Little Acts of Decisive Gallantry
Intelligence and the Battle of Princeton

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Much must go well, and from the very outset, for an intelligence operation to qualify as a success. Collectors and analysts must first understand the stated and unstated needs of their particular decisionmaker. They must pursue all the information relevant to those needs, reporting conclusions to their decisionmaker in a clear and timely manner. Finally, those conclusions must prove accurate. This last criterion is not always possible, but is necessary for an operation to be recognized as a success. Intelligence successes, furthermore, often go unnoticed, thanks to the incentive of the organizations that pursue them to maintain secrecy. To the same extent that they reveal the nature of their sources and methods, they complicate their own mission, allowing their targets to adjust.

Especially in the United States, successes are inclined to maintain the status quo; their advantage is often invisible to the citizens they support. In disrupting the status quo, intelligence failures tend to have a much higher profile: Americans may or may not recall the triumphs of the U-2 program, but will always remember the terrorist attacks of September 2001.

When we consider intelligence from the perspective of the United States, we tend to focus on the past seventy years. This focus is often appropriate, since a permanent, national intelligence community did not exist before 1940. The evaluation of intelligence successes, however, is a special case. The most consequential of these, at least for the United States, took place during the American Revolution, more than two hundred years ago. Many of the United States’ “founding fathers” had experience in what we now categorize as intelligence operations. Benjamin Franklin, for example, coordinated a disinformation campaign to undermine support for the British military both in Prussia and in Great Britain itself.¹ John Jay headed the “New York State Committee and Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies,” a counterintelligence agency that precluded Tory plots against defense and infrastructure targets in
the newly declared “state” of New York. Perhaps the most influential of these figures, however, is George Washington.

**Braddock’s Folly**

In 1753, the British colonial army sent twenty-two year old Washington to the Ohio Territory. His assignment was to determine the strength of French forces, and to deduce their reaction to British colonization in the area. Washington took careful advantage of opportunities to eat and drink with French officers, and hired Native Americans to collect additional intelligence on French capabilities and plans. When Britain and France went to war the next year, he wanted to serve General Edward Braddock in his campaign in the Ohio Territory. Washington refused, however, to do so as a provincial officer, in which case even junior officers of the regular army would have outranked him. Lieutenant governor of Virginia Robert Dinwiddie arranged for Washington to serve in an unpaid position as one of Braddock’s aides.

Braddock himself did not appreciate the value of military intelligence, a weakness that ultimately resulted in ambush on the Monongahela River. Washington was among the British force, which fought for more than three hours to extricate themselves from the trap and suffered a major military defeat. Braddock was mortally wounded during the battle, and Washington nearly killed; two horses were shot from under him, and by the end of the battle, four bullets had pierced his coat. Understandably, Braddock’s failure made an indelible impression on the young aide-de-camp.
George Washington, Handler

Only two weeks after taking command as Major General of the Continental Army, Washington recorded his first intelligence expense, a payment of $333 to one of his officers to develop a spy ring in Boston. Washington put a high premium on good intelligence after his defeat in the Battle of Long Island, encouraging the skirmishers who remained to capture British soldiers for interrogation. He had “never been more uneasy” for lack of intelligence, and asked that colonists “leave no stone unturned nor do not stick at any expense” to enlist spies.

By the winter of 1776, the outlook for the American Revolution was bleak. The Continental Army comprised of fewer than 5,000 men fit for duty, a number that would shrink further once enlistments expired at the end of the year. Several public figures, once ardent revolutionaries, had made peace with King George; Maryland, moreover, was “willing to renounce the declaration of the fourth of July for the sake of an accommodation with Great Britain.” In early December, Washington sent General Israel Putnam to organize defense for Philadelphia. Putnam found the city in complete disarray. Many of its citizens, terrified by the proximity of British troops in New Jersey, had fled their homes with what valuables they could carry. The Continental Congress had panicked and adjourned to Baltimore. Many of Philadelphia’s Quakers had Loyalist sympathies, and refused to carry on the revolution “in person or by other assistance.”

Having retreated to New Jersey, Washington was in a holding position. He hoped that intelligence might offset the Continental Army’s current disadvantage. On 12 December, he wrote a letter to Colonel John Cadwalader, the senior officer of a militia called the Philadelphia Associators, emphasizing the dire necessity for both intelligence and counterintelligence activities.
Spare no pains or expense to get intelligence of the enemy’s motions and intentions. Any promises made, or sums advanced, shall be fully complied with and discharged… Every piece of intelligence you obtain worthy of notice, send it forward by express… Keep a good lookout for spies, and magnify your numbers as much as possible.\textsuperscript{14}

