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## Spying during the Revolutionary War

**Enduring Understanding:** Students will analyze the different methods of intelligence used in the Revolutionary war and understand without the use of intelligence the USA would have lost the war.

**Hook:** Tell the students you are going to write something really important on this paper. What I am about to write can not get into the wrong hands. It is a secret, no one can know. (Write on the edible paper.) In fact it is iso important I don't want to take any chances . Eat the paper. (I got the edible paper at the spy museum but if you don't have any you can purchase it online.)

Tell students that during the Revolutionary War very important information couldn't get in the wrong hands, because of this there were many methods used to secure the information. Just a little side note: They didn't ever eat paper but they used many exciting and dangerous ways. Today we are going to learn those methods.

Show Video: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWR\\_4ofnxCU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWR_4ofnxCU)

Stop at 1:11 and ask the students what they think George Washington did? End at 1:41 otherwise it will give the methods away.

### Procedure: Jigsaw Method

1. Put students in groups of 5 or 6. Give each student an article to read, students will underline important details and take notes on the graphic organizer.

<http://www.myfoa.org/docs/mentoring/lessonplans/46GraphicOrganizers.pdf> pg 33

(Click on the above link for graphic organizer)

Articles: (Make sure to number the articles.)

The Culper Spy Ring (1)

Diplomatic Intelligence (2)

Cryptography (3)

Invisible Ink and Masked Letter (4)

Covert Action (5)

Military Intelligence (6)

2. Put students in expert groups by calling the same numbers on the article. (Ex: Cryptography is #3. ) Everyone in this group should all have the same article and become the experts on that article. The students discuss what they wrote on their graphic organizer with each other and add other important items brought up by others in the expert group.

3. Expert groups dissolve and go back to original group. Ask one student in each group to be the leader. (This student will make sure everyone gets a chance to discuss what they learned with the group.) Students will take turns sharing with the others in their group about what they learned. Make sure the students know it is important to listen to each student in their group and take notes because there will be an assessment at the end.

**Assessment:** Each student will create a foldable with a picture and a 3-5 sentence paragraph about each method used in the Revolutionary War.

(Example found: <http://www.myteacherpages.com/webpages/plash/files/foldables.pdf> pg 38

The Culper Spy Ring was established in 1778 by Benjamin Tallmadge under the orders of General George Washington. The ring was tasked with the mission of spying on the British Army and reporting on troop movements, positions, fortifications and plans in the New York area. The ring continued to operate until the end of the war in 1783.

In 1776, American spy Nathan Hale was hung after being caught by the British. Washington therefore determined to provide greater support to the Culper spy ring. The ring would use elaborate codes and aliases as well as dead drops and invisible ink in the course of their activities. Tallmadge (who went by the code name John Bolton) tapped two men for the task, Abraham Woodhull, a farmer from Setauket, New York and Robert Townsend, a merchant from Manhattan (Woodhull's code name was Samuel Culper, Sr. and Townsend's was Samuel Culper, Jr.).

Tavern keeper Austin Roe served as a courier and Caleb Brewster took the information on his ferry boat across the Long Island Sound where it was taken to General Washington. Anna Strong, the wife of a Long Island Patriot judge, would use her laundry as a way of signaling times and locations for the spies to meet. She would hang a black petticoat on the clothesline to indicate that Brewster was in town and available to ferry messages. She would then hang between one and six handkerchiefs on the line next to the petticoat in order to indicate the particular spot in which Brewster could be found. Another unidentified member of the ring was referred to as 355. 355 was believed to have passed along information garnered from Major John Andre and Benedict Arnold and she was believed to have been arrested and taken to the HMS Jersey where she was questioned and would later die after giving birth to a child.

The manner in which the ring operated was ingenious according to the conventions and limitations of the day. It was operated in such secrecy that even General Washington did not know the identity of many of the key players. Townsend ran a dry goods store and also was the society reporter a local American newspaper. His job as a reporter gave him access to British soldiers and functions without arousing suspicion. Roe would often drop by Townsend store and purchase goods as well as dropping off a special order from a Mr. Bolton.

After taking his goods he would leave and Townsend would go to an adjoining building and read the “request” and write a response. When Roe would come back to the adjoining building, Townsend would stuff his answers in with Roe’s goods. Roe would then ride by horseback more than 100 miles where he would leave the message in a dead drop box located in the middle of a field belonging to Woodhull. Woodhull would evaluate the information (sometimes adding to it) and then look across the bay at Strong’s signals to determine Brewster’s hiding place. Later that evening, Woodhull would find Brewster and give him the information. Brewster would then row across the water to Fairfield, Connecticut where he would meet with Tallmadge to deliver the messages, which would then be forwarded to Washington. The Culper Ring operated under constant pressure from Washington to obtain information but operated from even more pressure not to get caught by the British. Despite this, the ring is believed to have been the most successful on either side of the Revolutionary War. Of note, the group is believed to have played a central part in discovering the treachery of Benedict Arnold and to have learned of the British plans to ambush a unit of the French army arriving in Rhode Island (the consequences of which could have been devastating to the French and American newly-formed alliance).

