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The American Way of Propaganda: Lessons from the Founding Fathers

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Introduction

One of the most contentious debates in the war on terrorism centers on the “hearts and minds” aspect of the fight. Many argue for complete transparency in U.S. message-making, emphasizing the softer aspects of public diplomacy. A minority argues that the United States must make greater use of edgier information instruments such as propaganda, political action and psychological warfare. Critics of the minority view say such actions are un-democratic and unworthy of serious consideration as instruments – let alone weapons – of American statecraft. The methods, however, were part of the American founding. This article discusses how the fathers of the United States employed public diplomacy, propaganda, counterpropaganda and political warfare as instruments of democracy in the struggle for independence.

An American tradition

John Adams, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington recognized that the opinions and perceptions of foreign governments, publics, and armies mattered, and they used information operations as instruments of first resort in the American Revolution. They did it to seek support from elements within the British Empire and among Britain’s European rivals. Their efforts led to a global coalition in support of American independence and democracy, though in reality the coalition was united not by democratic principles but by a common enemy.

The positive American messages of justice, equality, independence and democracy had limited appeal at home as well as abroad. Often they conflicted with interests of potential or actual allies. American revolutionary leaders knew it, especially in France where they needed the financial and military support of the king but where their republican ideas were stridently anti-aristocratic, and indeed subversive to the French government. Among English Puritan and Presbyterian colonists, lingering hostility from the French and Indian War of a generation earlier, in which the Americans fought as British to force the French from North America, remained strong, to say nothing of anti-Catholic sentiment.

For all their mutual suspicions, the American revolutionaries and French monarchy found a common cause, if not in their ideals, in a common foe. Hopelessly outmatched against the world's most formidable military power, the American founders compensated asymmetrically with public diplomacy, propaganda, counterpropaganda and political warfare. They never used those terms – all came into vogue as we know them in the twentieth century – but they employed all the measures, integrating them with domestic politics, secret diplomacy, intelligence and warfare with decisive strategic effect.

Public diplomacy, according to an operating U.S. government definition, “seeks to promote the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.”¹ It consists usually of positive messages as a polite and nuanced form of propaganda.

Counterpropaganda is, literally, the act or product of countering the propaganda of one's adversary. *Political warfare* is the employment of aggressive and even coercive political means to achieve objectives, ranging from winning a tough campaign for public office to achieving military objectives through non-military means.² Closely related to political warfare, but almost purely military, is the discipline of *psychological operations* (PSYOP), which the military calls “planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups and individuals.”³ PSYOP is more manipulative than public diplomacy, and the U.S. generally uses it tactically, not strategically.

All these instruments bred the American revolution. Massachusetts patriot Samuel Adams pioneered what a biographer called a blend of “philosophy and action in ongoing political struggles.” A follower of 17th century English philosopher John Locke, Adams typically mounted a relentless negative political or ideological attack followed by a positive alternative solution that would keep the enemy on the defensive. The alternative was soundly based in philosophical and moral terms. Adams strategically integrated the negative and the positive with political action both at home and, when necessary and possible, abroad.⁴

¹ United States Information Agency (USIA) definition, cited by USIA Alumni Association, on its PublicDiplomacy.org Website, accessed 21 November 2005. Public diplomacy has many variations, according to the government agency involved, as well as to independent observers and practitioners.

² Political warfare, according to a National Defense University publication, is “the use of political means to compel an opponent to do one's will, political being understood to describe purposeful intercourse between peoples and governments affecting national survival and advantage. Political war may be combined with violence, economic pressure, subversion, and diplomacy, but its chief aspect is the use of words, images and ideas, commonly known, according to context, as propaganda and political warfare.” Paul A. Smith, *On Political War* (Washington: National Defense University, 1989), p. 3.

³ Joint Pubs 1-02, Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (1994).