**Joseph Reed and the Philadelphia Light Horse**

Two weeks later, Washington led his troops to decisive victory in the Battle of Trenton.\textsuperscript{15} On 29 December, he temporarily resolved the problem of expiring conscriptions by promising a bounty of ten dollars to each soldier who would stay on another six weeks.\textsuperscript{16} Frustrated by the “obscure and doubtful” intelligence on which he had to base his next action,\textsuperscript{17} Washington asked Robert Morris, the Continental Congress’s representative in Philadelphia, for paper money and hard money; paper to meet the bounties he promised, and hard to pay spies who would not risk their lives for paper. He said the need was dire; if necessary, the money should be borrowed.\textsuperscript{18} A messenger soon returned. Along with the paper money requested, Morris had sent four hundred ten Spanish silver dollars, a French half crown, two English crowns, and ten and a half English shillings.\textsuperscript{19}

Washington observed to Adjutant-General Joseph Reed, a New Jersey native, that the strength of the British in the area had greatly discouraged spies.\textsuperscript{20} Reed proposed to take some of Washington’s cavalrmyen to Princeton in an attempt to recruit spies. Washington approved, sending seven of the Philadelphia Light Horse along with Reed.\textsuperscript{21} The Light Horse was a wealthy group of young gentlemen who insisted on paying their own expenses. One historian speculates that ragged infantrymen must have jeered them as they rode into Trenton on matched chestnut
horses, and with chocolate brown uniforms, high-topped riding boots, and black hats with sliver cords and bucktails.\textsuperscript{22}

Days before, Reed had encountered the “poor” and “terrified” inhabitants of Bordentown. Red rags had been hanging from almost every house door in expression of Tory sympathies, but homeowners hastily tore them down in accord with the turn of events. In Reed’s words, they were “effectually broken and hardly resembling what they had been a few months before.”\textsuperscript{23} Reed and the Light Horse found the residents on the road to Princeton in a similar condition. The “arms and ravages of the enemy,” Reed said, had provoked such terror that no reward would tempt inhabitants, “though otherwise well disposed,” to go into Princeton on a mission of espionage.\textsuperscript{24} Stories of captives starving in the prison hulls of New York, and more immediate accounts of British plunder and rape in New Jersey,\textsuperscript{25} were doubtlessly a strong deterrent in the minds of these colonists.

Reed and the Light Horse rode on. Determined to bring back intelligence for General Washington, they circled Princeton, expecting that the rear of the town would be less guarded.\textsuperscript{26} They were about a half-mile southeast of Clarksville,\textsuperscript{27} almost in view of Princeton itself, when they spotted a British soldier walking between a barn and a house. Reed assumed he was looting, and sent two of the Light Horse to take the soldier prisoner.\textsuperscript{28} The cavalrymen kept the barn between themselves and the house so they could approach closely without being noticed.\textsuperscript{29} As they rode, a second and third British soldier appeared. Reed ordered the rest of his men to charge.\textsuperscript{30} As things turned out, the Continental force was outnumbered; there were twelve British soldiers present. Reed and the Light Horse, however, were in the right place at the right time; most of the British were inside, “conquering a parcel of mince pies” as Reed and his men
surrounded the house. Seven cavalrymen, six of whom had “never before seen an enemy,” thus forced the surrender of twelve well-armed British dragoons.

Reed and the Light Horse returned to Trenton with their captives mounted behind, probably to a much different reception by Continental infantrymen. The prisoners were separately interrogated, revealing that General Grant had reinforced British troops at Princeton, that the force assembled there comprised over 8,000 trained soldiers, and that they intended to advance on Trenton. This was valuable intelligence; at the time, Washington commanded only 4,700 men, many of whom were new recruits, and all of whom were poorly equipped.

“A Very Intelligent Young Gentleman”

On 15 December, three days after receiving the order to “keep a good lookout for spies,” Cadwalader wrote to Washington that he had sent “several persons over for intelligence.” On the morning of 31 December, Cadwalader followed up with the message that one of his spies, identified only as “a very intelligent young gentleman,” had returned from Princeton with detailed information on the British force assembled there.

… there were about five thousand men, consisting of Hessians and British troops—about the same number of each… He conversed with some of the officers, and lodged last night with them… No sentries on the back or east end of the town. They parade every morning an hour before day, and some nights lie on their arms. An attack has been expected for several nights past—the men are much fatigued, and until last night [were] in want of provisions, when a very considerable number of wagons arrived with provisions from Brunswick…
In accordance with Washington’s orders, the spy exaggerated to these officers the strength of Continental forces, telling them that the best accounts reported 16,000 troops. The officers were surprised, having thought—and correctly so—that there were no more than five or six thousand. By coincidence, the young gentleman was “near the party of chasseurs” whom the Light Horse captured, and was with the British officers when they heard news of the attack.

