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For Prize or Patriotism: The Understood Role of Privateers in the American Revolution

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Cover Page Footnote

Nelson, James L. *George Washington's Secret Navy: How the American Revolution Went to Sea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008) 27. Godfrey, Nathaniel. Pilot Nathaniel Godfrey's Report of Action Between the Schooner Margueritta and the Rebels at Machia, June 11th, 1775 (Report). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Volume 1. (Accessed April 10, 2018). Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), vii. Reuben Elmore Stivers, *Privateers & Volunteers: The Men and Women of our Reserve Naval Forces, 1766-1866* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 17. Carl Swanson, *Predators and Prizes: American Privateering and Imperial Warfare, 1739-1748* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 5. Continental Congress, *Journal of the Continental Congress*, October 30th 1775 (Notes). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume 4. (Accessed April 28, 2018). Volo, James M. *Blue Water Patriots : The American Revolution Afloat* / James M. Volo. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007. 46. Continental Congress, *Journal of the Continental Congress*, November 25th, 1775 (Notes). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume 4. (Accessed April 24, 2018). Morse, Sidney G. "State or Continental Privateers?" *The American Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (1946): 69. doi:10.2307/1845069. Volo, James M. *Blue Water Patriots : The American Revolution Afloat* / James M. Volo. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007. 44. Warren, James. Letter from James Warren to John Adams, August, 1777 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume 8. (Accessed April 28, 2018) Avery, John. Letter from John Avery to John Hancock, 1777 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume 8. (Accessed April 28, 2018). Congress of North Carolina, *Acts of the State of North Carolina*, December 24th, 1774 (Acts). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume 8. (Accessed May, 3, 2018). THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 14. THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 14. THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 33. Nelson, James L. *George Washington's Secret Navy: How the American Revolution Went to Sea* / James L. Nelson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. 235. Pennsylvania Committee of Safety. *Minutes from the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety*, March 26, 1776 (Minutes). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume #5. (Accessed April, 30, 2018). Washington, George. Letter from General George Washington to Benedict Arnold, December 5, 1775 (Letter) *George Washington's Secret Navy*. (Accessed April, 30, 2018). Graves, Samuel. Letter from Samuel Graves to Major General William Howe, December, 1775 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Volume 2. (Accessed April 10, 2018). Volo, James M. *Blue Water Patriots : The American Revolution Afloat* / James M. Volo. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007. 70. Howe, Richard. Letter from Vice Admiral Richard Howe to Phillip Stephens, 1777 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Volume 8. (Accessed May 2, 2018). Cook. Letter from Captain Cook, August, 1777 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Volume 8. (Accessed April 10, 2018). THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 28. Morris, Robert. Robert Morris to William Bingham Philadelphia, December 4th 1777 (Letter). *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Volume 7. (Accessed April 28, 2018).

For Prize or Patriotism: The Understood Role of Privateers in the American Revolution

Jay Feyerabend

In early June 1775, three ships, the *Margaretta*, *Unity*, and *Polly* sailed up the muddy waters of the Machias River toward the small, isolated town of Machias in present-day Maine. The Boston-based vessels *Unity* and *Polly* frequently traded lumber with colonists in Machias. This time, however, the British warship *Margaretta* accompanied the two schooners to protect the ships from the colonists, who presumably had received the news of the recent tension in Boston. The three ships laid anchor at Machias' wharf to trade provisions such as "salt, pork and flour" with the residents of Machias in exchange for lumber, the industry that drove economic life in Machias.¹ Increasingly disdainful of the British, the colonists were increasingly less inclined to provide the British with lumber because, as many of the colonists correctly thought, the British army would use lumber to build barracks for the army's siege of Boston. After days of tense negotiations with Ichabod Jones, the Tory owner of the *Polly* and *Unity*, the colonial representatives and British officials agreed to a trade deal. This development angered the more fervently patriotic residents of Machias who perceived this trade agreement to be coercive and unfair. Ultimately, the colonists' anti-British sentiments prevailed when an angry mob of approximately thirty men stormed a church in which Jones and the British officer Captain Moore were present.