⁴ John K. Alexander, *Samuel Adams: America's Revolutionary Politician* (Rowland & Littlefield, 2004), p. 12

The positive approach: promote ideas, values, and an image of victory

The American struggle for self-determination spawned the creation of a country based not on language, race, class, ancestry or geography, but a nation whose common bond was an idea. This transformational concept of nationality derived from common ideas and values embraced “self-evident” universal truths that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The authors of the Declaration of Independence intended their words to go far beyond the American colonies and the king and parliament in London. They took their message to the world. Thus in the first action of its existence, the United States government initiated an international public diplomacy campaign.

Twice in the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress appealed to international public opinion in support of the cause and principles of freedom. In the preamble explaining the need for severing ties to Britain, the founders noted that “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they [the people] should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” To substantiate their philosophical and practical reasoning, the elected representatives of the people said they would “let Facts be submitted to a candid world.” Their message-making campaign was global.

Being morally right was insufficient, especially among European leaders who saw no moral superiority among the Americans or who viewed the conflict with Britain on traditional, great-power terms. Those leaders influenced or controlled the cash, the material supplies, the munitions, and the military forces that the outmatched Americans desperately needed. The colonial rebels had to project an image of strength and invincibility. Against the British who out-powered them in seemingly every way, building that credible image would take time and sacrifice. It would also mean waging constant political and psychological attacks on the crown and its agents.

The negative approach: “Keep the enemy in the wrong”

The second and inseparable track of the founders’ public diplomacy and political warfare strategy was to attack the enemy relentlessly. All forms of warfare need an enemy, including any good political campaign, and so vilification of the British government was at least as strong as positive messages in early American public diplomacy. Samuel Adams, the earliest proponent of secession who helped author and signed the Declaration, consistently pursued the two-track campaign. The first step, he argued, must be the negative attack, couched when possible in comity and amity by allowing the adversary’s misconduct speak for itself, but always attacking. He counseled in 1775, “It is a good Maxim in Politicks as well as in War to put & keep the Enemy in the Wrong.”⁵

⁵ Samuel Adams, letter to Richard Henry Lee, March [21], 1775, Samuel Adams Papers, Lenox Library; a shorter text is in Force, *American Archives*, 4th ser., vol. ii., p. 176 ; portions of the letter are printed in W. V. Wells, *Life of Samuel Adams*, vol. ii., pp. 256, 257, 281.

Leading Bostonian opposition to the Stamp Act and other laws Parliament imposed on the colonies in the 1760s, he pioneered new methods of democratic political warfare, combining scandal, outrage, and demands for justice with public accountability and transparency, ridicule, shame and abuse. He worked through the English constitutional and legal system, using the system as a weapon against its very self, exploiting laws, procedures and precedents to his revolutionary advantage. As he orchestrated political takeovers on the inside, he attacked the system as politically and morally illegitimate from the outside to show that the crown could do nothing to meet the people's fair demands against taxation without representation. He worded legislative resolutions and other pronouncements in ways designed to put the local royal authorities, as well as parliament and the king, in impossible situations, placing them in lose/lose positions for which to attack them no matter what decision they made. Taking advantage of the crown's own mis-steps and the dislikable traits of colonial authorities in Boston, Adams built parallel political and administrative structures that mocked and negated British rule while creating new, legitimate democratic formations that demonstrated both the limits of the crown's power and the new powers of the people.⁶

Crowds made effigies of royal officials and hanged them from the branches of the Liberty Tree before thousands of enthralled Bostonians. A weak speaker, Adams understood the integration of oratory with the written word and the visual image. Recruiting a young, wealthy merchant named John Hancock, he ensured that protesters were outfitted with elaborate costumes, props, and musical instruments to lead protest songs in harborside demonstrations and parades through Boston's streets. He filled broadsheets with news of events that he created or orchestrated. Newspapers throughout the colonies and in London reported about the brash and colorful spectacles that energized crowds and made stories interesting and exciting to tell and retell. They reinforced the fears and hopes of political figures in other colonies, warning them that if the people of Boston were threatened, the people of all the colonies would be threatened.

