We've Been Here Before

Bringing a Public Enemy to Justice Requires Both Luck and Derring-Do

By Richard Brookhiser

Like the search for Osama bin Laden, the search for Benedict Arnold was bold and complex

OSAMA BIN LADEN, KILLED IN HIS PAKISTANI LAIR this May, was surely one of the most hated figures in our history. But maybe not the most hated. Two centuries after fleeing to his British paymasters, Benedict Arnold is still a byword for everything despicable.

The two share more than odium. Bin Laden the mass murderer and Arnold the traitor were both targets of concerted manhunts and proved to be maddeningly elusive prey. Like the search for bin Laden, the search for Arnold was bold and complex, requiring derring-do and a blend of military and covert action. Arnold's escape foreshadowed the difficulties America would face in bringing bin Laden to justice.

Benedict Arnold was one of the bravest and most resourceful officers in the Continental Army. Marching across Maine to attack Quebec in the winter of 1775, repulsing a British invasion of Lake Champlain in 1776 and helping win the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 were all splendid feats of arms. But heavy debts, a reprimand for corrupt business practices while he was military governor of Philadelphia, and marriage to a pretty young Tory wife led him to sell himself to the enemy. Working with Major John Andre, Britain's spymaster in occupied New York, Arnold planned to betray West Point, the Hudson River garrison he commanded. Their plot unraveled on September 23, 1780, when Andre was captured behind American lines. The next day Arnold fled on a British warship to New York.

Benedict Arnold was still an American hero in 1776, when this mezzotint was published. Four years later, he was a traitor and a wanted man.

Arnold's treason shocked George Washington, commander in chief. He was startled by the personal near miss: He had arrived at West Point for an inspection just as Arnold was to have delivered the fort to the enemy. And he was dismayed by the defection of a man who had served so well: "Who can we trust now?" Washington exclaimed.

Washington seized the moral initiative with an address to the army on September 25. The British, he said, were "practicing every base art to effect by bribery and corruption what they cannot accomplish in a manly way." The failure of their plot "affords the most convincing proof that the liberties of America are the object of divine protection." Then Washington planned his counterstroke.

On October 13, he asked to meet with Major Henry Lee, who commanded an elite cavalry corps then stationed in northern New Jersey, to discuss "a particular piece of business." Washington told Lee he wanted a volunteer to desert to British New York and bring Arnold back.

The idea was audacious, but not absurd. The British had used New York City as their American headquarters since driving Washington out of it in 1776. But it was a porous headquarters. Washington had a network of spies in place there; the supposed deserter would be able to call on them for help.

But who could Washington get to be his deserter? Lee said he could not ask an officer even to pretend to be a turncoat. Washington agreed that officers ought to be "scrupulous...in adhering to the course of honor." Could they find a noncom whose conscience would be less troubled?

Lee suggested a sergeant major in his unit named John Champe, who was 20-something,

smart, ambitious, strong and taciturn. The sergeant had his own scruples about deserting, but Lee assured him that he would be doing wrong "in semblance only." Champe was also "charmed" with the boldness of the plan. (The pluckiness of a certain kind of young fighting man speaks across the centuries.) He was given the names of two American spies in the city, and told not to kill Arnold under "any condition of things."

The first steps of the operation succeeded brilliantly. Since the "desertion" would have to appear authentic in order to deceive the British, no one besides Lee and Washington were let in on the secret. On the night of October 20, Champe rode out of camp at 11 o'clock and was soon spotted by an American patrol, which reported an unauthorized horseman. Lee delayed pursuit as long as he could, but Champe was slowed by having to take a circuitous route to avoid further patrols. By the time he reached the Hudson, it was light and the Americans on his tail had closed to within sight of him. Champe splashed into the river, waving at two British ships, which drove the Americans off with grape shot, and sent a boat to pick him up.

In New York, Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander, debriefed the American, who told Clinton what he wanted to hear: Arnold's example had inspired a "spirit of defection" in rebel ranks. Clinton passed Champe on to Arnold, who was trying to raise a unit of American deserters.

Meanwhile Champe contacted Washington's agents and learned Arnold's routine. Like bin Laden's pursuers, he focused on his target's dwelling. Arnold lodged in a house on lower Broadway; every night before retiring he took a turn in the garden. Champe loosened some palings in the garden fence and arranged with a fellow agent to mug Arnold and drag him out into the street. There they would hustle him to a boat and row across the Hudson to Hoboken, where Lee would be waiting to take him prisoner.

The carefully conceived plans went awry at the last minute. The night Champe was to have struck, Arnold changed quarters. Clinton had ordered him to lead an invasion of Virginia, for which he had to prepare. Arnold's troops, including Champe, were confined to barracks, then loaded onto transports. They arrived in Virginia in December, where Champe deserted again, making his way cross-country to North Carolina, where he found his old American unit. Lee presented Champe to his former comrades and explained what he had done. On Washington's orders he was relieved of further service—if the British had captured him they would surely have hanged him.

John Champe flees American pursuers as the bold plan to kidnap Benedict Arnold is put into action. Champe pretended to be a deserter to get close to his target in British-occupied New York.

Arnold spent the rest of the war commanding British troops or in Britain itself, beyond the reach of American vengeance. Champe took up a life of farming. In 1798, when Washington came out of retirement to command the army during the Quasi-War with France, he asked if Champe was available to serve again, but found that he had died earlier that year.

The hunt for Arnold showed why the hunt for bin Laden would be so difficult. Arnold was only a few miles beyond American lines, in an occupied city where helpful agents were already in place. Even so, mere chance allowed him to escape. It is always hard to hit a moving target.

It took years to find bin Laden in the cocoon woven by fellow terrorists and Pakistani protectors. But once the CIA tracked him down, the agency and President Barack Obama had one great advantage over Washington, Lee and Champe. Washington wanted Arnold alive. He wanted Arnold questioned: Had other American officers been involved in his plot? He wanted Arnold tried. "My aim is to make a public example of him," he told Lee. Finally, he wanted to safeguard America's reputation. If Arnold were killed during the attempt to take him, it would look as if "ruffians" had been hired to assassinate him.

No such reasons applied to bin Laden. After a decade on the run, the amount of useful intelligence he may have had was diminished. He was a terrorist whose guilt was manifest; two bullets proved justice enough for him. And they clearly were not fired by "ruffians." America declared the deed was done by Navy SEALs. It is always easier to destroy a target than to carry it home.

On 9/11, I saw the World Trade Towers smoking from my Manhattan neighborhood three miles north. Killing Osama bin Laden was no recompense, but welcome all the same

—Richard Brookhiser