

The life of benedict arnold essay sample

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Introduction

Benedict Arnold – a name that has been associated, even equated with treason, treachery, and dishonor. There was once a time wherein that name owned a very prestigious title – Major General Benedict Arnold. He was even the most trusted soldier of George Washington but due to Arnold's sell out of West Point to the British Army, he was forever condemned to be the greatest traitor and the most evil man in American History.

However, without Benedict Arnold, America will not be the way it is today. America might not even be the United States but instead would have been nothing more than another British colony. Benedict Arnold has helped define the United States as a country through his military career as well as aided in the formation of the United States' national identity and social integrity through his treachery and betrayal of his friends and his country.

This may sound preposterous as most history books and encyclopedias have condemned the man for the past 3 centuries but a thorough and objective study of his life, military career and a critical analysis of his perfidy will make apparent his contribution to American society.

This study will tackle his military career starting from the Battle of Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain to his eventually treachery. A brief discussion of his life with Peggy Shippen and will also be deliberated. Through these, a glimpse of his personality will be seen. Finally, the sociological significance of Benedict Arnold's image and disloyal deeds will be elaborated upon so as to demonstrate how his deed has created an icon

to be despised uniting the colonies at that time and defining the values of present day America.

Military Career

Benedict Arnold first started to shine in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775. He grudgingly shared this victory with Ethan Allen. Two commissions were given to occupy Fort Ticonderoga. It was a very strategic fort since it connected the rebellious Thirteen colonies with and those in British-controlled Canada. It was also the fort that housed most of the British army's artillery and ammunition, which the Revolutionists had very little of.

Benedict Arnold was given his commission by the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, while unknowingly, Ethan Allen and others from Connecticut decided to go on a campaign to possess Fort Ticonderoga as well. Upon meeting in Castleton, Arnold demanded that he get superior command of all the troops but the Green Mountain Boys, the militia men that Allen gathered in Connecticut, refused to attack Fort Ticonderoga unless they were under the command of Ethan Allen. Eventually, a shared command was agreed upon and Fort Ticonderoga was occupied without one bullet being shot.

As Ethan Allen left the Fort, Benedict Arnold decided to garrison the Fort himself but when Colonel Hinman was sent with reinforcing troops and was given command of Ticonderoga with Arnold as second, Arnold, dejected, resigned from the post.

This was the very first instance when Benedict Arnold felt that his efforts were not being appreciated. This campaign brought more glory to Ethan

Allen than to Arnold, when Arnold felt that he was the one who thought up the plan to take Fort Ticonderoga in the first place. It could also be that his glory was shadowed by the dubious accounting that Arnold presented Congress. His accounting of the expense of the campaign was an inflated amount of the actual price. He denied having manipulated the books but legislators became wary of the man.[i]

His second military campaign was in June 1775 during the Invasion of Canada and the Battle of Quebec. After the Continental Army was formed, the Canadians were invited to join the war against the British as part of the fourteenth colony but the Canadians refused. This being so, Major General Philip Schuyler decided to invade Canada in the hopes that by occupying Montreal, the Canadians will be forced to aid in the war against England. Benedict Arnold amended this plan by suggesting that the invasion of Canada be a two pronged attack – while Maj. Gen. Shuyler invaded Canada from the Lake Champlain down to Richelieu River and ultimately Montreal, a second force, headed by Arnold be commissioned to take Quebec City from Chaudière River and Kennebec River in Maine. This was approved by George Washington and the attack on Canada commenced.

This battle ended up with numerous Continental soldiers dead, General Montgomery's demise and a leg wound for Benedict Arnold. Although the Battle of Quebec turned out to be a fatal disaster, Benedict Arnold was promoted to Brigadier General. With these two campaigns and a combination of Arnold's characteristic of putting himself always at the fore and his ambitiousness have paid off despite stepping on the toes of his compatriots.[ii] None of his colleagues could deny that he was a very

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effective commander as well as an intelligent strategist. However, nobody liked his overbearing and arrogant personality.

Between the Battle of Quebec and the Battle of Saratoga, Arnold was given commissions like the defense of Rhode Island. However, it was in the Battle of Saratoga that Arnold's military brilliance and his valor truly shone.

The Battle of Saratoga was commanded by General Horatio Gates with Arnold as his junior officer. The British Army headed by General John Burgoyne intended to invade New York through the Hudson River in the hopes of ending the war and to sever any communication between the colonies and New England. Gates and Arnold were totally different kinds of commanders. Gates was more conventional and conservative while Arnold was innovative and aggressive.