[http://spymuseum.com/dt\\_portfolio/the-culper-spy-ring/](http://spymuseum.com/dt_portfolio/the-culper-spy-ring/)

## Diplomatic Intelligence (2)

I had a passion for intelligence gathering and I recruited the best people to spy for us. I instructed this group on the techniques of spying (or tradecraft as it is called today), the use of

cover stories to protect themselves, and the sending of messages in code. I didn't have a big staff so I did a lot of the intelligence analysis myself. Our methods might seem crude by today's standards, but we got the job done. I'll say our best talents were in military deception and counterintelligence. We would often give the enemy false information, and we were so good at it, they believed us! Why I still remember when I convinced British General Henry Clinton that I was going to attack New York City when, in fact, I was moving in for the final battle of the war at Yorktown, Virginia. Well, let's just say General Cornwallis was surprised!

On Nov. 29, 1775, the Continental Congress appointed another secret committee "for the sole purpose of corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world," called the Committee of Secret Correspondence. The objective of this correspondence was to collect intelligence regarding the extent of sympathy toward the American Revolution. The Committee of Secret Correspondence was lead by Benjamin Franklin, the only member experienced in foreign affairs. Arthur Lee, of the Lee family of Virginia and who was practicing law in London at the time, became the committee's first European agent. Franklin also corresponded with two of his trusted friends in Europe, Dr. Jacques Barbeu-Dubourg in Paris, and Charles W.F. Dumas in the Hague, asking them to sound out the possibility of an alliance with the U.S.

The French dispatched Julien Achard De Bonvouloir to America to study the situation there with respect to covert aid and political support, and the committee sent their own secret agent, Silas Deane, to France for the same purpose. Deane's mission resulted in the creation of a dummy corporation, Hortalez and Cie, through which the U.S. purchased French military supplies in exchange for commodities such as rice and tobacco.

On April 17, 1777, the Committee of Secret Correspondence was renamed the Committee of Foreign Affairs, but retained its intelligence function.

## Cryptography (3)

British and American spies used secret codes and ciphers to disguise their communications. A cipher is when letters, symbols, or numbers are used in the place of real words. In order to decode a cipher, the recipient of the letter must have a key to know what the coded letters, symbols, or words really mean.

In the letters to the left, Benedict Arnold used a cipher to deliver his messages secretly to John André. The cipher's key was a standard published book, either Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* or *Nathan Bailey's Dictionary*. When Arnold composed his letters, he first found the word he wanted to write in the key. Instead of writing the word directly in the letter, he wrote down the page number, the line number, and the number of the word counting over from the left. Therefore, each secret word was represented by a series of three numbers. For example, the second word in the letter of July 12, 1780, is "293.9.7" which stands for "wrote." André explained these methods in a letter he wrote on May 10, 1779.

American spies also used this method. After some letters were captured in 1779 by the British, Benjamin Tallmadge created a code using *Entick's Dictionary* for the Culper Gang.

Arnold and André also used other sneaky ways to hide the real content of their letters. Arnold and André pretended to be merchants. Arnold deliberately did not disguise some words with the cipher so that the letters seemed to be about normal business transactions. Anyone who intercepted these letters would see such business language and think the letters were part of routine commercial deals.

Other British and American spies used different types of ciphers and codes to communicate secretly. Some spies made up their own pocket dictionary to encode their messages. Each word had a corresponding number. Others spies assigned each letter in the alphabet a corresponding number. Some spies even transposed letters in the alphabet. Finally, other spies changed the names of major places, so that if the letters were captured, the other side would not know the places to which the letters really referred.

<http://clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/spies/methods-code.html>  
(For primary sources see above website.)

## **Invisible Ink and Masked Letter (4)**

### **Invisible Ink**

One form of secret writing used by both the British and American armies was invisible ink. Invisible ink, at the time of the Revolutionary War, usually consisted of a mixture of ferrous sulfate and water. The secret writing was placed between the lines of an innocent letter, in case they were intercepted by the enemy army, and could be discerned by treating the letter with heat by placing the paper over the flame of a candle or by treating it with a chemical reagent

such as sodium carbonate. John André gave instructions to British spies to mark their letters written in invisible ink with a 'F' for fire and 'A' for acid, so that the reader knew whether to use heat or a chemical solution to read the letter. Note the 'A' at the top of John Andre's letter to Henry Clinton of 1780. Benjamin Tallmadge also added invisible ink to his resources after the British captured some of his letters from the Culper Gang in 1779.

