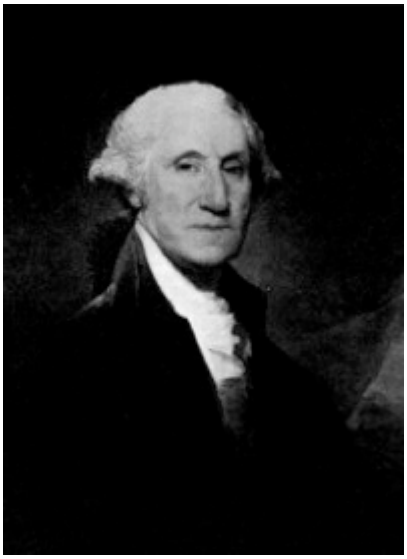
Spreading Liberty With a Bayonet



Or does it? Can one country impose liberty on another? Does freedom come at the point of a gun, sifting from the air with the debris of a bombed village? Or must people individually crave it, so badly they will fight and die for it rather than live as slaves?

From the way this administration spouts the word "liberty," you might think its members know something about it. For example, in his Second Inaugural alone, Bush invoked "liberty" 15 times and "freedom" 27 — yet the speech only ran 32 paragraphs. Bush seems to define both concepts as "following the American government's orders." That definition diametrically differs from both the dictionary's and our Founding Fathers'.

The Founders recognized that liberty is government's opposite; the more we have of one, the less we have of the other. Free people act, think, and speak as they wish, without anyone's forcing them to behave or believe otherwise — even if that "anyone" wears a government uniform. Liberty means an absence of governmental force.

But force is government's essence. The marble monuments and soaring rhetoric, fluttering flags, and stirring ceremonies disguise the State's ugly soul: force. Behind every law, regulation, program, and agency lurks the threat of force — lethal force ultimately. So expecting government and its armies to "spread liberty" is expecting what never was and never can be.

Behind Banding Together

Americans understood this when they confronted the British Empire's overwhelming force in 1775. The rebellious colonists triumphed at Lexington and Concord that April when the Redcoats policing Boston marched out of it to disarm the countryside. Instead, farmers and shopkeepers chased the soldiers back to the city, then camped around it in siege lines to keep them there. The British clawed their way out, over Bunker's Hill, in June. But success cost them so many casualties that Patriots joked about selling them another hill at the same price. And the British victory was an empty one: the colonists merely dug fresh lines a bit further from Boston. The few feet of new ground did their captives no good. One of the British commanders, Gen. Thomas Gage, was shaken enough to plead with the Secretary of War for reinforcements: "A large army must at length be employed to reduce these people."

Everyone knew that "large army" would soon cross the Atlantic. General George Washington and his commissary and quartermaster desperately needed more men and supplies before then. The Patriots manning the lines lived in whatever crude huts they cobbled together, not tents; Washington devised a series of colored sashes to distinguish rank in the absence of uniforms; and he constantly urged his excited farmboys-turned-soldiers to conserve ammunition. Though he cloaked these orders under the rubric of "military discipline," they hid a painful truth: reserves of ammunition — and everything else

the Continental Army needed, including soldiers — were shockingly short. Once the Redcoats' reinforcements arrived, those shortages would defeat the Americans faster than the British Army could.

But help lay to the north in Canada. It had the supplies: Washington had heard there was "an Abundance" of powder and arms, blankets and clothing. It had the men: scattered across eastern Canada were some 60,000 people, most of whom spoke French and farmed land belonging to wealthy *seigneurs*. And it had the oppression that should make those folks want to shake off the British government: the Quebec Act had taken effect May 1, 1775.

This legislation abolished representative assemblies elected by the people and replaced them with an appointed council — read "cronies" — to advise Canada's governor. The act also restored the legal authority of the Catholic Church, with canon law replacing the more liberal English civil law. It suspended *habeas corpus* and trial by jury, both hallmarks of a free people. This gave the *seigneurs* and clergy life-and-death power over citizens, especially those who ran afoul of them.

Perhaps even more tragic because it was more far-reaching was the return of feudal land-tenure: the *seigneurs* would again require tenants to work for them three days annually. Yet farmers already paid rent and taxes to these landlords as well as fees for the use of almost anything on the estate, whether gristmills, streams and creeks, or forests. The Church also extracted taxes, and these fell on all citizens. Catholic or not, everybody tithed crops and incomes. Everybody would also be harassed by the army of assayers, spies, and bureaucrats who monitored harvests and sales of merchandise — an IRS without the computers.

General Guy Carleton, Canada's military governor, had spent the four prior years lobbying King George III for passage of the act. Carleton claimed he wanted to restore sovereignty to the French population Britain had inherited with its victory in the French and Indian War. More likely, he worried that he had only 600 or so red-coated enforcers. The act compensated by increasing his own power as well as that of the Roman Catholic clergy and the *seigneurs*.

It's no surprise that Carleton and other powerful Canadians — as well as modern historians in love with big government — hailed the act as humane and tolerant. But farmers abhorred it. They had languished as peasants when the French ruled Canada, then gained some freedom when the British took over in 1763. But the act reduced them to peasantry and poverty once more. On the day of its implementation, protestors urinated on a statue of George III.

