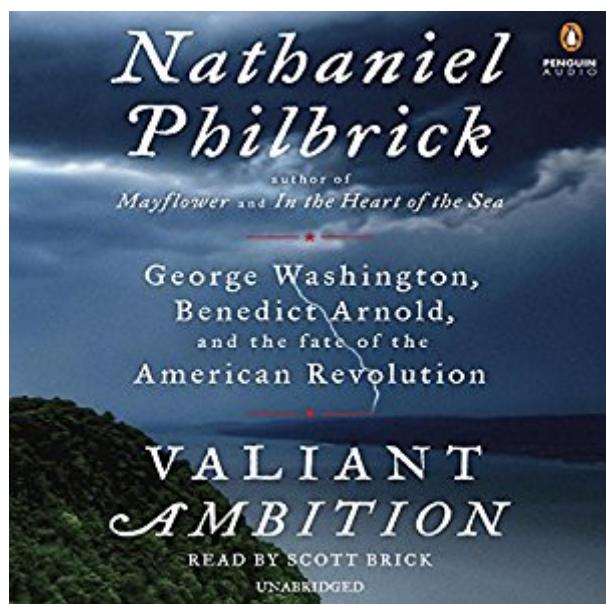


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Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, And The Fate Of The American Revolution



Synopsis

From the New York Times best-selling 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. 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

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 13 hours and 19 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Penguin Audio

Audible.com Release Date: May 10, 2016

Language: English

ASIN: B01DPUYFNO

Best Sellers Rank: #24 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > United States > American Revolution #28 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding #35 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military

Customer Reviews

A good historian, like a good musician, will take familiar material and make it seem like you are

discovering it for the first time. You think you know "God Bless America", and then you hear Ray Charles sing it. You think you know the story of Benedict Arnold and then you read Nathaniel Philbrick's *Valiant Ambition* and become aware of chords and notes you hadn't connected with before. Philbrick's telling adds texture and nuance along with a fresh perspective that is both engaging and convincing. Interspersing the observations of Joseph Plumb Martin, a private in the Continental Army who seems to have been present for many of the War's highlights is inspired, reminding us those serving "great men" often have a different view of that greatness. The result is a delight to read. Many authors have portrayed the Arnold-Washington relationship from an Oedipal angle. Happily, Philbrick saves that interpretation for Washington's relationship with the Marquis de Lafayette who plays only a minor part in *Valiant Ambition*. This telling of Arnold and Washington focuses upon how similar the two men were--extraordinarily ambitious and determined to tie their fortunes to the nation's. Each soldier was, initially, impetuous and prone to risk--some would say recklessness--that their troops would pay for with their lives. At the outset at least it was Arnold who was the better soldier. Both suffered injustices and calumnies from intriguing antagonists and a suspicious Continental Congress. The difference between these very similar men was that one had the capability to learn from mistakes and to "grow in the job." Both were proud to a fault but only one had the ability to subordinate himself and at times his dignity to a cause greater than himself.

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 ne 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.

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