inspiration also came from the beloved French General Lafayette, who had a knowledge of cryptography and codes.

The code was made of 673 numbers, each number representing a name, place or word that was put in the left column in alphabetical order. All the members of the Culper Ring knew each other's code and communicated between them through it. Washington was 711, Tallmadge/John Bolton was 721, CulperSr or Samuel Culper was 722, Culper Jr was 723, Roe 724. In the names, The agents and allies were not the only ones included in Tallmadge's book, General Clinton was referred to as 712. New York was 727. Long Island 728, and Setauket 729. The only member of the network that didn't want to use a coded name was Caleb Brewster, who was given only a number, 725²³.

The code's missing words and digits were signalled with bare-bone and mixed-alphabet schemes. The digits in the code had a double line under them to avoid confusion with the enciphered ones. Words in past and future tense were signed with a small squiggle that was left above the number.

Although Tallmadge was ingenious in the creation of his code, the cipher was far from perfect. The numbers instead of being randomised, were all in alphabetical order. This represented a great weakness for the book that could have been easily deciphered by a Black Chamber

²² A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP.117-118, Bantam Dell, New York.

²³ George Washington's Mount Vernon, The Culper Code Book. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book/#->

expert²⁴. Tallmadge committed another error while drafting the code, many important words that were essential in that situation were missing. In the Culper Book the word “officer” doesn’t appear, and it is puzzling how such an important word wasn’t used in the Spy book.

Furthermore, the agents were difficult to train on how to use the code and this lack of training resulted in confusion and mistakes. For example, soon after the introduction of the book, Culper Jr committed the error of coding common words like “the”, “of”, and “with” but remained crucial words like “intelligence” and “army” uncoded and readable. These mistakes could have given out the entirety of a mission and endangered the agents. Thankfully, after using the code book many times, the Culper Spies learned how to use it and were careful not to repeat the same mistakes.

Even though the book had its weak spots, it was useful and served the agents in their missions, it allowed them to trick an ordinary reader as well as a simple soldier who did not know how to decipher. The book was an important addition that gave the Setauket spies more professionalism and discipline, the code was what made them different to the other spy networks.

Culper Jr coded letter to Tallmadge and Washington²⁵: *“Sorry 626.280 cannot give 707 an exact account 431.625 situation. 431.625.635.707.373. Think 626.280.49 not taken sufficient pains 634.442.284. I assure 707.626.280.240.190.284. More 146 than 280 expected. It is 282 some measure owing 683,379.414 having got 287.1.573 line 431.216 intelligence. To depend 668.80 reports 683.183-1537.5 conversed 680 two qjcgilw 431 different 76 from 730 from 419.431 which 280 could 442.2 account 431.625 situation 431.625. Army 630. I was afraid 430 being too 526”*

The Deciphered message: *“Sorry that I cannot give you an exact account of the situation of the troops. You may think that I have not taken sufficient pains to obtain it. I assure you that I have, and find it more difficult than expected. It is in some measure owing to my not having got into a regular line of getting intelligence. To depend upon common reports would not do. I saw and conversed with two officers of different corps from Kings-bridge from neither of whom I could obtain an account of the situation of the army there. I was afraid of being too particular”.*

²⁴ A. Rose, (2006), Washington’s spies. The story of America’s first Spy Ring. P.123, Bantam Dell, New York.

²⁵ A. Rose, (2006), Washington’s spies. The story of America’s first Spy Ring. PP.122-123, Bantam Dell, New York.

A different example can be seen by a coded letter written by Culper Sr to John Bolton(Tallmadge), where he communicates the destruction of a letter by a second messenger, Jonas Hawkins, who had been briefly captured by the British²⁶.

“Sir, Dqpeu Beyocpu (Hawkins) agreeable to 28 met 723 (Culper Jr) not far from 727 (New York) and received a 356(Letter), but on his return was under the necessity to destroy the same, or be detected, but have the satisfaction to inform you that there's nothing 317 (important) to 15 (advise) you of.”

As it is possible to notice, the coded words were far too easy to understand and in enemy hands would have compromised the safety of Culper Jr and other spies around the city. Culper Sr was instead more able in using the code, and coded only the most important elements like the identity of the spy.