After narrowly escaping from the mob of colonists, Jones retreated into the Maine woods. British sailors rescued Captain Moore and took him aboard the war ship *Margaretta*. Once on the *Margaretta*, Moore threatened to burn the town if the colonists kept Jones from making the trade. Unimpressed with the firepower of the *Margaretta*, the colonists rejected the order and stormed the *Unity*

and *Polly*. Led by prominent lumberjack Jerimiah O'Brien, the colonists quickly gained control of the *Unity* and fired on the *Margaretta*. After exchanges of pistol and musket fire, the *Margaretta* pulled up its anchor and retreated up river. After anchoring up river for the night, Captain Moore realized he had failed to protect the trade interests of Ichabod Jones, who was still hiding in the woods. Moore decided to forego the mission and sail back toward Machias Bay. Jerimiah O'Brien and the colonists, however, had other ideas. As the *Margaretta* tried to escape toward the sea, the *Unity* rammed into the *Margaretta*, then the colonists swiftly stormed the ship's deck. After intense close-range, hand-to-hand combat, the outnumbered British finally submitted and the colonists captured the *Margaretta* and returned to Machias "in great triumph, with their colors flying."² Incidents such as the one at Machias, according to one historian, preceded a complex and multifaceted naval conflict during the American Revolution.³ The patriotic spirit of men like Jerimiah O'Brien and the "Machias Sons of Liberty" suggests that regardless of their position, these men deliberately chose to fight for independence.

The "Machias Sons of Liberty" anecdote aligns with the standard historical narrative about colonial rebellion against British tyranny. At the conclusion of the French and Indian War, Great Britain implemented a series of taxes, which colonists deemed unfair and oppressive in light of the Enlightenment.⁴ On the contrary, the British viewed these taxes as just and necessary means of protecting colonists and their interests (both on land and sea). In response to British taxation, colonists made a conscious choice either to split from the crown, or to remain British subjects.

Privateers fought in the war for complex, nuanced reasons. This paper starts from the assumption that privateers were influential in the naval theater of the war, one on which historians have reached a consensus. Using both the Official Naval Documents from the American Revolution and firsthand accounts from sailors, this essay will explore the financial aspects of privateering and examine the political sentiments of sailors. The paper will examine the various perceptions of the role of privateers, and how those perceptions differed among politicians in the Continental Congress, military officials, and the privateers themselves. Contemporaries believed that monetary gain rather than patriotism more likely

motivated the privateers. Although contemporaries likely would have believed that privateers were patriots and privateers had secondary motivations to join the war, the privateers' motivations were mostly of financial self-interest. Finally, the paper will assess the general effectiveness of privateers (as understood by their contemporaries) versus the effectiveness of the Continental Navy, drawing a clearer picture of the role privateers played during the American Revolution. The Continental Congress regarded the privateers as a valuable tool in their arsenal in fighting the British navy, and the privateers' involvement was a significant consideration in Congress' calculation and execution of strategies for effectively waging war against Great Britain.

Historians generally have reached a consensus on the influence of privateering on the American war effort, but they continue to debate whether patriotism or monetary gain motivated the privateers. Historical debate on the importance of privateering in the American Revolution began with Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. Referencing George Washington's dependence on the French Navy, Mahan argues that the commissioned navies were far more significant to the maritime war than the privateers. In response to Mahan, Edgar Stanton Maclay asserts that privateering was in fact an important, even "dominating," and legitimate form of naval warfare because privateering influenced the circulation of important supplies.⁵ In further support of Maclay's argument, Reuben Stivers emphasizes the privateers' patriotism through his portrayal of them as a "Volunteer Navy," while in contrast, Carl Swanson argues that a desire for money primarily—perhaps singularly—motivated men to become privateers. According to Swanson, there is minimal evidence to suggest that patriotic resistance to British tyranny motivated privateers.⁶

Economic Allure of Privateering

Patriotic fervor and disdain for coercive British policies, as in the case of "The Machias Sons of Liberty," first inspired some men to take up arms against the powerful Royal Navy. Patriotic sentiments, however, probably did not convince all colonists to continue waging war against the British. For both privateers and the

Continental Navy, the financial appeal of the war influenced sailors' decisions about joining the war. As it became increasingly evident that America's struggle for independence would require a prolonged war against the British, a major concern for men (and their families) determined to contribute to the war effort centered on how individuals would be financially compensated for their efforts while away from their homes—often for extended periods of time. Agreeing to fight against British rule was more than a patriotic decision, as this commitment influenced a sailors' ability to earn a living from his pre-war occupation. Men who wanted to become sailors during the late 1770s faced two primary options: either join the newly formed Continental Navy or join a privateering vessel commissioned by the Continental Congress or more commonly by state governments.

