

Review of Books

Richard Sale. *Traitors: The Worst Acts of Treason in American History from Benedict Arnold to Robert Hanssen*. New York:: Berkeley Books. 2003. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. ix, 309. Paper \$15.00

Popular history continues to intrigue the reading public and confound academics. Yet, popular history can address serious intellectual questions but not in the turgid scholarly style that too often fails to attract any save those initiated in the mysteries of historical writing. In *Traitors*, Richard Sale examines the most infamous traitors in U.S. history from revolutionary America to the modern United States in order to answer the question of “what makes a traitor.”

According to Sale, American traitors exhibit a pattern of similar traits regardless of time period in which they lived. Benedict Arnold, John Wilkes Booth, Whitaker Chambers, John Walker Jr., and Robert Hanssen all shared commonalities. Sale sees in each an “inner sufficiency;” all felt entitled to indulge their whims, were expert prevaricators, possess an exaggerated sense of their abilities, is ambitious to be a standout, and is a person without remorse. Though each act of treason was unique, Sale opines, each traitor exhibited the above traits. Importantly, every traitor Sale studies came from a dysfunctional family.

Perhaps benefiting from the perspective of distant time, the two best pieces in this work are the descriptions of Benedict Arnold and John Wilkes booth. Both men had a high degree of self-love, greed for money, and reckless behavior, as well as a belief that they were laws unto themselves. How else could an individual like Arnold defend the revolution so ardently and fight so heroically for independence, only to squander it all in a single act. However, whereas the catalyst for Arnold’s treachery was the desire for money and acclaim, Booth’s actions added a deep-seated racism and pathological hatred of Abraham Lincoln.

Sale contends that Whitaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley were imbued with the same characteristics as Arnold and Booth but justified their actions for ideological reasons. Much is known about the attraction of communism in the United States stemming from the Great Depression belief that capitalism had failed the populace. As

a result, Chambers, a highly placed spy in the U.S. Government, and Bentley passed American secrets to their Soviet masters. Both had the same exaggerated sense of self-importance and a taste of the high life. In the end, Bentley became disillusioned with her communist colleagues but she never shed the characteristics that made her spy against her country in the first place. Similarly, Chambers' eventual betrayal of his communist peers was a result of the same traits that led him to spy for the Soviet Union.

The most tragic figure, and according to Sale the most damaging, in this tale of traitors is Robert Hanssen. A classic case of dual personality, Hanssen seemed to be the poster boy for the FBI. However, his family background of abuse helped provide the material for building a future traitor. Hanssen's treachery not only caused the death of numerous people spying for the United States, but his activities seriously weakened America's ability to defend itself. Along with the material John Walker, Jr. and his ring passed to the Soviets, Hanssen's efforts made the United States vulnerable. Sale believes that the information the two traitors passed to the Soviets was so vital that had war between the United States and the Soviet Union broken out, it is unlikely the United States would have prevailed or even survived

Sale offers a compelling, and frightening, look into the minds of some of the United States' most damaging traitors. Supported by excellent footnotes and a clear style, Sale has produced a volume worthy of both survey and upper-level U.S. History courses, and for courses in psychology.

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