Adams defined his enemy early and kept it in the wrong for decades, relentlessly and often alone, provoking, alerting and educating the people about the dangers of a king's rule and a parliament in which the far-flung subjects could never be truly represented.

1775: British saw political warriors more dangerous than soldiers

Throughout the American independence period, the British repeatedly complained about revolutionary propaganda, and often viewed the political warriors as more dangerous than the shockingly unconventional warriors on the battlefield. For the Americans, propaganda and political action would compensate in the asymmetrical war ahead – areas where the British were not as competent in their wayward colonies – and the British knew it.

⁶ Alexander recounts Adams' political maneuvering throughout his book. In his 1935 biography, heavily sourced with primary materials, John C. Miller shows Adams as a skilled backdoor political maneuverer. See John C. Miller, *Samuel Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Stanford University Press, 1966; reprint of Little, Brown edition of 1936), *passim*.

General Thomas Gage, British military governor of Massachusetts, considered the two as the most dangerous men of the nascent rebellion. On receiving orders to arrest the entire elected political leadership of the colony, Gage focused on Adams and Hancock, marching 800 troops to Lexington where his spies reported they were hiding, and which sat astride the road to Concord, where Gage intended to capture rebel a powder magazine. Paul Revere foiled the plan on his famous Midnight Ride, helping Adams and Hancock escape as the British approached the town. The war began literally as a British attempt to capture the colonial propagandists.

As volunteers massed around Boston to fight what would become the Battle of Bunker Hill and the Continental Congress named 43 year-old George Washington as commander of the new Continental Army, Gage issued a proclamation to pardon any and all American rebels – including Washington - who had opposed, fought or even killed the king’s forces. In capital letters he made only two exceptions: “SAMUEL ADAMS and JOHN HANCOCK, whose offences are of too flagitious a nature to admit of any other consideration than condign punishment.”⁷

A winning combination

Neither man would hang; both would be re-elected to the Continental Congress and, with Hancock as Congress President and Adams operating behind the scenes, help craft the Declaration of Independence. As the unanimous bedrock statement of principle of the United States of America, the declaration illustrates the founding fathers’ three-part approach to communicating their message. The document begins with repeated positive statements of rights, ideals and obligations, including the right to oust repressive governments. Second, it resists Britain’s divide-and-conquer colonial strategy and aims at attracting other large powers as allies by showing inter-colonial unity. Finally, it vilifies the repressive government, while sparing the British people and even parliament, laying all blame on the king: “The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.”

For good measure, the Founders – 32 year-old Thomas Jefferson mainly, collaborating with Samuel Adams⁸ – substantiated their accusations with a litany of

⁷ Gen. Thomas Gage, “A Proclamation,” *Philadelphia Evening Post*, June 14, 1775, pp. 1, 2 and 3. In Institute of World Politics historical collection.

⁸ Samuel Adams had more of a role in authoring the Declaration of Independence, both intellectually and operationally, than many historians credit. Though Jefferson physically wrote the Declaration, the much of the wording is from Samuel Adams, who had been using the rhetoric for a decade or more. Rep. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, a close Adams ally who was considered as radical as the Bostonian, introduced the resolution for the Continental Congress to declare independence while Adams, seeking unanimity, tried to limit dissent. Alexander, pp. 154-155. Lee introduced the resolution on June 7, 1776, and Congress, under the presidency of Adams protégé John Hancock, created a committee to draft the declaration, which consisted of John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Robert Livingston of New York, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. Jefferson, at age 32, was a compromise member. Fellow Virginian Lee was considered too militant, while the other, Benjamin Harrison, was too conservative for Lee’s supporters. Some saw a Samuel Adams in one of Jefferson’s

crimes that reads like an indictment of the king, accusing him of everything from arbitrariness, illegality, abuse and neglect to hinting that His Majesty was not only a tyrant, but unwholesome, criminal, and possibly even unmanly. The king refused to approve necessary local laws, respected only those who signed away their rights, and harassed legislative assemblies “for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance.”