Cadwalader’s letter included a “rough draft of the road from this place,” meaning from Crosswicks, where he was at the time, to Princeton. This map* included a great amount of detail; for example, bridges were marked for the number of soldiers defending them. A block of text perpendicular to the others ran up and down the right side of the map, highlighting a road: “This road leads to the back part of Princeton which may be entered anywhere on this side—the country cleared, chiefly, for about 2 miles… few fences.” The map was particularly useful in that it indicated “the situation of the cannon and works begun, and those intended this morning.” It displayed, then, not what existed at the time Cadwalader drew it up, but what would likely exist at the time General Washington could first act on the intelligence.

Consequence and Legacy

Before he received Cadwalader’s letter, Washington had three pieces of intelligence on the British force at Princeton, all of which were obtained through prisoner interrogation: firstly, that General Grant had reinforced enemy troops there; secondly, that the aggregate force there comprised over 8,000 soldiers; and thirdly, that they intended to advance on Trenton.

Washington was likely relieved to receive a report from a plainclothes spy that not only suggested a weaker enemy force of 5,000 men, but also provided detailed, actionable information.

* See Annex: Cadwalader’s Map.
on a nearby town.

Washington immediately sent a large force up the Post Road; its orders were to delay any British movement toward Trenton. The Continental force advanced under the cover of darkness on New Year’s Eve, occupying a position six miles from Nassau Hall. British patrols spotted them at the break of dawn, at which point the First Battalion of British light infantry and two Hessian companies were sent to clear the road. The British cleared the pass, but at a heavy cost. This was a warning to British leaders that Americans were out in strength, fighting well, and taking few losses in return.41

The British force at Princeton advanced in force on 2 January. The Continental Army held its ground in the Battle of Assunpink Creek, also remembered as the Second Battle of Trenton. Washington convened a council of war in South Trenton that evening. His senior officers—including both Reed and Cadwalader—were there, along with local citizens, who were invited both to attend the meeting and to speak freely.42 None of the alternatives that the officers first considered seemed advantageous. At one point, General Arthur St Clair suggested a surprise attack on the enemy’s rear. If Continental troops could reach Quaker Bridge unobserved and unopposed, they would only have to proceed north about six miles before reaching Princeton. Reed confirmed St Clair’s estimate, and contributed his knowledge of the terrain. He mentioned that he and the Light Horse saw no British on the back roads to Princeton. The officers then consulted local citizens for advice; one later recalled “two men from the country, near the route proposed,” whom were “called to the council for their opinions of its practicability.”43

The plan was bold, and it might have failed were it not for the additional intelligence that Washington elicited at this council. When he wrote the Continental Congress on 5 January, it was with good news.
I have the honor to inform you, that, since the date of my last from Trenton, I have
removed with the army under my command to this place [Pluckemin, New Jersey]…
Their [the British force’s] large pickets advanced towards Trenton, their great
preparations, and some intelligence I had received, added to their knowledge, that the 1st
of January brought on a dissolution of the best part of our army, gave me the strongest
reasons to conclude, that an attack upon us was meditating.44

The Continental Army’s baggage, he went on, was silently removed to Burlington as
Washington led his troops “by a roundabout road” to Princeton.45 Once arrived, the Continental
force routed the British with its surprise attack.46

News of the Battle of Princeton spread quickly across America. The Pennsylvania
Journal wrote that if Washington had lived in the days of idolatry, he would have been
worshipped as a god.47 On 23 January, he discharged the Light Horse, saying that “though
composed of gentlemen of fortune,” they had “shown a noble example of discipline and
subordination,” and in several actions had “shown a spirit and bravery which will ever do honor
to them, and will ever be gratefully remembered by me.”48 At Washington’s request, the troop
reconvened in September 1779 and stayed on until British surrender in October 1781.49

The Light Horse enjoys an honorable legacy. In his 1816 memoir, General Wilkinson
praised them for the expedition of 30 December, a “little act of decisive gallantry” that had
“tended to increase the confidence of the troops, and certainly reflected high honor on the small
detachment.”50 Eight years later, at a reception for General Lafayette, John Lardner and William
Leiper—the sons of two Light Horse cavalrymen who were, supposedly, part of the
reconnaissance mission—wore the breastplates of British officers captured that day.51
Published in 1875, the Light Horse’s own narrative of the events that took place on 30 December cooperates almost perfectly with Reed’s. The Light Horse, however, maintained that Reed took twelve Light Horse cavalrymen with him on the mission to Princeton, while Reed clearly asserted in his handwritten account that he proceeded “with seven gentlemen,” five of whom he names: Messrs Caldwell, Dunlap, Hunter, Pollard, and Peters. Assuming that the two he does not name are Messrs Lardner and Leiper, five men of the Light Horse’s narrative remain unaccounted for. Whether Reed excluded, by accident or by design, the names of men that accompanied him on such a vital mission, or whether certain members of the Light Horse sought credit for a mission with which they were not involved is unclear. It seems, however, that history has sided with the Light Horse. Most accounts of the 30 December expedition mention twelve cavalry, not seven; a notable exception is David Hackett Fischer’s Washington’s Crossing, which—perhaps in a nod to the discrepancy—avoids mention of a figure.