It is due to this innovation and aggression that Arnold manipulated the troops to confront the British Army, leading to their eventual surrender in October 17, 1777. Despite the conventionalism and conservatism of Gates, Arnold took it upon himself to order the troops around the battlefield.

According to the correspondence between Arnold and Gates, Arnold wrote:

“ On the 19th, just when advice was received that the enemy were approaching. I took the liberty to give you as my opinion that we ought to march out and attack them, (*italics mine*) you desired me to send Colonel Morgan and the Light Infantry, and support them, I obeyed your orders, and before the action was over I found it necessary to send out the whole of my division to support the attack no other troops were engaged that day except Colonel Marshall's regiment of General Patterson's brigade.” [iii]

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This correspondence demonstrates Arnold's initiative in the battlefield as well as his tendency to presume to command the troops, which maybe to the irritation of Gates. Arnold's sole involvement and victory in Saratoga was further confirmed with the statement of Richard Verick, one of the staff members in Arnold's division:

“ This I am certain of, that Arnold has all the credit of the action on the 19th, for he was ordering out troops to it, while the other was in Doctor Potts tent backbiting his neighbors for which words had like to ensure between him and me and this I further know, that he asked where the troops were going, when Scammell's battalion marched and upon being answered, he declared no more should go, he would not suffer the camp to be exposed. -Had Gates complied with Arnold's repeated desired (sic), he would have gained a general and complete victory over the enemy. -But it is evident to me, he never intended to fight Burgoyne, till Arnold, urged, begged and entreated him to do it....” [iv]

Unfortunately, Arnold was crippled in this first battle in Saratoga with a musket ball shattering the bones in his leg. Demonstrating his pride, Arnold refused to have his leg amputated saying that “ Amputation was ‘ damned nonsense’”[v] This wound, with his prior resentment for not being recognized was the foundation of his imminent treachery.

During the time that he was recuperating from his leg wound continuously refusing amputation, the Battle of Saratoga continued on with Gates receiving all the laurels at the end of it. Gates was honored as the “ Hero of Saratoga” and he never acknowledged the contributions that Arnold gave to

the battle. Instead he commended other officers and said in passing that Arnold was brave during the assault.[vi] Gates also capitalized on Arnold's insubordination and disobedience which further fueled Arnold's resentment and bitterness.

The Battle in Saratoga is one of the most significant battles, if not the most significant, during the American Revolution. Because of the victory garnered in this war, France decided to join and aid the revolutionists against British colonial rule. This provided the revolution with the proper supplies, money and military reinforcements which they desperately needed to win the war.

This also showed the world at that time that the rebels could actually win and defeat the powerful British Army, and the honors in this turning point of the revolution whose victory Arnold started was given to another man, General Horatio Gates, who as stated by Verick, would not have moved without the “urging, the begging and the entreaties” of Benedict Arnold.

Coming Home, Philadelphia, Marriage

Shortly after receiving a soldier's welcome to Connecticut, Arnold's home, Benedict Arnold was promoted to Major General by George Washington, acknowledging his superiority over the other generals that received accolades because of the Battle of Saratoga. However, due to his leg wound, he wasn't able to get involved in the war actively in the battlefield. He was then made governor of Philadelphia, formerly occupied by the British and filled with British loyalists. In Philadelphia, he met Peggy Shippen, the woman from a wealthy family, a British loyalist and the former love interest

of British Major John Andre. Even after she was married she maintained her friendship with Andre and kept constant communication with him.

As governor of Philadelphia, he constantly entertained with lavish parties. He lived an ostentatious life and eventually went into debt. To maintain his extravagant lifestyle, he took advantage of his rank in the military, went into mercantilism and trade and entered into shady deals. Because of this, his dealings were constantly in question to which he answered that all the contributions that he had given and all the sacrifices he had endured for the Revolution should “ outweigh petty concerns as unbalanced accounts and occasional acts of insubordination.”[vii] He was known to have told Washington, “ Having ... become a cripple in the service of my country, I little expected to meet [such] ungrateful returns.”[viii]

His governorship in Philadelphia encountered numerous conflicts with Congress and his constant exposure to British loyalists may have influenced his mind with regards to the Revolution. It also may also be possible that the turn from hero to traitor changed in Philadelphia due to the following circumstances: his inability to go on the battlefield due to his leg, the bitterness he felt against Congress whom he believed did not appreciate his contributions, his British loyalist wife and the maintenance of a rich wife as well as an extravagant lifestyle.

