

Ruses, Disinformation & Spycraft
General Washington's Covert Military Tools

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Applicant learned of the contest through previously participating in years past.

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*To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.*¹

These words, spoken by President George Washington during his 1790 State of The Union Address, reveal an important ingredient in his recipe for peace: Always being prepared for war.

Seven years earlier, General Washington's Continental Army defeated a British Army that had more soldiers, more munitions, and the world's most lethal Navy. How could this happen? In part through the effective use of cloak-and-dagger methods such as ruses, disinformation, and spycraft.

In the earliest days of the American Revolutionary War, General George Washington knew what he needed: a competitive advantage to offset the might and size of the British military. This could be obtained through the use of trickery and espionage ... and it did not take him long to get started.

On December 22, 1776, John Honeyman, a former British soldier working for the Americans, was purposely captured by an American patrol. After discussions with Washington about British Colonel Johann Rall's encampment in Trenton, New Jersey, Honeyman was imprisoned by the Americans. With the help of a key provided by Washington, Honeyman, surrounded by gunfire from guards who were ordered to miss, escaped. Honeyman traversed to Trenton, where he fed Rall disinformation, overemphasizing the dilapidated condition of Washington's troops. Honeyman insisted there was no way the Americans could perform a

Winter march against the British. At ease with the diminishing probability of an American attack, the British Colonel relaxed. Rall called for a traditional Christmas celebration, complete with drinking and feasting. On December 26, 1776, an unprepared Rall was killed and his Hessian troops routed in the American surprise attack, led by Washington, who benefited greatly from the ruse and disinformation.²

The use of disinformation was employed again the following year. In 1777, the British occupied Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The outnumbered American Army, stationed at Valley Forge, feared a British attack out of Philadelphia. To instill doubt and hesitation into the minds of the British, one of Washington's assistants, Major John Clark, purposely allowed incorrect muster lists, handwritten by General Washington himself, to fall into the hands of British spies.

Washington, at the center of the disinformation campaign, created lists that indicated that the number of soldiers at Valley Forge was four or five times larger than it actually was, knowing British troop officials would eventually read what he had written. The lists ended up in the hands of British General William Howe, commander of the British troops, who recognized Washington's handwriting. Based on that handwriting, Howe accepted the lists as accurate and delayed any action against the Americans. This use of disinformation gave Washington and the Continental Army valuable time to recruit new soldiers, to gain essential supplies, and to prepare troops for any upcoming attacks.²

Even with these successes, better, more formal, covert information-gathering processes were needed by the Americans.

In November of 1778, Washington tasked Benjamin Tallmadge, a young cavalry officer who was recently appointed to head of the Continental Army's secret service, with creating a

secret organization to spy on the British troops at their base in New York.³ Gathering a group of dependable men and women from his hometown of Setauket, Long Island, Tallmadge helped to form one of the strongest Patriot associations that aided the Americans during the war. This association became known as The Culper Spy Ring (“The Ring”).

Tallmadge recruited only those he could absolutely trust, including his childhood friend Abraham Woodhull, and the daring American soldier Caleb Brewster. In order to protect their identities, each member of The Ring went by a different name, including General Washington, who was known as Agent 711.

As the war waged on, The Ring utilized several spycraft techniques, including coded letters and invisible ink. During the Revolutionary War-era, privacy regarding mail and communication was almost non-existent. John Nagy, author of *Invisible Ink: Spycraft of the American Revolution*, wrote “in the eighteenth century, there was no expectation of privacy when the postal system was used.”⁴

Because of this lack of privacy, The Ring hid secret messages in their letters when they communicated with each other. In order to ensure that the contents of a letter could not be understood if opened or captured, Tallmadge created a numerical code book consisting of 763 numbers. Each number in the book represented names, words, and places that only members of The Ring understood. Known as the Culper Code Book, this intelligence mechanism was essential to protecting the organization’s privacy regarding communication information with each other.⁵

Invisible ink was also used by The Ring. The ink, consisting of a mixture of ferrous sulfate and water, was put between the lines of an inconspicuous letter. The hidden message

could be seen when the recipient placed the paper over a flame or treated it with a chemical reagent.⁶ Jennifer Wilcox, author of *Revolutionary Secrets: Cryptology in the American Revolution*, wrote “the use of invisible inks is an ancient art, and the idea of disappearing writing was not new at the time of the American Revolution.”⁷ Through the use of invisible ink and ciphered documents, the Culper Spy Ring communicated effectively while simultaneously concealing their secrets from the British.

Perhaps The Ring’s most successful operation occurred in July 1780. A French fleet, in support of the Americans, was preparing to arrive in Newport, Rhode Island. Just days before the French landing, The Ring discovered that British General Henry Clinton had gathered 8,000 troops which would be used to attack the unsuspecting French fleet upon their arrival. American spy Woodhull sent a letter, coded with invisible ink, to Washington’s headquarters. In a corresponding letter, Woodhull emphasized the urgency of the situation, writing that “the enclosed requires your immediate departure this day. By all means let not an hour pass: for this day must not be lost. You have news of the greatest consequence perhaps that ever happened to your country.”⁸

Upon receiving the information, General Washington acted immediately. In another organized ruse, he ordered 12,000 Patriot troops to march towards the British base of New York. British General Clinton, fearing an attack, called back his troops, aborting the attack of the French fleet in Rhode Island, to protect his New York base. The expected attack from the Americans never came. General Washington’s ruse worked. Because of The Ring’s effective use of spycraft, General Washington was able to prevent a disastrous attack from occurring, thereby saving the lives of men who would fight, on behalf of the Americans, in many future battles.

Today, the United States Intelligence Community consists of seventeen separate governmental agencies who strive to continue what General Washington began in 1776: to obtain strategic military advantages through the uses of ruses, disinformation, and spycraft.⁹

Such methods help to accomplish what George Washington advised our nation in his 1790 State of the Union Address: Lasting peace for the United States... is more likely if we are always in a state of being prepared for war.

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