The legacy of the Light Horse stands in stark contrast to the anonymity and obscurity of our “intelligent young gentleman.” Some speculate that he was an undergraduate at Princeton, which had been closed since the British invasion. Nobody has claimed him; perhaps he had no descendants.

Lessons Learned

There are four principal lessons that analysts can take away from the success of Continental intelligence operations of December 1776.

1. *Be wary of intelligence gaps, and invest to negate them.*

Washington was uneasy when he lacked intelligence. During the American Revolution, he spent more than ten percent of the Continental Army’s military budget on intelligence operations.
This greatly helped him to avoid disasters like the one he experienced with General Braddock. Washington’s appreciation for intelligence did not change, moreover, after the revolution ended. One of his first acts as president was to request of Congress a secret fund for clandestine intelligence operations, later called the “Contingency Fund for the Conduct of Foreign Intercourse.” By the third year of his presidency, this fund accounted for twelve percent of the national budget.56

2. **Examine all possible sources; pursue intelligence relentlessly.**

Reed and the Light Horse were most interested in recruiting locals to spy on Princeton for them; the logic, presumably, was that a plainclothes spy might obtain more valuable intelligence from higher-level sources. When their recruitment efforts failed, they continued to Princeton, resolved to capture prisoners for interrogation. Finally, by asking advice of common, New Jersey citizens at the war council of 2 January, Washington and his senior officers demonstrated their openness to all sources of intelligence.

3. **Present estimates in an appropriate format.**

John Cadwalader’s message to Washington included actionable intelligence in two formats, one written and one drawn. The letter was helpful, but the map clearly more so.

4. **Corroborate sources.**

The prisoners that Reed and the Light Horse brought to Trenton were interrogated separately to help ensure the accuracy of information they disclosed. Washington incorporated Cadwalader’s report into his understanding of this intelligence; it strengthened certain elements of the prisoners’ narrative, but weakened others.
In a letter to Nathanael Greene, Washington commented on how implausible American victory must have seemed to impartial observers. He suggested that the effort of historians to document the American Revolution would be in vain, since it will not be believed that such a force as Great Britain has employed for eight years in this country could be baffled, in their plan of subjugating it, by numbers infinitely less, composed of men sometimes half starved, always in rags, without pay, and experiencing, at times, every species of distress which human nature is capable of undergoing.\textsuperscript{57}

If one “big picture” lesson is to be learned from the topics discussed here, it is that the careful collection and analysis of intelligence can offset great disadvantage. The Battle of Princeton was one of many in an eight-year war whose asymmetry was balanced through competent leadership and superior intelligence.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Founding Fathers 13.}
\footnote{Founding Fathers 11-2.}
\footnote{Founding Fathers 9.}
\footnote{Daigler 88.}
\footnote{Lengel 50.}
\footnote{Ferling 28.}
\footnote{Founding Fathers 9.}
\footnote{Andrew 6.}
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\footnote{Flexner 119-20.}
\footnote{Schechter 266-7.}
\footnote{Davis 134.}
\footnote{Davis 136.}
\footnote{Davis 140.}
\footnote{Fischer 254.}
\footnote{Flexner 181.}
\footnote{Reed’s Narrative 399.}
\footnote{Flexner 181.}
\footnote{Flexner 182.}
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\footnote{Reed’s Narrative 399.}
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\footnote{Reed’s Narrative 399.}
\footnote{Life and Correspondence 283.}
\end{footnotes}
Reed’s Narrative 399.

29 *Life and Correspondence* 283.

30 Reed’s Narrative 399.

31 Fischer 280.

32 Reed’s Narrative 399-400.

33 Fischer 280.

34 *First Troop* 9.

35 *Washington’s Spies*, Chapter Two.

36 *Life and Correspondence* 283-4.

37 *Life and Correspondence* 284.

38 *Life and Correspondence* 284.

39 Cadwalader.

40 *Life and Correspondence* 283.

41 Fischer 281-2.

42 Fischer 315.

43 Fischer 314-5.

44 Washington 146-7.

45 Washington 148.

46 Flexner 189.


48 *Muster-roll* 15.

49 *Muster-roll* 16, 25.

50 Wilkinson 133-4.

51 *First Troop* 9n.

52 *First Troop* 8.

53 Reed’s Narrative 399.

54 Fischer 281.

55 Founding Fathers 9.

56 A Review of Congressional Oversight 2.

57 Washington 152.
Annex: Cadwalader’s Map†

† Cadwalader 1.
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