Treachery

Through his wife’s communication with British Major John Andre, Benedict Arnold was able to get in touch with British General Henry Clinton. With the trust and confidence that Washington gave Arnold, Benedict Arnold was able

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to secure for himself governorship of West Point, the bastion that protects the Hudson River from the British. Through the Hudson River, the British would be able to sever communications between New England with the rest of the colonies making West Point a very important defense. However, maybe because of personal difficulties, he asked Clinton for 20, 000 pounds sterling in exchange for the plans of West Point, his aid in taking West Point and access to the Hudson River. This was agreed upon and Arnold secretly met with Andre to hand over the plans and the pass in September of 1780.

Three days after the meeting Andre was caught by Continental soldiers who discovered the plans and the pass signed by Arnold in his boots. Upon the capture and execution of Andre, Arnold immediately fled to the side of the British and became a British General. As a British General he commanded British troops to attack Virginia and Connecticut. Talking to a Continental soldier after taking Virginia, he was known to ask an American officer what will be done to him if he were captured. The soldier answered, “ They would cut off that leg of yours wounded at Quebec and Saratoga, and bury it with all the honors of war. Then they will hang the rest of you on a gibbet.”[ix]

Arnold tried to defend his actions later on in his memoirs. He claimed that his act was motivated by: the conflicts with Congress and their lack of appreciation for his services, his unwillingness to fight by the catholic French, and his conviction of sparing lives by ending a prolonged and hopeless war.[x] These justifications were not accepted by the American public. Other soldiers countered his reasoning with equal force claiming that almost all soldiers had gripes against Congress.

His difficulties were compared to that of Washington's making him look far more the traitor and Washington the perfect hero. " Where Washington rose above his detractors, Arnold succumbed to excessive self-righteousness and a sense of grievance." [xi] This weakness was attributed to his flawed personality - his ambitiousness, his greed and malice in character that has been there since childhood. What also made his perfidy abhorrent was that it went totally against the very tenets of the Revolution.

In his article ' The Nature of Treason: ' Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold,' Charles Royster said:

" When Americans declared their independence, they agreed that it could only survive if they and their descendants maintained their virtue. They must choose voluntarily to sacrifice safety, ease, and self-interest in order to defend liberty." [xii]

Apart from betraying the country, Benedict Arnold betrayed the public virtue that country needed to uphold. By living extravagantly and abusing his power and influence in the military, he secured his financial interests and lifestyle. [xiii] In his constant griping and continuous statements that the Continental government owed him, he showed no sacrifice for his country but instead showed that there were ulterior motives to all his actions. In essence, Benedict Arnold sold his country and his soul to the devil making him the basest and the worst traitor in American history.

The public outrage that occurred after his betrayal became a unifying factor for the Revolutionary cause. At about 1780, colonists and soldiers were getting more and more disinterested in the war because of the length of time

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it was taking to win it. Most people were losing hope that the Americas will ever be independent of the British crown.

“ The year 1780 marked the nadir of the Revolution for the Americans. Morale among citizens and soldiers was at an all-time low, and even the most ardent supporters of the fight for independence felt that the war had dragged on too long. Many had wrongly believed that a victory over Britain would be swift and certain. By 1780, the British had gained control over the Southern colonies, and were holding New York City. As the years passed, the *rage militaire* of the early days of the Revolution faded into despair and indifference.” [xiv]

Announcement of Arnold’s betrayal of the country made him the one exclusive public enemy. Even his co-conspirator Andre was looked upon as hero to the British crown. Andre’s actions were justified as just following orders like what a good soldier would do. Arnold, on the other hand, was conceived as the most disloyal and the most perfidious soldier. The colonies had an enemy in their backyard; an enemy that epitomizes the antithesis to their very beliefs and convictions. This served as a rallying point for the rebels and a new energy was fueled into finally defeat British colonial rule. The Revolution was revived.

The Image of Benedict Arnold

Since 1780 up to the present day, the story of Benedict Arnold is still being debated. History books, Encyclopedias and even children’s books recount Benedict Arnold’s betrayal of the Revolution. It is so much that Ducharme & Fine call the “ demonization” and “ nonpersonhood” of Benedict Arnold.