Code and Ink, were only the most resourceful and creative techniques implemented by Culper Sr and the others, many other methods were older but effective, Propaganda for example was a powerful tool to use against the British.

²⁶ Deciphered letter from Samuel Culper Sr to Tallmadge. 15th of August 1779. Founders Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-22-02-0039-0002>

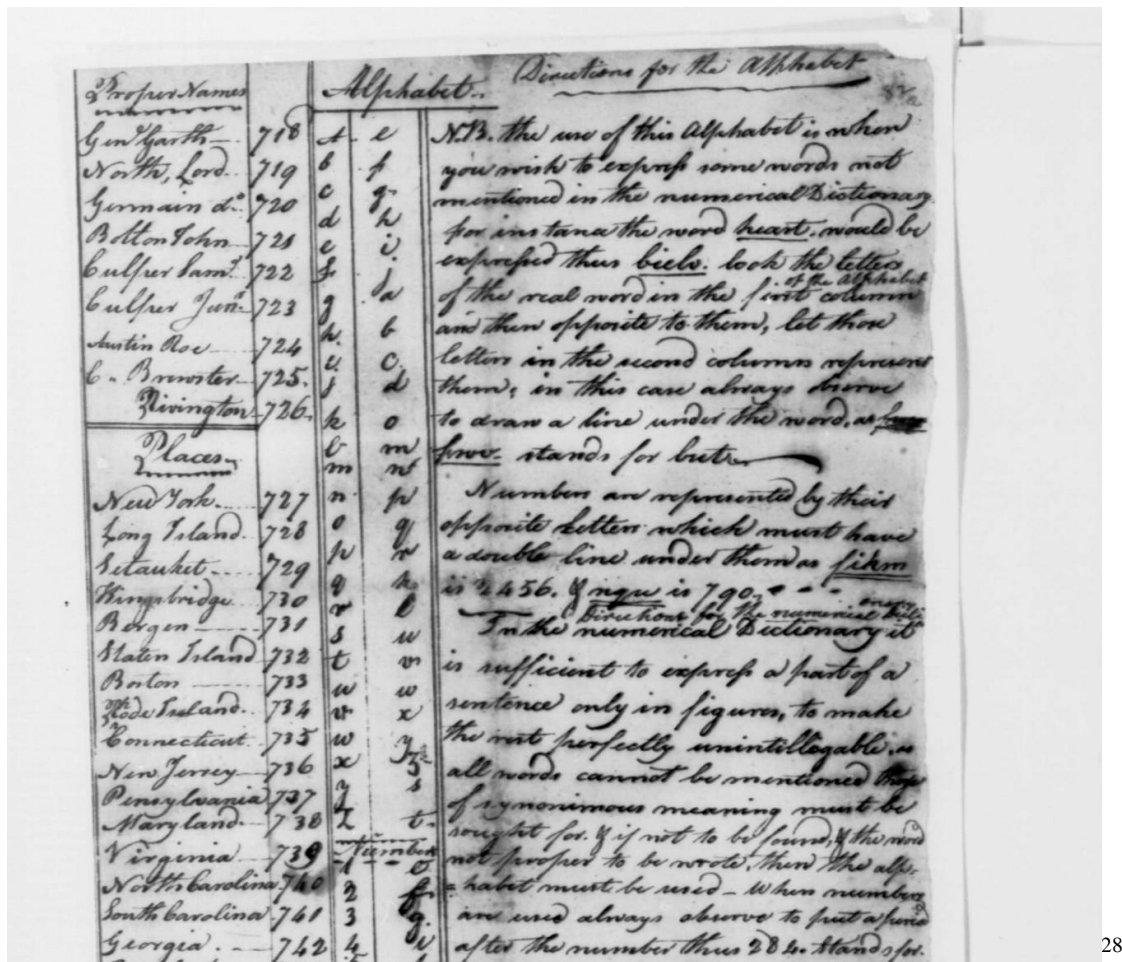
penance 511	rejoice 559	suprap 609	value 655	waggon 703
period 512	relate 560	sanction 610	virtue 656	wary 704
persecute 513	request 561	sensible 611	visit 657	warrant 705
poverty 514	relax 562	singular 612	valiant 658	
powerful 515	ridoubt 563	soldier 613	victory 659	Y
prophesie 516	rely 564	sovereign 614	vigilant 660	you
promote 517	remitt 565	security 615	vigorous 661	yet 706
proportion 518	reprise 566	severity 616	violent 662	you 707
production 519	repulse 567	severely 617	volenter 663	you 708
prossant 520	reward 568	september 618	valuable 664	yesterday 709
provision 521	retract 569	surround 619	voluntary 665	L
prosecute 522	restrain 570	servicable 620		zeal 710
practicall 524	reilly 571	security 621	W	
profitable 525	reciproque 572	severity 622	up 666	W
particull 526	regular 573	society 623	upper 667	W
petition 527	regulate 574	superior 624	upon 668	Gen ^l Washington 711
profession 528	rigorous 575		unto 669	Gen ^l Clinton 712
proclam 529	recital 576		unarm 670	Tryon 713
provision 530	recover 577		unfit 671	Unkirk 714
protection 531	remember 578	tho 625	unheard 672	Vaughan 715
	remittance 579	that 626	unsafe 673	Robinson 716
	represent 580	this 627	uniform 674	Arvon 717
		thru 628	uncertain 675	

