



ALMOST A TRAITOR: The Strange Case of Silas Deane

From very early on in the Revolutionary War, Silas Deane (1737-1789) played a no less than pivotal role in securing for America invaluable foreign aid and supplies from Europe. Notwithstanding such auspicious beginning, he was later accused by colleagues and members of Congress of using his position to make illicit, or at least inordinate, profits in financial speculation. These informal allegations (to make a long story short), pressed on Deane when he returned to the United States in 1778 subsequently brought about his dismissal by Congress from his post as envoy in France. Insofar as we later know, these charges turned out to be largely false. Despite the suspicions and acrimony of some members of Congress, such as former diplomatic associate Arthur Lee, he afterward tried to solicit reimbursement for personal money losses he incurred in the course of his seeking and procuring munitions, clothing and other subsidies vital to the American war effort; only to have Congress summarily reject those claims.¹

In late 1781, following Yorktown and after returning to France to settle some personal matters, some personal letters he had written to his brother, and some others, were captured by the British, and published in the loyalist New York newspaper *Rivington's Gazette*. In this correspondence, he expressed his despairing of the American military situation and the ineptitude of Congress to govern, a strong disapproval of the French, and a desire to settle for an honorable and amicable reconciliation with Britain. Although the publication of these letters did little to bolster British aims or change the course of the Revolution, they did prove an indelible scandal and embarrassment to Deane; who defended his writings as being nothing more than expressions of his private opinion at the time. Few accepted this as an excuse; such that he subsequently suffered the ignominy of being lumped with Arnold.

It is not all that implausible that Deane may have been placed under enticements and pressures not all that dissimilar to what Benedict Arnold was subject to; only while fellow Connecticut native Arnold actually turned coat, Deane only went so far as to consider doing so -- but went no further. Nonetheless, this was enough to damn him in the eyes of many. One piece of evidence that suggests his being so tempted is Deane's argument against the French; saying that they had allied themselves with America only to get even with Britain and had no real sympathy with American ideals. This, after all, seems a very silly complaint, coming from an experienced and savvy ambassador no less; when even if true, the French could hardly be blamed for such a motive; nor should it have come as a surprise that the Bourbon court might look askance at *Revolutionary* goals and aspirations. That Deane should propose such an argument suggests that he was using it as an excuse to cover his resentment of Congress', and presumably also the French court's mistreatment of him. Like Arnold, therefore, it seems not impossible that Deane was being deliberately probed and antagonized by "someone" in order to push him to the brink. But again, unlike Arnold, Deane only neared the brink and it was *not* possible, as it turned out, to actually thrust him over it.

This seems further supported by Arnold's bizarre and persistent effort when in London to become friendly to and make Deane's association -- which Deane took great pains to avoid, as reported in this letter he wrote to Benjamin Franklin:

"London, October 19th, 1783

"Sir, - I am informed by Col. Wadsworth and others lately from Paris that it was currently reported of me

¹ Years after his death, Deane was vindicated in this last, with the United States awarding his heirs a large amount in compensation.

that I was intimate with General Arnold, and that a pamphlet lately published by Lord Sheffield owed to me most of the facts and observations contained in it. I have found by experience that from the moment a man becomes unpopular every report which any way tends to his prejudice is but too readily credited without the least examination or proof, and that for him to attempt to contradict them in public is like an attack on the hydra; for every falsehood detected and calumny obviated several new ones of the same family come forward. This has well nigh rendered me callous to the attacks made on me in this way; yet it is impossible for me not to wish to stand fair in the opinion of those with whom I formerly acted, with whose confidence and friendship I have been more particularly honored, and this occasions me troubling you with this letter. Though you have condemned me of giving been guilty of great imprudence (and that justly), yet I have the satisfaction to know that you are still convinced of my integrity and fidelity whilst in the service of my country, and whilst I had the honor of being your colleague; and I wish to remove from your mind, if possible, every idea of my having acted an unfriendly part toward the interest of my country, or of my having countenanced so notorious an enemy as General Arnold by associating with him since my arrival in this city. The next day after my being in London, when I had no reason to suspect that any one knew any thing of me save those to whom I had sent notice of my being in town, and of my lodgings, I was surprized to find General Arnold introduced into my chamber without being announced by my landlord until he opened the door (my circumstances do not permit me to keep a servant). Several gentlemen were with me, and among others Mr. Hodge of Philadelphia. I can most sincerely say that I never was more embarrassed; and after a few questions on either part, and as cold a civility as I could use consistent with common decency, he took his leave. You well know that he is one who never wanted for assurance or address, and, as if we had been on our former footing, he urged me, at parting, to dine with him, which I civilly declined. The next day I changed my lodgings, and received from him repeatedly cards of invitation to his house, which I declined accepting, and in a few days he again called on me, at my new lodgings, in the same unceremonious manner as before. A gentleman from America was then with me, and remained in my chamber until he left me. On my parting with him on the stairs, I told him very freely that his visits were disagreeable to me, and could be of no service to him; that I could not return them, except that I might call with Mr. Sebor some evening to pay our respects to Mrs. Arnold, from whom I had received so many civilities in Philadelphia. This we did a few evenings after, and from that time, now more than five months since, I have not seen him, except in his carriage, passing me in the street.”²

