George Washington's

Five Rules for Waging War Honorably

By Ray Raphael

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George Washington launched America's first invasion of a foreign land scarcely two months after assuming command of the Continental Army. He dispatched troops to the far north to attack the scantly guarded city of Quebec, which the French had ceded to the British 12 years earlier. The goal of the campaign was not only to deliver a crushing strategic blow to the British by capturing the gateway to the St. Lawrence River and thereby to all of Canada, but also to convince French-speaking Canadians to join the revolution on the side of the United Colonies. But he faced a vexing dilemma: Would the Americans, whose greatest asset was their legitimate claim to the moral high ground, be viewed as liberators by the local people? If the Quebecois viewed the expedition as an unwelcome invasion, the American troops would be hard-pressed to sustain a successful attack on the fortress city. The Quebec campaign is now viewed as one of Washington's early missteps, before he grew into his role as a military commander. But a close examination of Washington's pre-campaign instructions to Colonel Benedict Arnold offers a glimpse of his foresight and genius. Instead of focusing strictly on logistical concerns, he included guidance on how troops should behave in a foreign land, amidst civilians with very different traditions, customs and religious beliefs. Indeed, his instructions could offer useful insights to contemporary American leaders and soldiers as they carry out military campaigns in distant lands.

1 Don’t Assume You Are Welcome

You are by every means in your Power to endeavor to discover the real Sentiments of the Canadians towards our Cause, and particularly as to this Expedition, ever bearing in Mind, that if they are averse to it and will not cooperate, it must fail of success.

When the British gained control of Canada in 1763, at the conclusion of the French and Indian Wars, nearly 70,000 French-speaking Catholics in Quebec came under imperial rule. The British military tried to institute English law, which at the time still withheld political rights from Catholics. But as rebellion spread in America following Parliament’s passage of the Stamp Act in 1765, Quebec Governor Guy Carleton shrewdly set out to separate Canada from the 13 colonies and turn it into a potential bastion of British armed strength by allowing French inhabitants to retain their heritage. “Barring a catastrophe too shocking to think of, this country will remain French till the end of time,” he declared. That policy came to be embodied in the Quebec Act of 1774, which granted freedom of religion to Catholics in Canada, restored French civil law and extended the boundaries of Quebec to include Indian lands south of the Great Lakes between the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

The changes were viewed with great alarm in the 13 colonies. The Quebec Act was passed in the same session of Parliament as a series of punitive acts designed to quell the patriot uprising sparked by the Boston Tea Party. Since Canadians were denied any electoral privileges, Americans suspected it marked a first step by the British to strip all of the colonies of their elected assemblies. Moreover, the act kindled old fears among Protestants of a Catholic majority to the north.

Washington and other leaders of the American Revolution hoped that their neighbors to the north would rise up with them against the British. But he also had good cause to wonder: Might the cultural, historic and political differences between Anglo-Americans in the rebellious colonies and the French Canadians overshadow their common concerns and shared interests? The expedition would be self-defeating if the local population proved to be actively hostile to patriot forces. “In that case,” Washington warned Arnold, “you are by no Means to prosecute the Attempt; the Expence of the Expedition, and the Disappointment are not to be put in Competition with the dangerous Consequences which may ensue, from irritating them against us, and detaching them from that Neutrality which they adopted.”

Carleton

2 Cultivate Local Support

Conciliate the affections of those People and such Indians as you may meet with by every Means in your Power, convincing them that we come, at the Request of many of their Principal People, not as Robbers or to make War upon them; but as the Friends and Supporters of their Liberties, as well as ours. And to give Efficacy to these Sentiments, you must carefully inculcate upon the Officers and Soldiers under your Command that not only the Good of their Country and their Honour, but their Safety depends upon the Treatment of these People.

While troops were gathering for the Quebec expedition, Washington penned an open letter to “the Inhabitants of Canada,” which he hoped would sway the uncommitted or, at the very least, soften any hostility toward the soldiers he had dispatched to their country. “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.” Echoing previous messages sent by the Continental Congress, he invited Canadians to join the cause: “Come then, my Brethern. Let us run together to the same Goal. Range yourselves under the Standard of general Liberty, against which all the force and Artifice of Tyranny will never be able to prevail.”