27

711 aka George Washington is visible at the end of the page, by the reader's right side.

Under Gen. Washington, with the coded name 712, George Clinton appears. In the same column it is possible to read the names of other important officers.

²⁷ George Washington's Mount Vernon. "The Culper Code book". Images are courtesy of the Library of Congress. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book/#>



In the second image, the Culper Ring members' coded names are at the top of the page, by the reader's left side. Soon after the names of the undercover agents, Tallmadge wrote the coded names of various places.

727 New York, 728 Long Island, 729 Setauket, 730 Kingsbridge, 733 Boston.

The other two column represent the original alphabet and the corresponding coded letter A was E, B was F, C was G etc...

Hear Ye Hear Ye.

Fake News, just like the previous methods that have been analysed before, have always been around. In our modern days the presence of false information is enhanced by television and

²⁸ George Washington's Mount Vernon. "The Culper Code book". Images are courtesy of the Library of Congress. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/the-culper-code-book/#->

social media. Propaganda through fake news is a powerful tool to use against the enemy. Nowadays it is being used in modern conflicts and during the American conflict was as brutal as it is today. Propaganda usually consists of information that is one sided and that doesn't show the entirety of a situation. In the American Revolution, Propaganda was one of the first methods to be used by both Americans and British before the actual fighting began. Benjamin Franklin, acting as minister in France, was amongst the first Americans to understand the importance of spreading fake news to discredit the enemy. George Washington approached the use of propaganda during the French and Indian war and was able to use his experience in the American conflict as well. Both sides were acquainted with the fact that many times a pen was mightier than the sword, and that people tended to trust what journals said. When using propaganda, what is important to have in mind is the need of a precise political objective that highly engaged people. At the eve of the Revolution, amongst the first groups to use propaganda in favour of independence were the Sons Of Liberty. Sam Adams, cousin of the second US President John Adams, was the leader of this group of revolutionaries. Through propaganda in newspapers, advertisements and in the streets, Adams convinced many Americans that they had to fight for their freedom, and that their own liberty was in danger. Samuel Adams was successful because he appealed to people's anger towards the new taxes and to the colonies' cry of no taxation through representation²⁹.

As the conflict erupted, fake news was used if not abused by both Patriots and Loyalists. Gen. Washington used it for the first time in July 1776 during the desperate battle for the contention of New York. The General spread the fake news that the Americans had a great supply of food and healthcare with them, and that their resources outnumbered the British ones³⁰. The aim of this mission was to lower the morale of the British soldiers and encourage young soldiers to desert the British side for the American one. Despite being used mainly for propaganda, Journal's entries could also contain information that was hidden through a code consisting of usual words that had another meaning for who was reading.