George III dissolved public legislatures and blocked the people from electing new lawmakers, prevented the states from determining their own population policies, obstructed justice and manipulated judges, and “erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat of their substance.” The king kept standing armies in local communities without the people’s consent, and outside the control of civil authorities. He waged economic warfare on the colonies, cutting off their trade, taxing the people arbitrarily, and denying them jury trials. Indeed, he abolished English law and replaced it with arbitrary government. Now, the framers said, the king “has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War on us.”

“He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of the people,” according to the Declaration. The document referred to the anticipated arrival of Hessian troops: “He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat [sic] the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.” That was certainly putting the enemy in the wrong. For the purposes of discussing public diplomacy, propaganda and political warfare, we see that the words comprise the first document issued by the United States of America.

Targeting British audiences

Well before the revolution began, colonial leaders targeted British public opinion and elites to push for changes that they were powerless to influence within parliament. They took advantage of the often freewheeling English newspapers’ substantial coverage of colonial politics and developments, and produced declarations and domestic news stories that they believed would be picked up in the British press. The newspaper industry of the time depended on contributed letters and essays, which were often published anonymously or pseudonymously, and American patriots wrote prolifically.

Without their own representation in parliament, American anti-tax ran campaigns to pressure the British legislature indirectly. Their successful boycotts forced parliament to repeal the Stamp Act of 1763. With the imposition of the Townshend Duties in 1767, Boston, New York and Philadelphia led a “non-importation” effort and public boycotts, a form of economic warfare. They would make English merchants feel the pain. The efforts

writings, and while the young Virginian was very quiet, he privately shared Adams’ sentiments. John Adams persuaded Jefferson to join the committee because he was a Virginian and because “you can write ten times better than I can.” A. J. Langguth, *Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), pp. 344-345.

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succeeded with the repeal of the Stamp Act, but they soon found a far more British determined government of Prime Minister Frederick North.

Colonial legislatures circumvented the royally appointed governors and named their own agents to represent their interests in London. Four of them hired Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania. Known for his charm and quick wit, Franklin was a popular figure in London where he had lived for years, all the more respected for his reputation as a political philosopher, an inventor, and a cutting-edge scientist experimenting with electricity.

Franklin, who like most colonists at the time considered himself an Englishman from America, arrived late to the cause of independence. He wrote influential articles in London against the Stamp Act and against the crown's abuse of its colonial subjects. Like nearly all the Founding Fathers at that point, he merely sought to extend all the rights of English subjects, so he naturally was positioned to fuel internal British opposition to the ruling Tories. Franklin worked with pro-American groups like the Society of 13 and the Society of 1774, exploited the opposition press, and blamed Lord North for his failures to work out reasonable agreements with the colonies.

Pointing to Samuel Adams and other radicals who wanted independence, Franklin and other agents attempted to warn the British that they risked antagonizing the thirteen colonies forever. Sometimes they tried to mediate between sides. Franklin often used satire. He penned a pamphlet in 1773, "Rules By Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced," a tongue-in-cheek guide to destroying the British imperium that showed that the king and parliament were following directions perfectly.⁹

A year before declaring independence, on July 6, 1775, the Continental Congress explained colonial grievances in a "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms." The declaration was an eloquent explanation from Americans who still considered themselves Englishmen, who feared a trans-Atlantic civil war (not dreamed independence) and sought to save the union with London. It was also fundamentally a propaganda document, addressing "our friends and fellow subjects in any part of the empire," as well as "before God and the World."¹⁰

Twelve months later, in the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress explained the colonists' diligent attempts to communicate with their royal brothers in private diplomacy as well as public. They neatly summarized the Samuel Adams approach of keeping the enemy constantly in the wrong while promoting the goodness of one's own cause. That approach would be the standard of American public diplomacy, political warfare and propaganda throughout the nation's founding.