While the salary promised to the sailors by the Continental Congress was a reliable source of income, the potential to make great deals of money through privateering was a much more attractive prospect to many. Sailors in the Continental Navy typically received a salary of five dollars, and officers and seamen split one third of the prizes from ships they seized.⁷ As historian James Volo explains, “in most cases simple economic self-interest spurred these patriots to serve by the hundreds in private warships from 1775 to 1783. So popular was privateering that the regular navy had trouble recruiting and keeping crews.”⁸ This overwhelming trend toward privateering suggests financial motives strongly outweighed the desire to fight with the continental forces. Sailor Jacob Nagle's writings support this claim. In his journal, Nagle claimed to have taken in nine prizes in May and June 1780 while sailing on the *Fair American* and twenty-one prizes while on the *Rising Son* from July 1781 through October 1781. Though Nagle did not state the specific amount in his journal, historian John Dann surmises that Nagle earned hundreds of British pounds as a privateer. Since American privateers were capturing many ships, Nagle certainly was not the only sailor making large sums of money. Many colonists who observed the money-making potential of privateering—but were not capable of joining crews—became involved by investing in the financial support of a vessel.

Letters and other historical documents during this period provide some insight into the amount of bounty that privateers

seized. Dr. James Warren wrote to John Adams in August 1776 to inform him of the amount of goods taken as prizes by privateers—goods that were ultimately sold in Boston during the summer of 1776: “We have nothing going forward here but fixing out privateers, and condemnation and sale of prizes sent in by them, so many that I am quite lost in my estimate of them, and West India goods are falling at a great rate. Yesterday arrived a prize taken by at [New] York Privateers with several hundred bags of cotton.” Warren’s tone suggests that privateering was a constant source of income, which was not particularly interesting to Adams. Not mentioning the cost of “fixing out privateers” also suggests that the cost of doing so was not very significant.⁹

John Avery wrote to President John Hancock of the Continental Congress explaining how Massachusetts is “intirely exhausted of commissions Instructions and Bonds for Armed vessels & call for them seems to increase therefore Should be greatly obliged to you if you would forward a Number of them of them for the Use of this State.”¹⁰ From this letter it can be inferred that privateering was growing in popularity. Moreover, it was not just Massachusetts that was exhausting its bonds and commission instructions. The call for privateering apparently occurred throughout many of the American colonies. One such example involves North Carolina.

The state of North Carolina was especially liberal in its policies regarding privateering; sailors were entitled to keep *one-half* of goods taken from merchant ships. If a crew captured a British vessel, then the crew split the bounty among themselves, minus a fee.¹¹ This incentive certainly would have enticed sailors living near the North Carolina shores (and possessing a proclivity to support the American cause) to join a privateering vessel and reap the rewards.

Privateers’ Political Sentiments

Whether sailors pursued an independent nation via their involvement in privateering is a different question, as personal motivations and sentiments may or may not have aligned within the broader goals of earning Independence for the Colonies. Although there is evidence for the pursuit of economic benefits, there is scarce evidence of sailors’ political sentiments. As a result, it is difficult to

say whether sailors regarded themselves as patriots or loyalists. It must be remembered that colonists cannot be neatly segmented into two distinct parties of patriots and loyalists. The case of Jacob Nagle serves as an example.

Jacob Nagle served in the Continental Army and Navy and on numerous vessels as a privateer. He thoroughly documented his sentiments and beliefs in a journal. While the entries illuminate his perspective on his role in the war, what they do not address is of critical importance. He does not reflect on political theory or provide updates on the land war, which he would have learned about during his time on privateering vessels.

When violence erupted at Lexington and Concord in 1775, the thirteen-year-old Nagle was traveling from his hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania to the American Barracks outside Philadelphia with his father, George Nagle. Jacob's father accepted a role in 1776 as major in the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment. His father's prominence in the military probably influenced how the young Nagle viewed the war. Following his visit to Philadelphia, Nagle returned to Reading for about a year until his father sent for him and he joined the Army as a regular soldier. Nagle remained in the Colonial Army until the summer of 1778. Little is known about Nagle's time between leaving the Army and joining the crew of the *Fair American*, a privateering vessel.¹² However, it is believed that Jacob Nagle might have spent roughly six weeks in the Continental Navy serving on the *Saratoga*, where he likely received basic sailing skills under the command of Captain Young prior to joining the *Fair American*.¹³ At a time when the Continental Navy struggled to recruit sailors, Captain Young's willingness to allow Nagle leave for a private vessel strongly suggests that naval commanders understood the effectiveness of privateering and viewed privateers as an integral part of the war effort while still realizing the fiscal benefits of privateering.