The British were extremely able at crafting false information, their aim was to incite the colonies against the Continental Congress. In 1777, Lord Germain ordered the production of fake dollars, initiating the British campaign to undermine Continental paper money. Loyalists

²⁹ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, PP 44-46., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

³⁰ K. Daigler (2014), *Spies, Patriots and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War*, PP 98-99., Georgetown University Press. Washington, DC.

newspapers like the *Gazette*, spread the news that Congress was responsible for the fraud, diminishing Americans' trust in Congress³¹.

*“There has lately been, as we understand by a Gentleman just arrived from NewEngland, a large Distribution in the Country of counterfeited Continental Bills, so amicably executed, as not easily discerned from those issued by Order of Congress. This has contributed not a little to lower their Value, and will be one effectual Bar To the Repayment or Liquidation”*³².

Since they didn't have many resources, the Culper Spy weren't able to write fake news in local journals, but their propaganda usually aimed at turning British soldiers to their side.

Even though it wasn't a method that Washington's spies used, propaganda proved to be essential in order to move the spirits of those who were still undecided and did not know his/her side.

Masked Letters

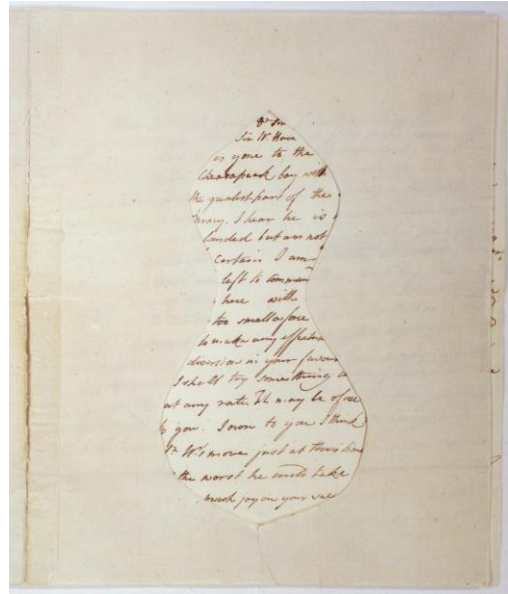
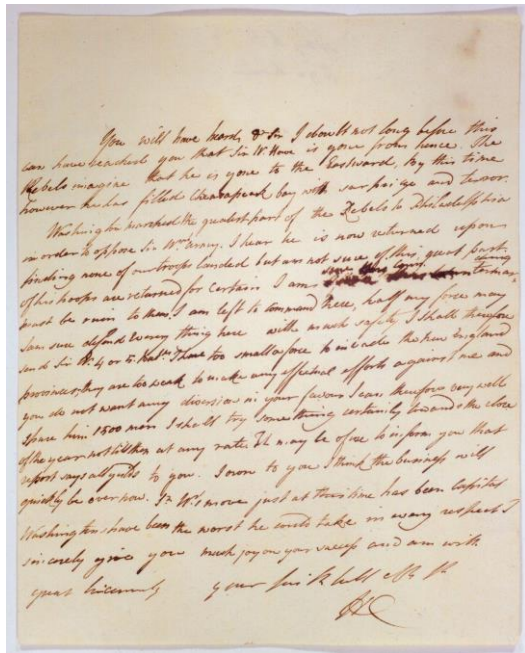
Finally, another ingenious method, mostly used by the British, was the use of Masked Letters. The text containing the information was usually in the form of an innocent letter that had nothing to do with military matters. In reality, the letter contained crucial information regarding the enemy. This system ensured the agent's security and if the decipherer wasn't an expert, it was difficult to retrieve the real content. The real content of the correspondence could be detected only by placing a specific cut out shape on the paper. The sentences that appear inside the shape are the real content of the message³³. Many spies didn't send letters and shape at the same time in order to avoid being discovered. The British Sir Henry Clinton was an expert in masked letters, and used them in most of his military correspondence. In the images taken from the William L. Clements Library, it is possible to analyse a masked letter written by Sir Henry Clinton to General Burgoyne on the 7th of August 1777. In the first image, the meaning of the

³¹ E.P. Newman. “THE SUCCESSFUL BRITISH COUNTERFEITING OF AMERICAN PAPER MONEY DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION “. PP 175-176. Jstor
https://www.britnumsoc.org/publications/Digital%20BNJ/pdfs/1958_BNJ_29_18.pdf