Letters written in invisible ink needed special care; water or other liquids could smear the invisible ink and make it impossible to read. The Rebel Army used invisible ink frequently to report to George Washington. There are some examples in the Library of Congress' collection of Washington's papers. Sir Henry Clinton's spy network did not use invisible ink as frequently, but we have included one example in our exhibit. The letter written by Benjamin Thompson to an unidentified person was written in invisible ink. The paper was either heated by flame or treated with acid, therefore the paper is very brittle and dark.

### **Mask Letter**

August 10, 1777 -- Henry Clinton to John Burgoyne

The British used one type of secret writing that appears to have been unknown to the Americans. Sir Henry Clinton composed letters that were meant to be read through a mask or grille, a technique known as the Cardan system. (The technique is named after Geronimo Cardano, one of the most famous code-makers in the sixteenth century.) Composition demanded care because the letter must make sense both with or without the mask. Clinton probably wrote the real message first- in this case in the shape of an hourglass figure. Additions were added to the beginning and end of the lines in order to manipulate the content. Advantages of the method include the ability to send the letter by one route and the mask by another, and an opportunity to convey false information if intercepted.

Clinton's letter to John Burgoyne is full of misinformation. The letter, read without the mask, exaggerates British military successes and available troops. Clinton writes that General William Howe's actions "just at this time have been capital." With the mask, however, Clinton expresses a different opinion, "I own to you that I think Sr.W's move just at this time the worst he could take."

Clinton also used masks in conjunction with printed material. He strategically cut small windows out of blank pieces of paper that could be placed over selected text in order to convey secret messages.

<http://clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/spies/methods-mask.html>

(For primary sources see above website.)

## **Covert Operations (5)**

### **A Look Back ... Benjamin Franklin: Founding Father of Covert Action**

*There was never a good war or a bad peace.*

—Benjamin Franklin

With the beginning of the Revolutionary War came the birth of American intelligence. Since then, the tradecraft of intelligence has been developed and improved to better protect our nation. Our nation's birthday is a good time to reflect on how intelligence tradecraft began.



### **Twice a Founding Father**

One founding father who contributed to the development of American Intelligence was Benjamin Franklin. He became known as a master of covert action.

Long before the war, Franklin had established a reputation as:

- a scientist of distinction,
- a seasoned diplomat,
- a world-class thinker, and
- a talented public servant.

He utilized all of these skills to carry out covert actions successfully. During the war, Franklin served as:

- an agent of influence,
- a propagandist,
- manager of covert French aid to the American Revolutionaries, and
- director of American paramilitary activities against the British.

### **Befriending the French**

In December 1776, Franklin was named the Ambassador to France. During his time in Paris, Franklin developed a relationship with the French Government that involved much more than diplomatic work. His real mission was to convince the French Government to become a military ally against the British.

In order to accomplish this, Franklin used his charm and virtues to establish a reputation as a friendly, humble and industrious American. This image was in stark contrast to how the French perceived the British at that time.

Franklin's charm and established friendships with French officials allowed him to successfully manipulate French perceptions of America. On more than one occasion, Franklin convinced the French authorities not to reduce secret aid or block American privateer ships from using French ports despite British protests and threats.

After the American victory during the Battle of Saratoga, Franklin convinced French leadership that he was seriously considering British peace proposals. He orchestrated meetings between the American Commissioners and British envoys, all the while informing French authorities of the discussions and keeping up appearances that a peace agreement was inevitable.

Franklin's trick worked. On January 7, 1778, the French Royal Council decided to negotiate an alliance with America.

### **A Master of Propaganda**

Franklin was also quite talented in producing convincing propaganda. One of his more famous propaganda operations involved generating dissatisfaction among German mercenaries serving with British forces in America.

In 1777, Franklin composed a letter from a Prussian Prince to the commander of the Prince's mercenary troops. The letter questioned casualty figures provided by the British Government and exposed British human rights violations committed against the Americans.

The forged letter also advised the commander to let his wounded soldiers die because the British would pay more for a death than for a wounded soldier. The letter was widely circulated in Europe and among Prussian troops in the colonies, and was credited with causing numerous desertions.

### **Paramilitary Operations**

During the Revolutionary War, Franklin was involved in many paramilitary operations, including coordinating the efforts of privateers operating out of French and other European ports against British shipping. Franklin also played a role in the only American military attack on the British Isles during the Revolutionary War period.

In April 1778, Captain John Paul Jones raided the British port of Whitehaven. Franklin and Jones had planned to burn the ships at port. However, once the attackers were ashore, the element of surprise was lost and they were forced to retreat. The cost of the damage was minimal; no more than 250 – 300 pounds (less than \$50,000 of today's U.S. dollars). Even though the raid was not successful, it was an important achievement for America in terms of propaganda and morale. A British town had been invaded for the first time since the late 1600s.

