

Lesson Twenty-One

Less Than The Best

LESSON IDEA

To examine the weak characters and treasonable acts of Benedict Arnold and Charles Lee, and contrast them with such authentic heroes as Daniel Morgan, Nathanael Greene, and Francis Marion.

PREPARATION

Read the discussion portions of today's lesson and review the stories from previous lessons about Greene, Morgan, and Marion. The "hero chart" suggested last week could also be used to illustrate the specific character traits lacking in Arnold and Lee.

AMERICA'S FIRST AND most notorious traitor, Benedict Arnold, actually entered the Revolutionary War as a fire-breathing patriot. In 1775, Arnold was a druggist, bookseller, and militia leader in New Haven, Connecticut — a man noted for his hatred of British Redcoats.

After the battles of Lexington and Concord, the citizens of New Haven voted against sending men and arms to the Continental Army at Boston. Benedict Arnold was furious, and almost went to war with his own town. He demanded powder and ball from the town depot. When his demand was refused, he sent a fiery "either-or" message to the town fathers — *either* they deliver the keys to the powder house *or* he would order his men to break open the door and help themselves. That was the style of this egotistical, hot-tempered, and domineering man. The town fathers reluctantly surrendered the keys, and the fuming captain led fifty Connecticut patriots, smartly uniformed in scarlet, white, and black, on a march to Boston.

When he arrived, Arnold immediately proposed sending troops to capture British cannon, guns, mortar, and stores at Fort Ticonderoga, a poorly guarded, out-of-the-way enemy fort at the

southern end of Lake Champlain in New York. He asked and received permission from the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to recruit four hundred men for the venture — and was, at the same time, appointed a colonel in the Continental Army.

BUT, UNKNOWN to the men at Boston, the Connecticut Committee of Safety had already directed Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys of New Hampshire to capture Fort Ticonderoga. Arnold, hearing of the plan and fearing Ethan Allen might outrace him to glory, did not wait for the men he had recruited to join him, but galloped north with a single servant on the trail of the Green Mountain Boys. When he

caught up with the mountaineers, he boldly demanded to be placed in command, arguing that Allen did not have proper orders. The brawny, high-spirited mountain men laughed at the cocky stranger; and Allen, a powerful man who could have decked the feisty Arnold with a single blow, was amused but unmoved by the bullish tactics of the Connecticut colonel.

"What shall I do with the rascal?" Allen asked his men. "Put him under guard?"

"Better go side by side," one of them advised.

Finally, Allen agreed to let Arnold march at the head of the column — provided he gave no commands. Catching the British by surprise, Allen, Arnold, and the Green Mountain Boys captured Fort Ticonderoga without a fight and the next day marched farther north and seized the British post at Crown Point. A few days later, Arnold, this time supported by his own men who had finally caught up with him, captured the post at St. John's on the Richelieu River.

Although the victories sparked American



Benedict Arnold

morale and discouraged the British from striking at the colonies through Canada. The cannon and stores, which were a major objective of the capture, remained at the faraway forts for months. Arnold, in his race for glory, had neglected to plan for any transportation to carry the desperately needed supplies back to the Continental Army. Allen had overlooked that detail, too. But both men argued over who would take credit for what in the reports to Congress.

How does Benedict Arnold's behavior compare with Nathanael Greene's actions at Valley Forge when he stepped down as general to become the army's quartermaster! [Let everyone answer. Remind them, if necessary, that Greene preferred to lead his troops but consented to take a demotion to quartermaster because he knew how important supplies and equipment were to the army. Also, in Greene's campaign in the South, he strategically retreated from Cornwallis rather than sacrifice his men in showdown battles to enhance his own reputation as a general.]

IN THE AUTUMN of 1775, Arnold led an army up the Kennebec River in Maine to capture Québec. From start to finish, the venture was a fiasco. But always Arnold fought as savagely as a caged tiger, sometimes attacking the enemy even without waiting for orders. Regardless of his daring heroics in countless battles, General Gates stripped him of his command at Saratoga — perhaps because of a personal dislike for Arnold, perhaps because of his undisciplined behavior. It was a fatal turn. To a man of Arnold's immense ego, the loss of glory was a death blow to patriotic fervor. The leg wound he received at Saratoga was minor by comparison.