But what if the soldiers he dispatched undermined his offer of friendship and misbehaved? A great number of common Continental soldiers were 15 or 16 years old at the start of hostilities. When Washington arrived in Cambridge to assume command, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which had been managing the war until then, warned him that “the greatest part” of the soldiers he was about to command “have not before seen service.” They were “naturally brave and of good understanding,” he was informed, “yet for want of Experience in military life,” and disregarding “strict temperance,” they lacked basic military discipline and even cleanliness. Concerned about how these lads might handle themselves, Washington warned Arnold and his officers that they must “observe the strictest Discipline and good Order, by no Means suffering any Inhabitant to be abused, or in any Manner injured, either in his Person or Property, punishing with exemplary Severity every Person who shall transgress, and making ample Compensation to the Party Injured.”

A Recruit

Thomas Hart’s 1776 mezzotint of Benedict Arnold was published in London, where the public clamored for images of the American rebels.

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3 Don't Assume You Are **Welcome**

As the Contempt of the Religion of a Country by ridiculing any of its Ceremonies or affronting its Ministers or Votaries has ever been deeply resented, you are to be particularly careful to restrain every Officer and Soldier from such Impru dence and Folly and to punish every Instance of it. On the other Hand, as far as lays in your power, you are to protect and support the free Exercise of the Religion of the Country and the undisturbed Enjoy ment of the rights of Conscience in religious Matters, with your utmost Inflence and Authority.

Anti-Catholicism was deeply embedded in the popular culture of colonial America. Every year on November 5, the anniversary of a thwarted Catholic conspiracy to blow up Parliament in 1605, artisans and laborers in colonial cities would march through the streets bearing elaborate effigies of the pope and the devil, which they would burn at night. Men imbued with this attitude were about to come across ubiquitous displays of the Catholic faith, shrines and crosses and gestures, each a temptation to ridicule. Without stern measures to prevent it, some soldiers were likely to succumb, and just a few miscues could endanger the entire mission.

Washington was also well aware that in the minds of many patriots, including soldiers who had volunteered for this mission, the invasion offered a special opportunity to fight two tyrants at once: the British monarch and the Catholic pope. One army chaplain gave voice to these zealous rebels by noting the expedition would "spread the gospel through this vast extended country, which has been for ages the dwelling of Satan, and reign of Antichrist." This was a common sentiment. Just before embarking on their journey, a group of soldiers broke open the Massachusetts tomb of George Whitefield, the famous revivalist of the Great Awakening, cut off pieces of his collar and wristbands (which had not yet decomposed in five years under ground), and carried them off as relics to ensure success in conquering a land peopled by Catholics, their British rulers and others they considered heathens.

Whitefield

4 Don't Abuse **Prisoners**

Any Prisoners who may fall into your Hands, you will treat with as much Humanity and kindness, as may be consistent with your own Safety and the publick Interest. Be very particular in restraining not only your own Troops, but the Indians from all Acts of Cruelty and Insult, which will disgrace the American Arms, and irritate our Fellow Subjects against us.

Washington's injunction turned out to be moot during the Quebec campaign because patriot forces did not take any prisoners. But he stuck to his principles as the war progressed. After the pivotal Battle of Princeton in January 1777, which forced a British withdrawal from New Jersey, Washington issued another set of instructions that embody the classic practical argument that prisoner abuse can lead to retaliation in kind. "Treat surrendering prisoners with humanity," he told his subordinates. "Let them have no reason to complain of our copying the brutal example of the British army."

The British viewed American prisoners as rebellious subjects of the Crown deserving of the severest possible punishment. When American officers captured at Bunker Hill in August 1775 were imprisoned with felons in a Boston jail, Washington complained that they should be treated with more humanity and with "Claims of Rank." Instead, General Thomas Gage insisted the men were traitors, not prisoners of war, and by law "destined for the cord." During the course of the war, captured Americans were stuffed into hastily improvised warehouse facilities and notorious prison ships docked in the New York harbor. An estimated 11,000 prisoners held on those ships died from starvation and disease, as well as flogging and other forms of violence.

Americans were not completely above reproach in their treatment of prisoners. Indeed, Loyalists who had the bad luck to be captured were condemned as traitors and a notable few suffered hideous treatment in a copper mine in Connecticut. But the Americans were generally more lenient toward prisoners, in large part because they lacked the resources to keep them for long. After they took some 6,000 at the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, many of the British and German officers were eventually exchanged for captured American officers. But enlisted men were held captive in camps in New England, Virginia and Pennsylvania and put to work on farms until the end of the war. Ultimately, more than 2,000 quietly blended into the countryside and became new Americans.

Prison Ship

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5 Withdraw If Your Objectives Are **Unattainable**

If unforseen Difficulties should arise or if the Weather shou'd become so severe as to render it hazardous to proceed in your own Judgment and that of your principal Officers (whom you are to consult), in that Case you are to return, giving me as early Notice as possible, that I may give you such Assistance as may be necessary.