³² E.P. Newman. “THE SUCCESSFUL BRITISH COUNTERFEITING OF AMERICAN PAPER MONEY DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION “. PP 175. Jstor
https://www.britnumsoc.org/publications/Digital%20BNJ/pdfs/1958_BNJ_29_18.pdf

³³ William Clements library. “Mask Letter”. University of Michigan. <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/secret-methods/mask-letter/>

letter doesn't seem to contain any crucial information. In the second picture, once the Shape is applied, the real meaning of the message can be redacted by reading inside the shape³⁴.



Images and information from <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/clinton-burgoyne-mask-letter/>

1.4 The Culper Ring in action

Once armed with the sympathetic stain, a code book, and masked letters, the Culper Ring Spies were ready to put into action all the tools they acquired. In truth, the Ring worked before the ink and code arrived, the agents were devoted to their tasks, and always tried to come up with new ways to trick the British. These new methods enhanced their abilities and allowed them to be more precise and timely during their operations, which was what Washington wanted. Townsend's arrival was a blessing for the General, who wanted to gather intelligence directly from the city. With Culper Jr, the Culper Ring carried out impressive missions and outwitted the British. Amongst the many operations that the undercover agents accomplished, some are worth mentioning more than others

³⁴ William Clements library. "Henry Clinton Letter to John Burgoyne, August 10, 1777, Henry Clinton Papers" University of Michigan. <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/gallery-of-letters/clinton-burgoyne-mask-letter/>

Not Worth a Continental

As stated in the previous paragraph, fake news was often used by the British to undermine Congress and the Continental Army, especially Gen. Washington. Between 1779 and 1780, the newly acquired member of the Culper Ring, Robert Townsend, found himself in a New York where chaos reigned. It was during those years of British occupation that Townsend came to know about the British plan to destroy the American economy and Americans' trust in Congress. If there was no real money, then that meant that soldiers were not going to get paid at all, and no soldiers equals no war. This British operation weightened a lot on the shoulders of many Continental soldiers who were starving for free. As Culper Jr discovered, the Loyalists aimed at throwing Patriots against each other, especially against Congress.

In 1777 under Lord Germain's orders³⁵ The British began to produce a huge amount of fake Continental Dollars. The activity went on for a couple of years, until 1780, and British officers supported by newspapers and locals spread the tale that the currency was fake, and that Congress itself was to blame. Newspapers like the *Gazette*, claimed that Congress had issued the fake currency hoping to increase the credit of the dollar. The newspaper defined Congress as the main culprit for all the chaos. The Dollar, by the end of 1777 had no value and a soldier pay of 5 Dollars was worth less than 2 shillings³⁶. The circulation of the fake notes was rendered easy by the British who advertised the free money available. Some advertisements reassured the volunteers by telling them that there was only a little possibility of being discovered since the copies were perfectly made. The plan proceeded swiftly through 1778 and 1779 when Continental bills became literally worthless. Alarmed by the situation, Congress recalled the bills of credit authorised in Philadelphia and Yorktown³⁷, and in the hope of solving the situation Congress began to print more money as the value dropped³⁸.

The operation lasted until 1780, when Culper Jr was already an active member of the Spy Ring and found himself in the eye of the hurricane. Townsend, always careful not to ask too many

³⁵ A. Rose, (2006), *Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring.* P.181, Bantam Dell, New York.

³⁶ S. Hatfield, (2015), "*Faking It: British Counterfeiting during the American Revolution.*" *Journal of The American Revolution.* <https://allthingsliberty.com/2015/10/faking-it-british-counterfeiting-during-the-american-revolution/>

³⁷ A. Rose, (2006), *Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring.* P.183, Bantam Dell, New York.