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Demonization is the process by which a person's virtues are taken away simplifying the judgment that his person is evil, while nonpersonhood is the denial that this person ever had any virtues.[xv] This is what has happened to the character of Benedict Arnold through the years. His military achievements have been shadowed, if not erased, by his treachery. Monuments throughout the United States try as much as they can not to acknowledge his heroism. A monument in Saratoga shows only a boot with the inscription of

“ In Memory of the most brilliant soldier of the Continental Army, who was desperately wounded on this spot, the sally port of Burgoyne “ Great [Western] Redoubt,” 7th October 1777, winning for his countrymen the Decisive Battle of the American Revolution, and for himself the rank of Major General.”[xvi]

Another monument in Saratoga commemorates the four Generals that fought in the Battle of Saratoga. The monument contains four coffins, three of which have the statues of Generals Philip Schuyler, Horatio Gates, and Daniel Morgan, while the fourth bears only the name Benedict Arnold. His actions were deemed so evil that mentioning his name or acknowledging his heroism is unacceptable. Benedict Arnold is the anathema of America. He is the perfect example of what an American should not be.

Conclusion

Due to the demonization and nonpersonhood of Benedict Arnold, recollection of his story hardly acknowledges his achievements as an American hero. As a matter of fact, his actions, as a soldier, have been tainted so much to look <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-of-benedict-arnold-essay-sample/>

like he never did it for the country nor did he do it because he believed in the tenets of the Revolution. However, the fact remains that he was wounded twice in battle and he had put himself in harm's way for the Revolution. Without his expertise in strategy and in war, it is possible that the British would have won in the Battle of Saratoga ending the American Revolution and maintaining England's hold and rule over the Americas. There would not have been an independent United States.

Moreover, his treachery, although essentially abhorrent, served as a rallying point for the colonies and the revolutionaries. His act of betrayal served as a point of catharsis for public guilt which was caused by despair and the loss of faith for public virtue. These catharses lead to the revivification of the revolution and the unification of all the colonies against England resulting in the eventual victory of the Revolution.

The story of Benedict Arnold is a tragic one. A hero that became a traitor. This image, which lives until today, helps define what America as a country stands for, and what an American is. The best way to give meaning to convictions and beliefs is to have an opposite by which it will be compared, and that opposite is Benedict Arnold. He is the opposite of what an American should be. He is a reminder of what should not be done. He will be forever remembered as a traitor but if not for him, the revolution would have lost in Saratoga; the revolution would not have been revived by his treachery; Americans today will not be warned of what it is to betray your country and of what it is to be an American. America will not be what it is today if not for Major General and traitor Benedict Arnold.

- [i] Nichipor, Mark, "Benedict Arnold and the Battle of Saratoga," *Early American Review* (2003) http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/2003_winter_spring/arnold_saratoga.htm
- [ii] Henretta, James, "The Enigma of Benedict Arnold," *Early American Review* (1997) <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/arnold.html>
- [iii] Arnold to Gates, 22 September 1777 Gates Papers, Library of Congress cited in Mark Nichipor "Benedict Arnold and the Battle of Saratoga," *Early American Review* (2003) http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/2003_winter_spring/arnold_saratoga.htm
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- [v] Palmer, David, "Benedict Arnold Crippled in Battle," *USA Today (Society for the Advancement of Education)* Vol. 136, (July 2007), p. 26
- [vi] Ibid.
- [vii] Ducharme, Lori & Fine, Gary Alan, "The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold," *Social Forces* Vol. 73 (1995):
- [viii] Henretta, 1997, <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/arnold.html>
- [ix] Ducharme & Fine, 1995, p. 1323
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[x] Ducharme & Fine, 1995, p. 1319

[xi] Cate, Alan. “ George Washington and Benedict Arnold: A Tale of Two Patriots.” *Parameters* , Vol. 37, 2007, p. 121

[xii] Royster, “ The nature of Treason: Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold,” 1979, p. 165

[xiii] Although Benedict Arnold was accused of violating public virtue, other people were also doing so in a lesser degree. (Ducharme & Fine, 1995, p. 1314)

[xiv] Ducharme & Fine, 1995, p. 1315

[xv] Ducharme & Fine, 1995, p. 1311-12

[xvi] Boot Monument in the battlefield of Saratoga.

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