The Quebec Act also terrified Canada's southern neighbors. They considered it a warning of what awaited them. Americans were sure the British administration longed to steal a portion of their crops and incomes, too. They loathed the thieves as much as they did the theft: they'd already shown that by tarring and feathering some of the bureaucrats who levied taxes. So furious were the colonists that Thomas Jefferson listed the act among his indictments against the Crown in the Declaration of Independence: "For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an arbitrary Government, and enlarging its Boundaries, so as to render it at once an Example and fit Instrument for introducing the same absolute Rule into these colonies."

Americans assumed Canadians wanted to live free as much as they did. And there were the practical advantages of uniting with Canada. The Continental officers in 1775 feared they could not withstand Britain's fury without Canada's help. If ever a country had reason to "spread liberty" to another, with or without the spreadee's permission, it was Revolutionary America.

Tough Terrain

And yet, when Major General Phillip Schuyler and Colonel Benedict Arnold received orders to march twin columns on Canada's only cities, Montreal and Quebec, overpower the Redcoats there, and invite Canadians to join the lower 13 colonies, Congress and Washington both stressed the "invite." Gen. Schuyler should "take possession of St. Johns [a fort near the present Canadian-U.S. border], Montreal, and any other parts of the country" only if this were not "disagreeable to the Canadians." And Col. Arnold was to discover "the real sentiments of the Canadians towards our Cause." If they were "averse to it and will not co-operate or at least willingly acquiesce … you are by no Means to prosecute the Attempt," though the "present enterprise" was "of the utmost consequence to the interest and liberties of America."

Washington also appealed directly to the Canadians in a broadside:

> 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.… The cause of America and of liberty is the cause of every virtuous American Citizen Whatever may be his Religion or his descent, the United Colonies know no distinction, but such as Slavery, Corruption and Arbitrary Domination may create. Come then ye generous Citizens, range yourselves under the Standard of General Liberty, against which all the force and Artifice of Tyranny will never be able to prevail.

On September 12, 1775, Gen. Schuyler led troops to St. John's and asked Canadians to join the rebellion. Four days later, his second-in-command sailed up Lake Champlain with another 1,700 men. Brigadier General Richard Montgomery would join Schuyler at St. John's. Fortunately for the Americans, the delicate and plodding patrician Schuyler fell sick, leaving energetic Montgomery in charge. He besieged the British garrison at St. John's until the heavily outnumbered Redcoats surrendered. Montgomery marched victorious into Montreal.

All military campaigning in the 18th century was arduous, but Montgomery's men enjoyed a cakewalk compared with the second column under Arnold. Short, scrappy, and brilliant, Benedict Arnold was arguably the most talented officer on either side of the Revolution. The nightmare of his treason was yet undreamed; at this point, he was a hero who had helped capture Ft. Ticonderoga and its invaluable guns for the Continentals earlier that year.

Now the colonel decided to reach Quebec via an old Indian trail, most of which wound through Maine's wilderness. The path had a reputation for harsh, almost impassible conditions, something few men would attempt, let alone an army. This was especially true with the fierce northern winter just weeks away. Which was precisely why Arnold chose it: Canada's Gov. Carleton would never expect troops to debouch from the backwoods at a time when soldiers of any sense would be snuggling into winter quarters. Should he hear rumors of an army slogging through such forbidding terrain, he would doubtless discount them.

Arnold hoped to build on that and surprise Quebec's Redcoats. Since he lacked a million-man army and was 150 years shy of aerial bombardment, surprise was essential: Quebec was virtually impregnable, even with only a couple hundred Redcoats protecting it. The city perches on sheer, 100-foot bluffs above the St. Lawrence River, too high and steep to be scaled. As if river and bluffs weren't protection enough, it also boasted a wall 30 feet high — the lone walled city in North America. Only a couple of commanders had been mad enough to attack this fortress since its founding in 1608. It succumbed just once, in 1759, when its defenders ventured outside the walls to fight on the neighboring Plains of Abraham. They lost in 15 minutes after withstanding a siege of almost three months inside the walls.

Arnold recruited roughly 1,100 men from the army gathered around Boston and shipped them along New England's coast to Fort Western on the Kennebec River (near modern Augusta, Maine). They would row, pole, and tow large, clumsy, heavy boats known as bateaux up this river, not only against the current but primarily through white water as they ascended into high wilderness. Thereafter, the route alternated between raging rivers and portages through marshes, swamps, and bogs with the troops bearing the burdensome boats on their shoulders. Any dry ground the column hit usually went uphill — more torture for men struggling under 400-pound bateaux.

The trail had never been adequately mapped, and the maps that did exist were inaccurate by design: King George's cartographers had sabotaged them. They showed the distance to Quebec at 180 miles; it was actually closer to 400. Arnold had calculated that 180 miles through wilderness would require 20 days' travel. Being a thorough, practical campaigner, he provided rations for 45 days. But his men were on the road almost a week longer than that. Those extra days would have exhausted the rations even if most of them hadn't spoiled first. "I have been much deceived in every account of our route," Arnold sighed, "which is longer, and has been attended with a thousand difficulties I never apprehended."