In 1778 when the British pulled out of Philadelphia, Arnold was named military commander — a position of honor he felt he had earned for his battlefield actions and a position of power which he used to become a "somebody" in Philadelphia society. He moved into the mansion vacated by the British General Howe, employing a housekeeper, a coachman, a groom, and seven lesser servants. He gave lavish dinner parties, served the most expensive food and wine, and flamboyantly courted an eighteen-year-old Tory socialite named Margaret Shippen, who soon con-

sented to be Mrs. Arnold. To pay for it all, Arnold made financial deals with war profiteers and even some Tories — the colonists that were still loyal to Britain.

What basic character defect do you think caused Arnold to live a life of wasteful luxury when he knew how desperately food and clothing were needed in the Continental Army? Do you think Francis Marion, the wealthy plantation owner who existed on swamp water and roots would have lived as Arnold did in Philadelphia? Why not? [Encourage each member of the family to answer. Remind the group of Daniel Morgan's fierce reply to the British officer at Québec when he was offered a comfortable life if he would change sides.]

Finally, the Council of Pennsylvania charged Arnold with eight specific acts of misconduct. A Congressional Committee dismissed four of the eight counts; a military court found him guilty of two of the remaining four and recommended a reprimand from the Commander-in-Chief — a light punishment, perhaps due to his heroic actions in the past.

WASHINGTON JUDGED Benedict Arnold's actions indefensible, imprudent, and improper, but still did not doubt his ability or loyalty. Only weeks after the trial when Arnold asked for the command of the fort at West Point — a prestigious and strategic post on the Hudson River — the Commander-in-Chief readily gave it to him.

But Washington's confidence was misplaced. For over a year Arnold and his Tory wife had been corresponding with the British to arrange the surrender of West Point for twenty thousand pounds if Arnold could obtain command of it. On one occasion the Connecticut traitor even gave the enemy information on his commander's travel plans, including the name of the place where Washington would be lodged — an invitation to Clinton, the British general, to seize the American Commander-in-Chief. But Clinton either did not receive the message or else declined to act upon it.

As Arnold busily completed his arrangements for the surrender of West Point in September, 1780, Washington rode toward the strategic American post to confer with the tempestuous

general. When he arrived, he was shocked to find everything in disorder. Arnold, the commanding officer, was nowhere to be found.

Earlier in the day, word had reached the turncoat that Major John Andre, the British agent who was helping to finalize the surrender arrangements, had been captured by patriot forces. Arnold, anxious to save his own neck, left his wife to fend for herself and fled to the safety of a British ship. Soon after Washington's arrival, a messenger brought the Commander-in-Chief the papers found in the boot of the British agent. Suddenly the full extent of Arnold's treason was known; all the proof that was needed was there.

The following day Washington swiftly set about undoing Arnold's surrender plans. The traitor had deliberately weakened West Point, scattering its troops in all directions. Working until two in the morning, the Commander-in-Chief completed preparations for manning the strategic fort. But to make certain West Point would not fall to the British, he also called up troops under General Nathanael Greene to assist in its defense.

The enemy plans were foiled. Major Andre was hanged while Arnold, who so richly deserved a similar fate, was protected by Clinton and commissioned a general in the British Army. It was the first major act of treason in American history and one which shocked patriots in every state. Unfortunately, there were other instances of dishonorable behavior — if not blatant treason — that continued to plague the Commander-in-Chief and the Continental Army. Such was the conduct of General Charles Lee of Virginia.

Lee was an eccentric genius, both as a scholar

and a soldier. Next to Washington, he was considered by many in Congress to be the army's outstanding general. His brilliant mind was not matched, however, by his physical appearance or manners. Often slovenly, Lee traveled, ate, and slept in the company of his two dogs — one so large it was sometimes mistaken for a bear. Oftentimes Lee looked more like a tramp than a general. He was moody, unpredictable, and highly independent.

DURING WASHINGTON'S retreat through New Jersey late in 1776, Lee — then with a separate division near White Plains, New York — repeatedly ignored his Commander-in-Chiefs requests for help. When he finally moved in Washington's direction, he did so halfheartedly. Dallying at a tavern near Morristown to write letters to General Gates, condemning Washington's strategy and predicting America's defeat, he sent his army marching off ahead of him.

British cavalry, aware of Lee's movements, seized the opportunity to attack the isolated American commander; within fifteen minutes after the first shot was fired, Lee surrendered, handing the British his sword without a whimper or a fight.

