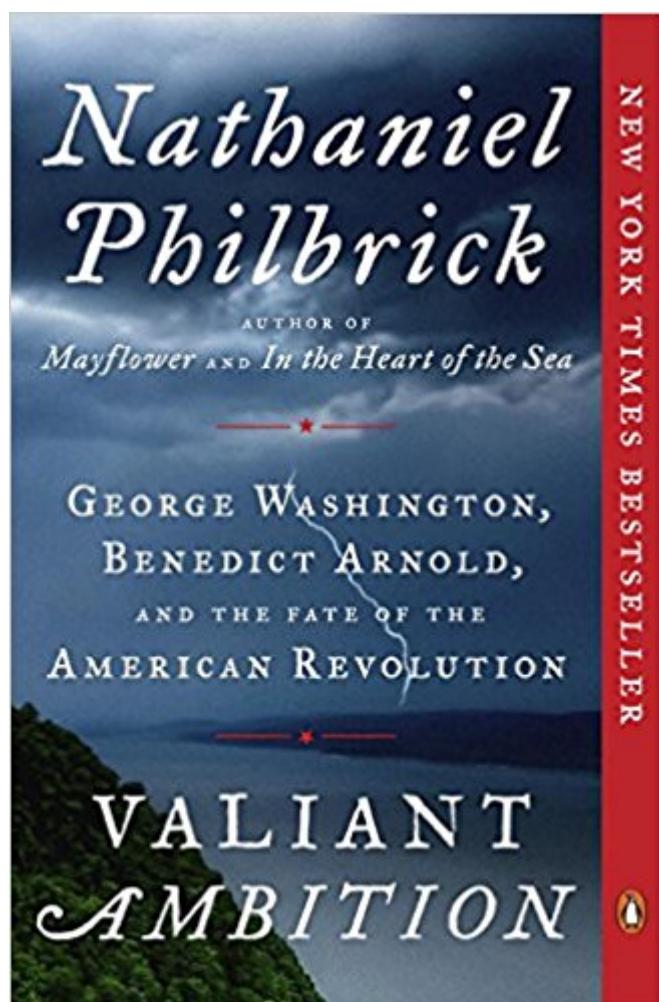


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# Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, And The Fate Of The American Revolution



## Synopsis

From the New York Times bestselling author of *In The Heart of the Sea* and *Mayflower* comes a surprising account of the middle years of the American Revolution, and the tragic relationship between George Washington and Benedict Arnold. "May be one of the greatest what-if books of the age" — a volume that turns one of America's best-known narratives on its head. "Clear and insightful, it consolidates his reputation as one of America's foremost practitioners of narrative nonfiction." — *Wall Street Journal* In September 1776, the vulnerable Continental Army under an unsure George Washington (who had never commanded a large force in battle) evacuates New York after a devastating defeat by the British Army. Three weeks later, near the Canadian border, one of his favorite generals, Benedict Arnold, miraculously succeeds in postponing the British naval advance down Lake Champlain that might have ended the war. Four years later, as the book ends, Washington has vanquished his demons and Arnold has fled to the enemy after a foiled attempt to surrender the American fortress at West Point to the British. After four years of war, America is forced to realize that the real threat to its liberties might not come from without but from within.

*Valiant Ambition* is a complex, controversial, and dramatic portrait of a people in crisis and the war that gave birth to a nation. The focus is on loyalty and personal integrity, evoking a Shakespearean tragedy that unfolds in the key relationship of Washington and Arnold, who is an impulsive but sympathetic hero whose misfortunes at the hands of self-serving politicians fatally destroy his faith in the legitimacy of the rebellion. As a country wary of tyrants suddenly must figure out how it should be led, Washington's unmatched ability to rise above the petty politics of his time enables him to win the war that really matters.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of May 2016: I spent early summers running around Valley Forge in Pennsylvania and my later childhood years living next door to Lexington, Massachusetts, where the first battle of the American Revolution was fought—so I thought I had a pretty good handle on the war. Philbrick proved me wrong with his fascinating history of the years from 1776 to 1780, when the new country teetered between victory and disaster, its destiny influenced by George Washington and Benedict Arnold. Both generals were audacious—Washington and Arnold jumped into situations risky both to themselves and to the soldiers who fought for them. Both generals suffered indignities at the hands of the Continental Congress, a body riven by its own politics and hamstrung by its inability to set taxes on its citizens. But while Washington learned to temper his aggressiveness, sought others' wisdom, and developed a strategy for winning the war, Arnold remained self-centered and self-aggrandizing, focusing on the tactical to the detriment of the larger goal—culminating in his decision in 1780 to turn coat and deliver the fortress at West Point to the British army. Philbrick's eye for the illuminating detail and his clear writing keeps the story taut, unlike many history books that too often overwhelm the reader with a sludge of see-I-did-my-research prose. Riveting and relevant, *Valiant Ambition* explodes the myth that a triumphant revolution was inevitable. --Adrian Liang --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