⁹ Benjamin Franklin, "Rules by which a Great Empire may be reduced to a Small One," *The Public Advertiser* (London), 11 September 1773, in Walter Isaacson, ed., *A Benjamin Franklin Reader* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), pp. 240-248.

¹⁰ Continental Congress, "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms," 7 July 1775, from Library of Congress.

Targeting Canada, Bermuda and Ireland

As a major British possession adjoining the colonies, Canada presented both a dangerous enemy rearguard and an opportunity. The First Continental Congress voted in 1775 to invade Canada to cut off British supplies and replenished troops from Quebec and Montreal. Via the Boston Committee of Correspondence, Samuel Adams directed U.S. propaganda operations in Canada. He appealed for a combined North American front against the British. Gen. George Washington wrote a specific letter “To the Inhabitants of Canada” and another to the people of Bermuda, calling for their support. Washington’s letter to the Canadians said, in part:

Come then, my Brethern, Unite with us in an indissoluble Union. Let us run together to the same Goal. We have taken up Arms in Defence of our Liberty, our Property; our Wives and our Children: We are determined to preserve them or die. We look forward with pleasure to that day not far remote (we hope) when the Inhabitants of America shall have one Sentiment and the full Enjoyment of the blessings of a Free Government.¹¹

The Continental Congress soon authorized a propaganda operation to urge Canadians to join as a “sister colony” against the British. Under the supervision of Franklin and a few others, the newly-created Committee of Secret Correspondence, considered the nation’s first foreign intelligence agency, sent a French printer to Quebec “to establish a free press . . . for the frequent publication of such pieces as may be of service to the laws of the United States.” The committee also recruited French Catholic priests to promote Canada secession to the rebel cause. The effort failed, however, due in part to excesses of American troops who attacked Montreal and Quebec, a hostile Canadian clergy, French-Canadian antipathy toward the openly anti-Catholic New Englanders on their border, and Congress’s inability to deliver more than promises.¹²

While the Continental Congress failed to gain the Canadian provinces’ secession from Britain, the British decried the effectiveness of American propaganda efforts. The British colonial secretary in Canada complained that unrest was growing with “the minds of the people poisoned by the same hypocrisy and lies practised with so much success in the other provinces, and which their emissaries and friends here have spread abroad with great art and diligence.” British General John Burgoyne blamed his recruitment woes in Canada “to the poison which the emissaries of the rebels have thrown into their mind.”¹³

Coordinating secret intelligence with message-making

The American founders sought to coordinate the collection of secret intelligence with public message-making. Fortuitous and well-exploited intelligence collection in England, warned the patriots in advance that the crown would send thousands of

¹¹ George Washington, “To the Inhabitants of Canada,” September 6, 1775, in *George Washington: A Collection*, comp. and ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988).

¹² Central Intelligence Agency, “Intelligence and the War of Independence,” undated. Electronic version accessed on CIA Website at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/warindep/frames.html>.

¹³ Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (Manchester University Press, 1990, 2003), pp. 134, 135-136.

mercenaries from the German principality of Hesse to augment its own Redcoat regulars. That knowledge, combined with the Americans' instincts for psychological warfare learned during the French and Indian War, enabled the Continental Congress and General George Washington to run successful psyops against the Hessian troops and divide thousands of them from the British.

From London in September 1775, Franklin warned the Continental Congress that the German Prince of Hesse was visiting to sign an agreement with George III to hire Hessian mercenaries. "The leading people, among the Germans of Pennsylvania, should likewise be consulted," he said in his secret letter. The British king signed the agreement in November 1775, Congress found out quickly in January 1776, and by the spring the Americans had already devised a psychological warfare effort to divide the Hessians from the British army and discredit the British government. Thanks to Franklin's secret work, the Continental Congress received copies of the British-Hessian treaties in May. Gen. Washington asked Congress President Hancock about raising German-American groups to promote desertions, while the Congress appointed John Adams, Jefferson and to others to a new committee to make propaganda out of the treaties, or in its words, to "extract and publish the treaties," and to "prepare an address to the foreign mercenaries who are coming to invade America."