³⁸ S. Hatfield, (2015), "*Faking It: British Counterfeiting during the American Revolution.*" *Journal of The American Revolution.* <https://allthingsliberty.com/2015/10/faking-it-british-counterfeiting-during-the-american-revolution/>

questions, tried to grasp as much information as he could. The able spy reported detailed information and was never suspected of being an undercover agent. After gathering enough information, Culper Jr wrote to Washington that from Philadelphia, the British got hold of several stacks of paper made from Congress' last emission³⁹. Hence, now armed with the original papers, the British were issuing perfect copies. After receiving the alarming news, Washington promptly warned Congress reassuring them that he received the information from a trusted correspondent inside the city. Thanks to the great spying abilities of Robert Townsend, in March 1780 Congress retired all the circulating money and declared bankruptcy. This covert operation represents how resourceful and essential for the Culper Ring Townsend was, by hiding behind his introverted personality and discretion, Culper Jr was surely one of the most indispensable members of the network.

The operation was praised by Washington, who was extremely satisfied with the Ring's activity. Washington's satisfaction towards his spies had its ups and down, but the General knew that the Culper Spy Ring was what he needed to win the war and build a new nation.

The French are coming!

The months following the uncovering of the great fraud were not very fruitful in regards to intelligence operations. There were fractures between the members of the network and Washington, and when the two most important agents Woodhull and Townsend did not communicate, information ran short. During these months of tense silence, the General wondered if the best decision was to end the network's operations at once and resort to other means. In May an annoyed Washington wrote to Tallmadge on the idea of putting an end to the Ring given the scarcity of intelligence from the agents⁴⁰. Thankfully, Washington didn't follow his first decision and between May and June 1780, the General reactivated the Ring after a few months of coldness. The reason for the Ring's reactivation was the imminent arrival on Rhode Island of a fleet commanded by the French Comte de Rochambeau⁴¹. Because of their arrival, Washington needed Culper Sr and Jr more than anything. When Caleb Brewster arrived in Setauket, Woodhull was sick and confined in bed, unable to reach New York to meet the "younger" Culper. To his rescue came Austin Roe who rode to New York to meet Culper

³⁹ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.183, Bantam Dell, New York.

⁴⁰ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. P.188, Bantam Dell, New York.

⁴¹ Intel.Gov. "Evolution of Espionage". <https://www.intel.gov/evolution-of-espionage/revolutionary-war/culper-spy-ring>

Jr. When Roe arrived in New York to meet Townsend, the younger Culper gave him extremely important news that might have altered the course of the war. Given the urgency of the matter, Culper Jr took important precautions. He wrote the vital information with the sympathetic stain in a commercial letter that was supposed to be sent to the British Col. Floyd. To give Roe an alibi, Townsend specified that Austin Roe was the messenger assigned to give Floyd the letter⁴².

In his letter, 723 informed Washington that the British knew of Rochambeau's arrival with his troops and were planning an ambush. Clinton knew about the arrival because the traitor, Benedict Arnold, was told the plan by Washington who trusted him with the information before he turned out to be a traitor. When Brewster arrived at camp, both Tallmadge and Washington were away. The whaler urged a dragoon to bring the letter to Washington's headquarters where the information was received by an alarmed Alexander Hamilton⁴³. Since the information was urgent, Hamilton did not wait for Washington and sent a letter to Lafayette who was at Newport with Rochambeau. In the letter, signed on the 21st of July 1780, the future Secretary of the Treasury informed Lafayette of a possible attack on the French fleet by the enemy.

My Dear Marquis⁴⁴

We have just received advice from New York through different channels that the enemy are making an embarkation with which they menace the French fleet and army. Fifty transports are said to have gone up the Sound to take in troops and proceed directly to Rhode Island.

The General is absent and may not return before evening. Though this may be only a demonstration yet as it may be serious, I think it best to forward it without waiting the Generals return.

We have different accounts from New York of an action in the West Indies in which the English lost several ships. I am inclined to credit them.

I am My Dear Marquis with the truest affection Yr. Most Obedt

A Hamilton Aide De Camp

Hd. Qrs.

July 21st 80

⁴² A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP.189-190, Bantam Dell, New York.