As a founding father, Benjamin Franklin understood that intelligence is as vital an element of national defense as a strong military. He also knew the importance of secrecy for conducting effective intelligence operations. Franklin used his intellect and humor to win friendships and build French support for the American independence struggle.

## **Military Intelligence (6)**

### **The Battle of Cowpens - Gaffney, South Carolina**

#### ***Cowpens National Battlefield***

On January 17, 1781, General Daniel Morgan turned the tide of the American Revolution. The Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina started the British down a road that would end with their monumental surrender at Yorktown, Virginia.

The battle took place as everything was going wrong in America's fight for independence. George Washington's army was bogged down in the North. The British had taken Charleston and then handed the Americans a devastating defeat at Camden, South Carolina. Banastre

Tarleton and his dragoons were riding rough-shod over South Carolina, and had just massacred a force of American soldiers at the Waxhaws.

Command of the American army in the South now fell to General Nathaniel Greene. Using an unexpected strategy, he sent Morgan into South Carolina to try to delay the British campaign.

Tantalizingly appearing and then falling back before Tarleton's oncoming legion, Morgan stretched the British officer's supply lines while giving his own force time to receive reinforcements. On January 17, 1781, however, he turned to fight.

Knowing Tarleton's reputation for rashness and the American militia's reputation for running under fire, General Morgan came up with an ingenious plan. He formed his men in a series of lines, militia in the front and his retreating Tarleton and there was a brief but deadly clash between the American and Legion horsemen. Washington engaged Tarleton himself and was almost killed when the British commander was joined by two of his officers. The American cavalryman lost his horse and by the time he could secure another, "Bloody Ban" had escaped.

Hannah's Cowpens had become a killing ground by the end of the battle. When the numbers were tallied, Tarleton's legion had been destroyed. The British lost 110 killed, 200 wounded and another 630 captured. American losses were around 25 killed and 125 wounded.

The Battle of Cowpens inspired the American armies with new hope. Morgan had defeated the most feared British force in the South and achieved the only successful double envelopment of the American Revolution.

Realizing the significance of his own victory, Morgan began a rapid withdrawal into North Carolina. He knew Cornwallis would be desperate to recapture his 630 prisoners so he drove his army north as fast as it could move. So began the famed Race to the Dan that under General Nathaniel Greene's leadership would become one of the most notable achievements of the Revolution.

to his men, Morgan explained his plan. The men in the front had only to fire a couple of times and then they could head for the rear. This seemed reasonable to the militiamen and they agreed to the plan.

The strategy worked. Morgan's front lines weakened the oncoming British with a volley fire and then headed for the rear. Tarleton, believing Morgan's men were breaking and running, ordered a charge. By the time the British reached the American regulars, they believed the Patriots were in full retreat.

Tarleton ordered his men to charge and they surged forward, but again ran into heavy fire, this time from Morgan's Continentals. A fierce firefight erupted, the Continentals standing toe to toe with the British while the militia forces reformed to the rear.

The critical moment came when part of Morgan's main line confused orders and began an organized retreat. Rushing forward, the general picked his moment then ordered his men to wheel and fire directly into the faces of the oncoming British.

The British assault collapsed. Sensing the moment of victory, the American militia rejoined the battle and suddenly the British were in full retreat. Their retreat became a disaster when the Americans charged them and all order disappeared in Tarleton's ranks.

One of the most remarkable moments of the day took place at this stage of the battle. As the British army collapsed and the Patriot soldiers waded into their lines, two of the American officers focused on the small British cannon. In a remarkable maneuver, Captain Anderson of Maryland used his spontoon (a lance carried by some officers) to "pole vault" onto one of the guns.

Washington's cavalry charged after the retreating Tarleton and there was a brief but deadly clash between the American and Legion horsemen. Washington engaged Tarleton himself and was almost killed when the British commander was joined by two of his officers. The American cavalryman lost his horse and by the time he could secure another, "Bloody Ban" had escaped.

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his army north as fast as it could move. So began the famed Race to the Dan that under General Nathaniel Greene's leadership would become one of the most notable achievements of the Revolution.

The battlefield at Cowpens is now a beautifully preserved and interpreted national park area. Located on Highway 11 in Gaffney, the park is open daily from 9 to 5 and is free to visit.

Walking trails lead through key areas of the battlefield, which is also ringed by a driving tour. The museum features artifacts, a film, weapons and more.

Cowpens National Battlefield is also on the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail which follows the route of the American army to the nearby Battle of Kings Mountain.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUKFj5FYdy4> (Battle of Cowpens video)