Events quickened their pace and they bear recounting to illustrate how the Americans operated. In June, a Samuel Adams protégé in Congress introduced the resolution to declare independence. Under Hancock's leadership, continental lawmakers unanimously adopted the declaration on July 4, in which they referred to the incoming troop fleets of "large Armies of foreign Mercenaries." With his distinctive penmanship Hancock signed the document immediately. The rest signed it on August 2. A week later, Congress set up a committee to devise a plan to encourage Hessian desertions. Three days afterward, on August 12, the Hessians landed in New York.

By this time, Franklin had returned to Philadelphia and joined Adams and Jefferson on the Hessian desertion committee. The Continental Congress resolved to protect non-English deserters from the British forces (Hessians, Irish, Scots and others) and give them each 50 acres of land for them to start a new life as free Americans. It ordered leaflets printed in English and in German, and sent copies to Gen. Washington in New York. The congressional desertion committee issued its report on August 14; on the 18th, Washington summoned Christopher Ludwick, an American army cook born in Hesse, to be his agent to infiltrate Hessian ranks. Franklin had the leaflets printed at his shop and sent them to troops in New Jersey on August 24. Two days later, Washington reported that his agents successfully infiltrated the leaflets among Hessian ranks. That same day, Franklin and John Adams wrote a congressional resolution to non-English officers in the British military, offering a sweeter deal of hundreds of acres of land to each deserter. The resolution was immediately translated into German and printed the night of August 26-27.

The Battle of Long Island (Battle of Brooklyn) raged on August 27 and 28, ending in a quick British win before Franklin could send the congressional pamphlets to

New York. Washington wrote to Hancock on the 29th, “As to the Encouragement to the Hessian Officers, I wish it may have the desired effect, perhaps it might have been better, had the offer been made sooner.”

The British soon occupied New York City. Washington learned in mid-October that a Hessian deserter said his comrades had not been receiving the leaflets, and that the British made the Hessians fear surrendering to the Americans. Later Washington and other military commanders learned that British officers told their Hessian mercenaries that if they deserted, the “shaggily clad” Americans would cannibalize them, so the Hessians would have to “exterminate first” if they were to live. It was easy for the Hessians to believe, as many American troops wore tattered and filthy civilian clothes unbecoming to any European soldier, and U.S. snipers, who had the bad form to shoot enemy officers, were dressed as “savage Indians.”

With time and patience, the strategy to divide the Hessians worked. One in six deserted. Playing up the use of German professional mercenaries among British troops also paid dividends to the United States, not only to discredit the empire, but to show the great odds against which the heroic Americans would fight. When news of British General John Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga reached Europe in late 1777, the French realized that the American irregulars, against troops of two of the world’s best armies, had a fighting chance. Now in his third year in Paris, Franklin was already prepared for the moment.

Secret and public diplomacy in France

Nearly a half-year before the first shots at Lexington and Concord, French Foreign Minister Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, noted the increasing friction between most of the thirteen colonies and what he called the metropolis in London. The loss of nearly all its North American territories in the Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War) still fresh, Vergennes observed the tension with anticipation. “The quarrel between the colonies and the British government seems to grow more serious every day,” he wrote in late 1774. “It may prove the most fatal blow to the authority of the metropolis.” The rift was an opportunity for France – if the upstart Americans had a chance of winning.¹⁴

The war broke out in April, 1775. King George III declared the colonies in rebellion in August. In October, realizing that the Anglo-American political break was irreconcilable, Franklin returned to Philadelphia after a decade in England. During Franklin’s long sailing journey home, the French ambassador in London, the comte de Guines, proposed to Vergennes that he send a secret agent to Philadelphia to collect intelligence on the capabilities and needs of the revolutionary American government and its military. He dispatched a young retired military officer who had recently returned from the colonies for the job. Disguised as a merchant from Antwerp, the agent went to sea shortly after Franklin.