⁴³ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP 190-191, Bantam Dell, New York

⁴⁴ Letter from Hamilton to Lafayette 21st of July 1780. Founders Archives.
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0775>

Once Tallmadge and Washington returned to camp, the Commander in chief saw the situation as an opportunity to retake New York. At the end, after careful consideration and persuasion Washington realised that taking the city would have been difficult since there wasn't enough time to plan a big attack. In the meantime, to discourage the British ambush on the French, Washington spread the rumour that 12.000 American soldiers were on their way to New York. Washington had to give up his dream of retaking New York, but once Clinton heard the rumours regarding the American defence, he called off the ambush.

Thanks to Townsend's information, and Hamilton's letter to Lafayette, the Americans were once again able to prevent disaster. The French alliance proved to be essential for the outcome of the war, their help signed history and the beginning of America's victory over Britain. The roots of the United States and France's friendship is long and it is certainly linked to the American Revolution.

A difficult relationship.

The Culper Ring was undoubtedly an effective team, their organisation made them resourceful and timely, their operations pleased Washington who thanks to them was able to outwit his enemy. But things were not always all puppies and rainbows, the relationships between the Culpers and the General weren't always easy. Washington had a difficult temper and the two Culpers' personalities often clashed with his. Because of the many clashes between them, many times Washington believed that the right idea was to put an end to the network. Various episodes enraged the General in regards to the most resourceful members of the Ring. Cooperation between Culper Sr and Jr was paramount for the outcome of the operations, but not all the times cooperation worked.

Woodhull tended to be overcautious and paranoid, furthermore he was always in need of money and lamented that the General was not giving him enough⁴⁵. In addition, Culper Sr's habit of hiding supplies of invisible ink instead of using it, annoyed Washington. Constantly afraid of being discovered by the enemy, in the Winter of 1780, Woodhull abandoned a mission⁴⁶, causing a long fracture between him and the General. During this period of fracture, Culper Sr's intelligence was always running short and Washington decided to rely on Culper Jr. But

⁴⁵ Letter from Washington to Tallmadge, 19th of May 1780.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-26-02-0041-0002>

⁴⁶ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP.184-185, Bantam Dell, New York.

once again, Washington's patience was put to test in March 1780. Townsend wanted to try and use the passage to New Jersey as an alternative route, but instead of relying on the contacts that Washington gave him, he decided to entrust his young cousin James to go across the Hudson. The young Townsend's cover was that he was a loyalist visiting his family. Maybe because of the young age, the young covert agent got carried away during his visit to a secret Patriot family, the Deussenberry, and they arrested him under the suspect of being a British spy. Once brought to the Patriots' headquarters, soldiers found two sheets of papers on him. The papers contained a poem written in Culper Jr S handwriting. The poems were covered with information written by Townsend with the secret ink⁴⁷. After liberating James Townsend, Washington was furious at his agent's recklessness while Woodhull was offended by Culper Jr acting behind his back. Taken by surprise by Washington and Woodhull's anger, Townsend decided to end his collaboration with the Ring, and played deaf at Woodhull's request to join back⁴⁸. Thankfully, the man inside New York decided to join the team just in time to discover the British plan of ambushing the French.

Relationships inside the first American Spy Ring were never easy, but despite their differences the Culper spies knew that the future of their country was at stake. These men with different needs, dreams, and personality, had in common the dream of liberty, the will of serving their country, the knowledge that they had to stand together for a greater cause.

Conclusions

Masked letters, ciphers, and secret identities made the perfect spy 200 years ago as they do today. Nowadays the statue of the Martyr spy Nathan Hale stands at the CIA headquarters, his statues welcomes the news spies and is a reminder of how noble it is to work at the service of their country. 200 years ago, the father of the country put his trust in 6 untrained civilians and was able to win the battle for freedom. The methods analysed above show how the world changed but never lost sight of the previous teachings. These methods are a legacy not only to national intelligence but also to international services. Even though there will always be more modern machines and inventions, at the basis of espionage there will always be the capacity to observe and report what was said or witnessed. Once again George Washington's experience

⁴⁷ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP.185-187, Bantam Dell, New York.

⁴⁸ A. Rose, (2006), Washington's spies. The story of America's first Spy Ring. PP.187-189, Bantam Dell, New York.

and ability shapes the world in which we live. Maybe without the Culper Ring there wouldn't have been the type of intelligence we have today.