



WELCOME TO THE HISTORIANS

Welcome to the Fall Session of The Historians!

I am looking forward to seeing those of you who returning for our second year and a special welcome to those who are new to our group. We have some terrific books to read this fall. The choices were influenced by the survey that you all took at the May session and online, so look for your suggestions and areas of interest in the books that we read.

The book for the September 5 meeting is Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the Fate of the American Revolution by Nathaniel Philbrick. When George Washington learned of Benedict Arnold's betrayal, he walked into a room filled with other officers and wondered out loud who was next. Washington could not imagine why it would be Benedict Arnold of all people who betrayed the American cause. As I taught my students, Benedict Arnold should have been one of the great leaders of the revolution. His men trusted his leadership and loved his charismatic personality. The battles he fought against the British in Upper New York and Quebec, on land and water, are brilliant strategic maneuvers. Arnold's ability to keep his men alive and fighting through two frigid winters is nothing short of miraculous. And he played an essential role in Saratoga. At the same time, Arnold was bitter and full of grievances. These traits proved his undoing.

Washington's traits as a patient, cautious leader are well known. As Alexander Hamilton tells us, Washington as a military leader lost more battles than he won. But Washington learned from his mistakes, while Arnold found it difficult to admit to mistakes. Arnold had to be the hero or he took it personally. Washington was vilified by some members of the Continental Congress. He strove to rise above the insults. Arnold took such treatment personally. Washington believed in rules. Arnold believed that rules are made to be broken. These two men have formed the foundation of what Philbrick calls "our American genesis story." This is the story formulated in the early 19th century which set Arnold in the role of "villain" to allow the necessary contrast to our "hero," Washington. Valiant Ambition explores these contrasting stories of character, ambition, and leadership.

You will find a lot of details on battles and strategy as well as fascinating stories about both men. As a reminder for those of you who are students of literature, history readers often skim as we read for information or dip in and out of the sections we find the most interesting. All of you should feel free to do the same.

In our September 5 meeting, we will focus on the contrasting leadership styles of both men. What did you learn about Benedict Arnold that you did not know? Most history texts focus on the treason at West Point and very little else. How do the stories of Arnold as a military leader affect your understanding of his role in the American Revolution? And what is Arnold's tragic downfall? Is it just hubris? As you think about leadership, what role does character play? And what about all of the people in this story who ran McCarthy type smear campaigns against both men? How important are their actions?

As you can see, we will have lots to talk about when we meet on September 5 at 6:30. Come prepared to have a lively discussion as we share the joy of talking history.

Dr. Donna McBride