"May be one of the greatest what-if books of the age—a volume that turns one of America's best-known narratives on its head."—Boston Globe "A suspenseful, richly detailed, and deeply researched book about the revolutionary struggle that bound George Washington and Benedict Arnold together and almost disastrous dysfunction of America's revolutionary government that helped drive them apart."—The New York Review of Books "Clear and insightful, it consolidates his reputation as one of America's foremost practitioners of narrative nonfiction."—Wall Street Journal "Philbrick is both a meticulous historian and a captivating storyteller. The book has unforgettable novelistic details [and] also contains much astute historical analysis and argument. Philbrick sees Arnold not as the man who almost lost the war so much as the catalyst that helped to win it."—Christian Science

Monitor. "This is history at its most compelling: political machinations, military jostling and outright treachery. And Philbrick's vivid writing brings the whistling cannon balls and half-frozen soldiers to life (and death) in vivid detail. He peels back the mythology to reveal a teetering war effort, a bickering Congress, discordant states unwilling to coalesce to support the new national government and — above all — a traitor who sought to sell out his own country for personal gain and achieved instead the one thing that no other revolutionary could: a unification of the Americans and an end to the war. And for that, we have much to thank Benedict Arnold." •Seattle Times "Benedict Arnold takes center stage in Nathaniel Philbrick's vivid and in some ways cautionary tale of the Revolutionary War. The near-tragic nature of the drama hinges not on any military secrets Arnold gave to the British but on an open secret: the weakness of the patriot cause. Arnold's betrayal still makes for great drama, proving once again that the supposed villains of a story are usually the most interesting." •New York Times Book Review "Philbrick wants his readers to experience the terror, the suffering and the adrenaline rush of battle, and he wants us to grit our teeth at our early politicians who, by their pettiness and shortsightedness, shape military events as profoundly as generals and admirals do. Finally, he reveals the emotional and physical cost of war on colonial society. He succeeds on all fronts." •Washington Post "Philbrick has the ability to take seemingly dry facts of history and turn them into exciting prose. The players come alive and their motivations are clear. The people he chronicles are legends, so revealing to the reader what makes them human, foibles and all, helps make sense of the events that transpired and why they acted the way they did." •Associated Press "Philbrick's deep scholarship, nuanced analysis, and novelistic storytelling add up to another triumph." •Publishers Weekly, starred review "A lively account of our Revolution's most reviled figure." •Kirkus Reviews "An engrossing narrative of the war's most difficult years... Philbrick argues that the quarrelsome, divided Americans needed Arnold's perfidy as much as they did Washington's greatness to unify their new nation. He pushes aside the patriotic myth to unveil the war's messy reality — and it's still a rousing adventure." •BookPage "As another American summer crawls toward the Fourth of July, and with a presidential election creeping up like Freddy on Elm Street, Nathaniel Philbrick offers some beach reading to remind us that outsized egos and a dysfunctional Congress were as much at issue in 1776 as they are now — if that's any comfort... Valiant Ambition colorfully reconstructs the character-driven battles that defined the Revolutionary War." •USA Today "Look,

you're not getting tickets to Hamilton. If he were alive, George Washington himself couldn't get tickets to Hamilton. Here's a cheaper alternative: a new look at the first American president and contrasts him with our most famous traitor.