¹⁴ Eric Niderost, “Revolutionary Spymaster: Benjamin Franklin,” *American History*, February 2006, p. 56.

As happened so often, despite the length of transatlantic journeys and slowness of communication, events moved quickly. Franklin landed in Philadelphia in October, whereupon citizens almost immediately elected him to the Continental Congress. In November, Congress established the five-man Committee of Secret Correspondence intelligence service. Franklin was the only committee member who knew Europe, and he was well known and regarded across the continent for his scientific and philosophical works.¹⁵ He also spoke some French.

Despite the dire conditions of the American military, Franklin appears to have exaggerated the force's strengths to French intelligence, just as Washington had been doing in elaborate deception operations against the British military. The French agent, Bonvouloir, filed a hugely inflated report on December 28, saying that "Everyone here is a soldier, the troops are well clothed, well paid and well armed. They have more than 50,000 regular soldiers and an even larger number of volunteers who do not wish to be paid. Judge how men of this caliber will fight." In truth, only about five thousand poorly paid, ill-trained, hungry cold men comprised Washington's army.¹⁶

Bonvouloir apparently never second-guessed Franklin, and Vergennes did not question Bonvouloir. The false report persuaded King Louis XVI and his divided court to aid the Americans, covertly at first, and with the secret assistance of Spain. By early 1776, the Vergennes secured funding from the French and Spanish kings to set up a front company, Hortalez & Cie, to provide weapons and other material assistance to the Americans while officially keeping their neutrality.¹⁷

With France now covertly aiding the Americans in the war, the Continental Congress sent Franklin to France, where he would attempt to negotiate a formal military alliance against the British. The struggling United States had little to offer the cash-strapped French for such a high-risk venture, but the strategy was for the U.S. to check British imperial expansion, in this case by American diplomacy and political action backed by French wealth and military force. London saw the septuagenarian Franklin, crossing the Atlantic with his two grandsons, as one of its greatest threats. British Ambassador Lord Stormont, who also headed the king's secret service station in France, wrote less than admiringly to the British Foreign Secretary in London: "I cannot but suspect that he comes charged with a secret Commission from Congress . . . and as he is a subtle, artful Man, and void of all Truth, he will, in that Case, use every means to deceive. . . . He has the advantage of several intimate connexions here, and stands high in the general opinion. . . . In a word, my Lord, I look upon him as a dangerous engine and am very sorry that some English frigate did not meet him by the way."¹⁸

British agents spread rumors in Paris that Franklin had given up the revolutionary cause as lost, enriched himself with 30,000 pounds of gold, and sought asylum from the

¹⁵ G. J. A. O'Toole, "Intrigue in Paris," in Edmund R. Thompson, ed., *Secret New England: Spies of the American Revolution* (Provincial Press, 2001), pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ Langguth, pp. 325-326.

¹⁷ O'Toole, p. 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

king. Stormont made the mistake of ridiculing Franklin's humble beaver-skin hat, not appreciating adoring Parisians who swooned the American's exotic back-woods appearance. In response, Franklin coined a French verb, *stormonter*, meaning to lie, and the word was an instant hit.¹⁹

Franklin was hugely popular in France, where the Age of Reason began to eclipse that of divine right of kings. French journals already had published his works on science and theory. Parisians bought engraved and painted portraits of him and set them on their mantels. Franklin's distinctive profile decorated snuff boxes. Deliberately trading his Philadelphia silk clothes for his hat and rustic "Quaker" attire, he personified the American Revolution.²⁰