As for Arnold himself, Hessian officer Johannes Ewald, who ended up serving under him in Virginia for a spell in early 1781, left us this additional description:

“He was a man of medium size, well built, with lively eyes and fine features. He could be very polite and agreeable, especially at the table, but if one stayed too long in his company, then the apothecary and horse trader [his pre-war employments] showed through the general. He spoke a great deal about his heroic deeds on the other side, and frequently mentioned his ingenious trick at West Point, a story which he could make ridiculous with much wit.

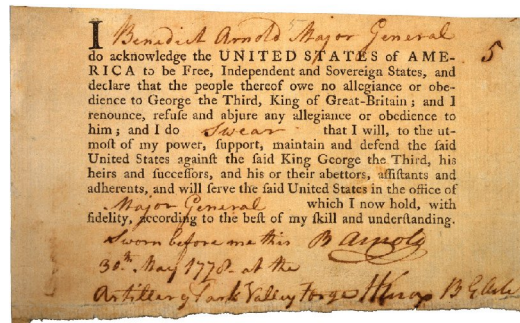
“In his military actions he constantly displayed his former resolution, which, however, was mixed with a cautious concern due to his fear of the gallows if he fell into the hands of his countrymen. He always carried a pair of small pistols in his pocket as a last resource to escape being hanged. I have watched him very closely, and I found him very restless on the day the Americans threatened to take Portsmouth with a coup de main. On that day, he was not the ‘American Hannibal.’

“His dishonorable undertaking, which, had it succeeded, could have actually turned the war more favorably for England, nevertheless cannot be justified, for surely self-gain alone had guided him, and not remorse for having taken the other side. If he really felt in his conscience that he had done wrong in siding against his mother country, he should have sheathed his sword and served no more, and then made known in writing his opinions and reasons. This would have gained more proselytes than his shameful enterprise,

² “The Deane Papers,” vol. V, 1782-1790; found in *Collections of the New York Historical Society* (1890), pp. 212-215.

which every man of honor and fine feelings -- whether he be friend or foe of the common cause -- must loathe."³

True, Arnold, by his cynical and mercenary betrayal, while risking the lives of innocents in the process, did in fact do an undeniably sinister thing. Yet what emerges in retrospect, and as illustrated by the above quoted passage, is that his error was, after all, really that of a buffoon, and that, further, he was brought to the pass of making his fatal error maybe as a direct result of someone else clearly understanding how to exploit his weakness. Such as Arnold, or for that matter some of the more famous dictators of the 20th century, were, it could be argued, not themselves intrinsically bad people, but really only frail and foolish ones; but whose foolishness was used by someone who was (and presumably still is) evil. This is not to exonerate Arnold, etc. of their responsibility to do right and avoid wrong, or absolve them of the moral obligation not to be a great bane or curse to the world. The point is merely one of bringing attention to what seems to be the distinct possibility of a mysterious figure in the shadows isolating, guiding and luring such dupes onto villainous acts; while to ignore this only increases the likelihood of our misunderstanding what might actually have taken place; thus perhaps putting more blame, or at least opprobrium, on Arnold than was *all told* duly his.



On the 3rd of February 1778, Congress, for purposes of deterring or removing any possibly lukewarm or loyalist leaning patriots, passed a resolution requiring United States officers to sign a pledge affirming their fidelity to the cause. Above, from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. is a photo of one such oath; witnessed at Valley Forge on May 30, 1778 by Brig. Gen. Henry Knox.

William Thomas Sherman

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³ Capt. Johann Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal*, trans. and edit. by Joseph P. Tustin, pp. 294-296.