Given the hawkish disposition of American political leaders and the soldiers themselves, Washington showed real courage by issuing this instruction. If Arnold turned back because of adverse conditions or intelligence reports that the host population was "averse" to the presence of the Continental Army, the resultant political uproar would likely have cost him his job. But his instructions stood, and he expected Arnold to obey them faithfully, come what may.

Arnold was confident he could reach Quebec in three weeks, but he badly miscalculated the distance, and the difficulties, ahead. The trek instead lasted two months, and a third of his force of 1,100 eventually turned back. The rivers were unpredictable, forcing the soldiers to carry their 400-pound boats and all their supplies for miles at a time. The cold was relentless and provisions few: Survivors recalled making meals of boiled shoe leather or melted candles before sheltering for the night under a single thin blanket.

Despite Washington's cautionary instructions, Arnold saw his mission through. In keeping with time-honored military tradition, he praised the determination of his troops. "Notwithstanding all these obstacles," he wrote from Pointe Aux Trembles in November 1775, 'the officers and men, inspired and fired with the love of liberty and their country, pushed on with a fortitude superior to every obstacle, and most of them had not one day's provision for a week." In retrospect, all that heroic effort was in vain. But once offensive forces are set in motion it can be hard to reverse them, even if a withdrawal might be the wisest course of action.

Montgomery

And On To Quebec: The story of Benedict Arnold's Quebec Campaign continued on the following page

A 1758 engraving shows Quebec a year before the British captured the picturesque capital and ended French rule in Canada.

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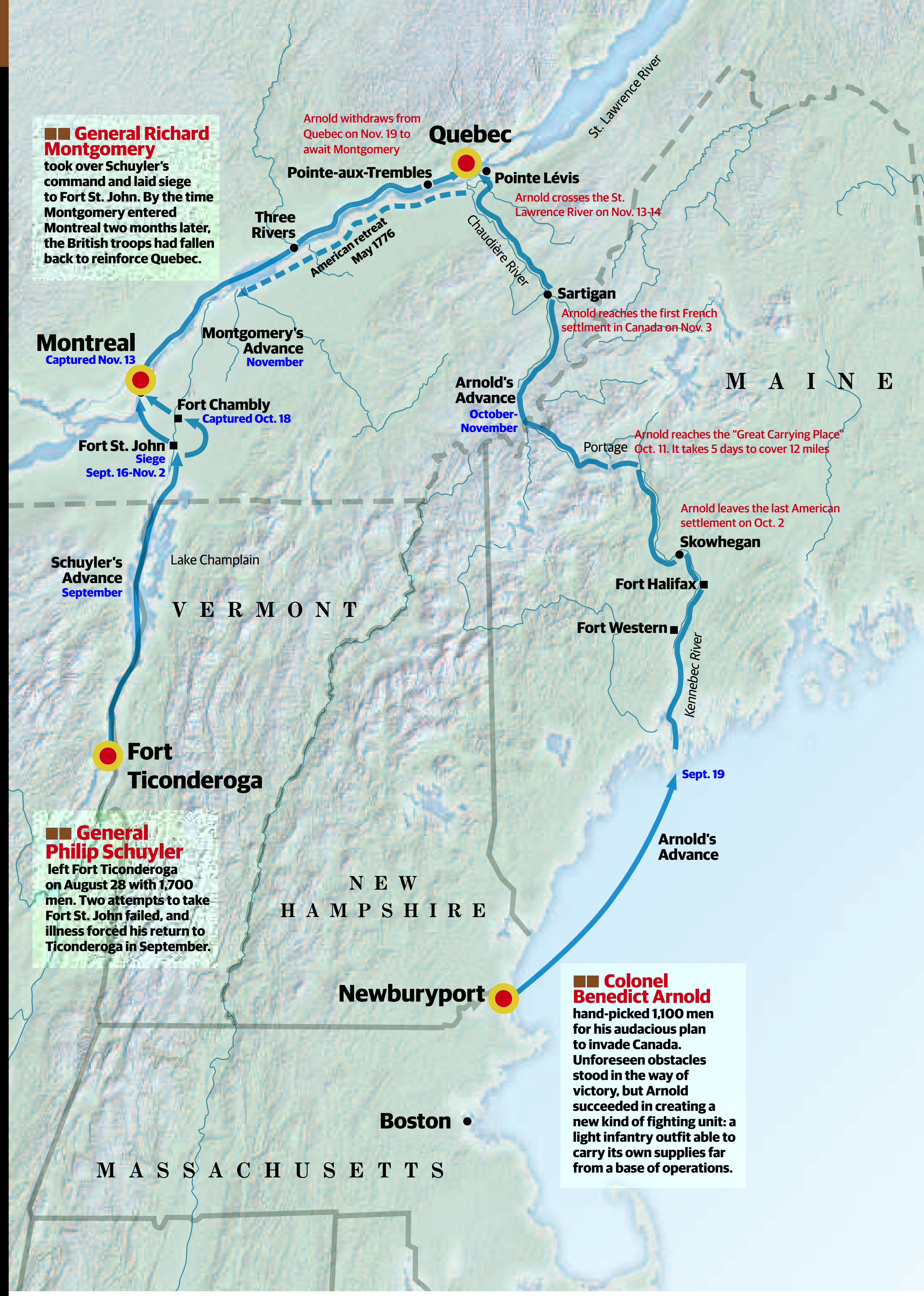