How did Lee's action compare with Daniel Morgan's surrender at Quebec? [Remind family members of Morgan's desperate fight against great odds and his refusal to surrender his sword, when cornered, to the British whom he called "scoundrels." Also point out that it was this same General Lee who took such a defeatist attitude at Charleston, when he ridiculed Francis Marion's men and the fort at Sullivan's Island.]

Even though Washington was aware of Lee's biting criticism, he considered the Virginian's capture a great loss and diligently sought his release. Finally, in 1778, a prisoner exchange was arranged and Washington welcomed the eccentric general to Valley Forge with ceremonies befitting a military hero.

Lee, in private letters, responded to this generous treatment by saying he had found the army "in a worse situation than he expected, and that General Washington was not fit to command a sergeant's guard."

What does this tell us about Washington's char-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

A more detailed account of Benedict Arnold's plans for the surrender of West Point is given in *Rebels and Redcoats*, chapter thirty-one. There is a fantastic contrast in the behavior and character of Arnold and the British agent, Major John Andre, who was hanged for his part in the conspiracy. Andre conducted himself with such courage and honor that he earned the respect of his captors; while Arnold, who escaped the ultimate punishment for his treason, was as unpopular with the British as he was with his former countrymen. More details on Horatio Gates, James Wilkinson, Aaron Burr, and Thomas Conway can also be found in *Rebels and Redcoats*.

acter? About Lee's? [Encourage a family discussion. Bring out the point that Washington put his duties as a military commander above his personal feelings, not indulging in pettiness or revenge, as lesser men might have done, to punish Lee for his critical words. Lee, on the other hand, seemed entirely self-centered, showing little gratitude for Washington's efforts to free him, nor for the generous treatment he received after his questionable behavior at Morristown.]

At Monmouth Courthouse, Lee's behavior was even worse. Stepping aside, after some grumblings, to let Lafayette command the advance troops, he then changed his mind and demanded to be commander. Washington, growing tired of such childish ego games, stuck with Lafayette. Last minute crises, however, put Lee back in command with orders to pursue the British and attack their rear guard. Instead, Lee ordered a retreat. Washington quickly moved into the situation, and after an exchange of words with Lee, took command. Riding along the lines, shouting orders as well as words of encouragement, Washington rallied the rattled troops, magnificently stemmed the retreat, and pressed on to victory.

When the smoke had cleared, Lee — his vanity badly bruised — dashed off a hotly-worded letter to Washington demanding "justice and a fair hearing." Washington replied that Lee certainly needed to explain his actions. In a great huff, Lee penned an offer to resign, then immediately sent another terse note asking for a court-martial to clear his name. Washington — his patience at an end — granted the request, put Lee under arrest, and charged him with disobedience of orders, misbehaving before the enemy, and disrespect in his letters to the Commander-in-Chief. A military court found Lee guilty on all three counts and suspended him from any command for twelve months. Without apologies or regrets, the egocentric Virginia general — trailed by his ever faithful dogs — quit the army and spent his remaining years defending his actions by attacking his detractors publicly and privately with verbal blasts and scorching letters of criticism.

How did Lee's behavior compare with Nathanael Greene's when Greene was made a private instead of a captain in the Rhode Island militia he helped form and finance? What quality of

character did Lee lack? [Let everyone answer. Emphasize Greene's self-discipline, his willingness to put the cause of independence ahead of his personal feelings.]

Concluding Thought

There were others in the American ranks who could have become heroes instead of men of tarnished fame — Horatio Gates, James Wilkinson, Aaron Burr, and Thomas Conway to name a few. But always, like Arnold and Lee, their pride, selfishness, and overweening ambition marred their service and their lives. When their vanity was wounded or their ambitions threatened, they did not hesitate to strike out at the offender, regardless of the damage it might do to the American cause.

Looking Ahead

The man whose patience, wisdom, and faith guided the patriots to victory against such overwhelming difficulties — both from the British and from the vain, egocentrics within — was the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, General George Washington. Looking back across two hundred years of history, it seems as though Divine Providence molded Washington's character and personality to meet the exact needs of the historic hour. Next week we'll find out more about the young man who was destined to become the Father of his Country — a giant among the heroes of America.

DURING THE WEEK

Ask family members to collect pictures, stories, and quotes of Washington in preparation for the next lesson. A notebook or scrapbook could be started as a permanent record of his heroic acts and important speeches. Other patriots could also be included — for example, any of the signers of the Declaration of Independence or any of the Revolutionary War heroes we have studied.