In the course of making the rounds of Parisian society and cultivating support in Spain, Franklin prepared action plans, well in advance, to implement instantly when the opportunity presented itself. That moment came in December, 1777, when news reached Europe that General Burgoyne had surrendered in October to American troops at Saratoga. Franklin knew his next move: a proposed Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France, part of which included an American military alliance with France and Spain against the British. He had already written a draft in anticipation. Less than two months later he signed a Franco-American military alliance. The army and navy of King Louis XVI formally engaged, sealing ultimate defeat for the British.²¹

Counterpropaganda in Europe

Well before independence, American influence operations in Europe were in response to aggressive British propaganda. Thanks to the regular reports on British attitudes that Benjamin Franklin and others supplied the colonies from London and elsewhere, the patriots knew what was being said about them and how to counter the negative publicity.²² Adams was concerned that the governor's portrayal of the colony would legitimize the sending of a large occupation force to Boston.

When provoked Redcoats fired on civilians in the March, 1770 shooting known as the Boston Massacre, the patriots wanted to be sure the world saw them not only as martyrs but as martyrs with whom British society would identify. Paul Revere's famous engraving that depicted the event portrayed the British soldiers coldly and ruthlessly firing point-blank into a crowd of fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen. In reality, the victims were of the social classes that would evoke the least sympathy in England: dock workers, sailors, a runaway Afro-Indian slave and Irishmen. Adams then found a

¹⁹ Langguth, 433-434.

²⁰ Taylor, 140.

²¹ O'Toole, pp. 77-78.

²² In October, 1769, the Boston Town Meeting approved a long essay that Samuel Adams principally authored, titled "An Appeal to the World; or a Vindication of the Town of Boston, from Many False and Malicious Aspersions" that the royally appointed governor of Massachusetts had been reporting to the crown.

local lawyer who would defend the British soldiers in court without besmirching the reputation of Boston: his second cousin, John.²³

When the war finally broke out, the Americans needed good information operations on the continent to present their view and to wage counterpropaganda against the British. Coordination fell to the Committee of Secret Correspondence whose function, according to the Continental Congress resolution that formed it, was to correspond “with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland and other parts of the world.”²⁴ Sent as a U.S. emissary to the Netherlands, John Adams wrote to Franklin, “It is necessary for America to have agents in different parts of Europe, to give some information concerning our affairs, and to refute the abominable lies that the hired emissaries of Great Britain circulate in every corner of Europe, by which they keep up their own credit and ruin ours.”²⁵

Franklin recruited a friend in Holland, Swiss journalist Charles Dumas, as a secret agent for the Committee of Secret Correspondence to collect intelligence and run propaganda operations in Europe. Among his activities, he “planted stories in a Dutch newspaper, *Gazette de Leide*, intended to give the United States a favorable rating in the Dutch credit markets.”²⁶ Soon, the U.S. had secret agents in Spain, Portugal, Berlin and Tuscany.²⁷

The American way of propaganda

The American Revolution showed that wars of ideas and battles for democracy are fought primarily as wars and not as diplomacy. And where public diplomacy plays a role, its tone is not necessarily positive or gentle. The founders’ message strategy was simple: Relentlessly tell the best about the American cause and the worst about the enemy. As they provided us with our first principles and our Constitution, our founding fathers gave us with the diplomatic and political tools to promote and defend our interests around the world. Those tools, properly used, meant the margin of victory for America’s first strategic hearts-and-minds campaign. They were life-saving ways of achieving military objectives by political means. They were created and implemented by the very individuals who helped draft and who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In a seamless garment they combined intelligence and military force with what today is known as diplomacy, public diplomacy, propaganda, counterpropaganda, political warfare and psychological warfare, a spectrum of statecraft that carried the day for the founding of the United States and for its future defense.

²³ Alexander, 77-86.

²⁴ Niderost, p. 54.

²⁵ Taylor, p. 141.

²⁶ CIA, “Intelligence in the War for Independence.”

²⁷ O’Toole, p. 75.