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George Washington launched a two-pronged invasion of Canada in September 1775 with the goal of bringing the "14th colony" into the revolutionary fold. Initial hopes for the campaign were high because British General Guy Carleton had been forced to send two of his four regiments south to deal with the rebels in Boston, leaving only a few hundred men to fend off an assault on Quebec, the capital city strategically located at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Plans called for General Philip Schuyler, commander of the Northern Department of the Continental Army, to advance with 1,700 troops from New York north along Lake Champlain to take Montreal. Then he would meet up outside Quebec with a force of 1,100 led by Colonel Benedict Arnold, who landed at the mouth of the Kennebec River in Maine on September 19 and set out through unsettled wilderness just as winter set in.

Arnold believed the late season would work in his favor, because the St. Lawrence River would soon freeze and prevent the British from sending reinforcements by boat. But redcoats quickly became the least of his worries. He'd badly miscalculated the distance he had to travel, and most of his supplies were ruined in leaking bateaux, the 400-pound, flat-bottomed cargo boats that his men were forced to carry around unnavigable rivers. Hunger, fatigue and bone-chilling cold took a toll on the men as they wandered through "a direful, howling wilderness," reported Isaac Senter, a doctor from Rhode Island who made the long march. "We proceeded with as little knowledge of where we were or where we should get to, as if we had been in the unknown interior of Africa, or the deserts of Arabia."

By the time Arnold arrived on the outskirts of Quebec in early November, one-third of his men had turned back and the rest were a sorry sight. "I thought we much resembled the animals...called the Ourang-Outang," recalled one survivor. The ragtag army holed up to wait for General Richard Montgomery, who had taken command of the other invading party when Schuyler fell ill. But Montgomery arrived a month later with only 300 men. More than half his soldiers had decamped when their enlistments expired, and 500 were left to garrison Montreal. Carleton, meanwhile, had beefed up Quebec's defenses with troops from Montreal, as well as sailors and loyalist militia, and had stockpiled enough food and supplies to last until the spring.

Arnold and Montgomery faced a deadline, since the terms of enlistment for many of their men were due to expire at the end of the year. But they also wanted a snowstorm to provide cover for a nighttime assault, and the weather remained unusually clear until the pre-dawn hours of December 31. Then, in gale-force winds and blinding snow, they circled Quebec from different directions, breached the city's protective palisades and entered the Lower Town, which they needed to capture before ascending the cliffs to the walled city in the Upper Town. In the ensuing chaos, Montgomery and most of his officers were killed. A musket ball shattered Arnold's lower right leg, and he had to be carried out to a nearby hospital. For four hours, the fighting raged, house to house, in the narrow streets. When it was over, the British were still in control and more than 400 Americans had been taken prisoner. Arnold, not be deterred, laid siege to Quebec with a force of 800, half of whom were French Canadians who opposed British rule. Carleton, safe and comfortable inside the city, decided not to attack, and for the next four months, Arnold played a dangerous game, withholding information from his own troops about their precarious position while bluffing Carleton that the Americans were in better shape than they appeared.

By May 1776, Arnold had to concede defeat. With the spring thaw on the St. Lawrence and 10,000 British reinforcements headed their way, Carleton himself led a small force to rout the Americans remaining outside the city. "In the most helter skelter manner," said Dr. Senter, "we raised the siege, leaving everything. All the camp equipage, ammunition, even our clothing, except what little we happened to have on us."

The American army was in full retreat, finally sailing down Lake Champlain in mid-June. It had been a valiant effort, but the 14th colony was lost for good. ■

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