Praise for Bunker Hill "A masterpiece of narrative and perspective."

Boston Globe "A tour de force . . ."

Chicago Tribune "Popular history at its best" • a taut narrative with a novelist's touch, grounded in careful research.

Miami Herald "A story that resonates with leadership lessons for all times."

Walter Isaacson, The Washington Post "A gripping book."

The Wall Street Journal

Three stars is all I can give this work, and that really disappoints me. I am a huge fan of Revolutionary War biographies. And I am a huge Nathaniel Philbrick fan, but this is not his best effort. His story-telling style is still strong and his way of melding the story and history is still engaging. However, from the very start, this book emits an odd purpose to which the facts are stretched to fit. Washington is portrayed as a virtual incompetent, stumped and duped by Arnold and others at every turn, and Arnold as a lucky pretender who "almost" causes calamity before he finally fulfills his egomania as a traitor. These two pre-announced characterizations are repeated over and over again in furtherance of a theme: the Revolution hung by a thread with incompetence (and incompetents) abounding and circumstances falling just right. It seems like a strong revisionist intent about this War (or all wars?) over-whelmed the author's research. Other histories of Arnold supply much more detail on his personality, as well as on such things as the invasion of Canada, Valcour Island and Saratoga. I was left dismayed by this book's lack of detail and credit given to Arnold, which is replaced by character deprecating language speculating on his REAL motives at each step. Even more striking is how he does a similar thing with Washington who, if you read Chernow's account, is anything but the shallow-thinking reactive bungler that Philbrick portrays. I strongly suggest that you read both: "Washington, A Life", by Chernow and then Sterne's: "Patriot and Traitor". These two books give a much more balanced presentation of both characters and their pivotal roles in the War. They present the men as human beings, with many strengths and weaknesses, not as easily understood and criticized role players moving to their inevitable fate. Interestingly, in his earlier book, "Bunker Hill", Philbrick treated another patriot very differently. He practically canonized Dr. Joseph Warren who was indeed a patriot, but in a very limited arena, in one colony, and for a very short time, calling him "indispensable" to the Revolution. And yet, Washington and Arnold who were largely responsible for the survival of the cause of 13 barely united colonies, and the only major victories the army had for nearly 4 years thereafter, as well as

enticing the French into the War, are framed as lucky but flawed participants in a War that played out by chance. Odd? Might one suspect the author - a native of Nantucket - of being slightly Boston-ophobic? I urge you to read the other works about these two fascinating and important men and make up your own mind.

Nathaniel Philbrick, in *Valiant Ambition*, skillfully weaves together two themes in this riveting history, the Revolutionary War from 1776 coupled with the highly successful and heroic military career and ultimate treason of Benedict Arnold in 1780. With a critique of Washington in the 1776 Battle of Long Island (more critical than Joseph Ellis in his *Revolutionary Summer*), through the strategic navigable importance of the Hudson River and Lake Champlain, the Battles of Ticonderoga, Fort Stanwix, Saratoga and Brandywine, the winter agony at Valley Forge, and less reported battles (e.g., the Battle of Fort Mifflin), this fascinating history book is peppered with unbiased portraits of the military leaders from the Colonies (Washington, Schuyler, Gates, Greene) and the British (the Howes, Clinton, Andre) with telling informative maps timed to the eighteenth century and placed in the appropriate chapters. Far more than a military history, the author deftly confronts the all but invisible line between loyalty to the Crown and loyalty to an emerging sense of American nationhood. The last hundred pages seamlessly turn to the background of Arnold's quixotic personality, self-centeredness, need for money and his marriage to the unstable Peggy Shippen. The events of September to October, 1780 play out like an opera bouffe; and if they were not so serious, at times, comedic, leading to the accidental last mile seizure of John Andre's thus to the uncovering of Arnold's plot to turn over West Point to the British. Philbrick concludes that Arnold's decision to sell his loyalty to the highest bidder, the greatest danger to America's future came from self-interest preserving opportunism masquerading as patriotism. The book ends as the fight for independence moves south. One might expect another book on that subject.

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