The march quickly degenerated into a struggle for survival. The river ruined the rations; the men's noise and smell scared away game. Indeed, the troops were soon "almost destitute of any eatable whatever, except a few *candles* [dipped from animal fat], which were used for supper, and breakfast next morning, by boiling them in water gruel, &c.," according to 22-year-old Isaac Senter, the column's surgeon. But worse was to come: "In company was a poor dog," Senter continued, "[which had] hitherto lived through all the tribulations [but which] now became a prey for the sustenance of the assassinators. This poor animal was instantly devoured, without leaving any vestige of the sacrifice. Nor did the shaving soap, pomatum, and even the lip salve [like the candles, these toiletries consisted primarily of edible fats such as tallow and lard], leather of their shoes, cartridge boxes, etc, share any better fate."

Eventually, even the candles and cartridge boxes were gone. Some men eyed the animal skins that had been "for several days in the bottom of their boats, intended for to make them shoes or moccasins." They burned the hair off these hides, boiled them, and drank the broth. Others tried different recipes: "No one can imagine," one soldier sighed, "who has not experienced it, the sweetness of a roasted shot-pouch to the famished appetite."

Nor did the weather take pity on these starving sufferers. A storm pelted them for three days with rain and wind so high the troops had to huddle under fallen trees lest other falling trees kill them. The swollen river flooded one night after they had bedded down beside it. Not only did it swamp their camp, it obliterated their guiding ribbon to Canada. Temperatures plunged bitterly and early: on the first of October, the men woke to find their wet clothes "frozen a pane of glass thick." Things were so bad that half the column mutinied and turned back. The rest splintered, with every man for himself. Some lost their way and wandered for hours or even days out of their way. A few never returned.

Eventually, the bearded, ragged skeletons staggered out of the wilderness onto the first farms suburban to Quebec. The peasants warmly welcomed them, eager to succor such heroes — though the gold Arnold paid for supplies didn't hurt either. "Surely a miracle must have been wrought in their favor," a Canadian marveled. "It is an undertaking above the common race of men."

Alas, the miracle went for naught: Carleton knew they were coming and, worse, had reinforced Quebec. But men who will brave frozen clothes and roast dog are not easily thwarted. Arnold's exhausted troops flopped down on siege lines around the city while their indomitable commander scouted a means for

overthrowing the British government inside. Gen. Montgomery marched north from Montreal to join the fun, but he and Arnold both knew that even their combined columns could not defeat Quebec's wall.

Tepid Treatment

Meanwhile, though the peasants were not "averse" to the Americans' mission and would "co-operate or at least willingly acquiesce," they had their limits. They happily sold the army supplies, and they worked as auxiliaries to construct siege materials. But they did not join Continental ranks in enough numbers to make a difference. Perhaps they yearned to live free, but not if they had to die for it.

The siege was an imperfect one since reinforcements and supplies still reached Quebec from the St. Lawrence. In fact, the siege could continue indefinitely without much harm to the British but with yet more agony for the Americans as they shivered through a Canadian winter. Montgomery and Arnold realized an outright attack on Quebec was suicidal, but they lacked other options. So once again they resorted to minimizing the odds, as Arnold had tried to do with his Indian trail. Their columns would attack in a classic pincers movement — during the next blizzard, when the British were least expecting it.

That storm hit on December 31, 1775. And just as with Arnold's march, this new attempt to outfox the enemy backfired. The snow made a virtually impossible attack completely impossible for the Americans, while the British stood laughing atop their invincible wall. A cannonball killed Montgomery almost immediately while a bullet in the leg disabled Arnold at about the same time. Most of his column was captured. Montgomery's escaped to resume the siege, with Arnold commanding from his hospital bed.

American reinforcements trickled in over the winter — only to sicken and die from small-pox. Arnold's gold gave out and, with it, the peasants' goodwill. Then, in May 1776, British ships with fresh troops sailed up the St. Lawrence. The Continentals scrambled south in a rout so frenzied they left their dinners cooking for the arriving Redcoats to enjoy. Even Benedict Arnold, who had persevered through blizzards and floods, candle soup, back-breaking portages, a mutiny, siege and battle, finally admitted defeat: "Neglected by Congress below; pinched with every want here; distressed with the small-pox; want of Generals and discipline in our Army, which may rather be called a great rabble; our late unhappy retreat from Quebec … our credit and reputation lost, and great part of the country; and a powerful foreign enemy advancing upon us, — are so many difficulties we cannot surmount them." Most disheartening of all, Canadians saw America's invitation to join the rebellion as an invasion then and now. A plaque in Quebec that marks the spot of Arnold's wounding reads: "Here Stood Her Old and New Defenders Uniting, Guarding, Saving Canada Defeating Arnold at The Sault-Au-Matelot Barricade on the Last Day of 1775 Guy Carleton Commanding at Quebec."

The lesson resonates today: bombs and bullets can't spread freedom, and even invitations can be misinterpreted as invasions. Only by enshrining liberty in our hearts and in our own country will we gleam like a beacon for all the Earth.

Becky Akers writes frequently about the American Revolution.