

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