Prior to his brief stint in the Continental Navy, Nagle planned to sail for Europe before his parents forbade it. Nagle's desire to leave North America suggests that his service in the army may have had more to do with his parents' wishes than his own political inclinations. Although Nagle sailed on various privateering vessels, his journal curiously does not mention the war except when he and other sailors from *The Trumbull* were traveling by land to

Philadelphia and looking for quarters to spend the evening on their journey. Nagle and the other sailors found “a farm housed about a mile on the road, but he could not tell whether he would give us entertainment or not, as he new he was a rank, but he told us not to let on that we had seen him, as he would be there by dark, and if we would be Tories for one night, he had no doubt but what we would be well treated.”¹⁴ If privateers truly regarded themselves as American patriots, one would expect Nagle mention the land war or at least comment on other sailors’ conversations about it. By not mentioning the land war in his journal, even after he served time in the Continental Army, Nagle might not have thought the land war was as significant as his work on various privateering vessels.

Privateers seemed to take more pride in their privateering than in fighting for political freedom. For example, Hohn Manly, a privateer operating out of Philadelphia, became a national hero for his exploits as a privateer. When Manly entered a port, the local newspaper regarded the event as newsworthy. In 1776, a ballad titled “Manly: A Favourite New Song in the American Fleet” was recorded. Some lines from the song include “Brave Manly his is stout, and his men have proved true,” and “To Him and all those valiant Souls who go in Privateers.”¹⁵ It stands to reason that serving on a privateering vessel excited those who were seeking this type of adventure. Privateers and those related to privateering regarded the profession as honorable. Further, it appears that privateering was not perceived as piracy; neither the private journal of Jacob Nagle nor any official documents from the continental or state legislatures described privateering in the same manner as the illegal act of piracy—an activity which was regarded with great disdain at the time.

There were, however, other reasons why men might have chosen to become privateers. During the late 1770s both state militias and the Continental Army drafted soldiers to ensure there were enough for the war effort. One way men could avoid conscription was by volunteering to serve on a privateering vessel. While the living standards on privateering vessels were not desirable, it might have been well understood that life on a privateering ship—and the spoils associated with it—would have been preferable to serving in the army and living in the encampments. This further supports the notion that men opted to

become privateers not due to patriotic support for independence, but rather to avoid life in the army (coupled with the potential to earn great rewards).

Privateers likely chose their profession for a myriad of reasons. Whether to seek riches, avoid service in the American army, or simply to pursue adventure, privateers held a variety of motivations which were not strictly patriotic. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that men serving on privateering ships may have regarded their service as simply a way to continue providing for their families when they no longer could be regular sailors as they were before the war. To these men, earning a living might have been more important than serving a political cause.

Privateers' Role in Congress' Naval Strategy

The freedom-seeking politicians in Philadelphia understood the popularity of privateering and likely seized on the opportunity to leverage (non-political) privateers for the war effort. Nagle's experience as a privateer is likely representative of many of his contemporaries' time aboard ship. Whether driven by a desire to serve their country or to earn money for their families, privateers contributed to the American cause. This contribution is most evident in Congress' use of privateers to disrupt British supply lines and to gather critical matériel for the American cause.

Without the financial means to lure sailors away from profitable private ventures, the Continental Congress decided that using privateers to wreak havoc on British vessels—rather than building official Naval ships—was more financially viable. Because building and maintaining a congressional navy was very expensive, the size of the navy was small compared to the number of privateers on the water. Estimates of the number of men in the Navy range from six-hundred in 1775 to roughly four thousand around 1777, with an average of under two thousand sailors per year between the years of 1775 and 1782.¹⁶ Although accurate records substantiating the actual number of privateers during those years are difficult to come by, many historians believe those numbers were in fact significantly higher.

Congressional legislation empowered both the Continental Congress and state congresses to grant Letters of Marque. These

were permits for colonial vessels to engage in privateering activities in exchange for two-thirds of the prize acquired by the vessel.¹⁷ This was a compelling proposition for colonial governments, as they would not shoulder any of the financial burden of procuring ships and preparing the vessels for their voyages. Wealthy individuals or investment groups assumed the risks and costs of putting ships to sea. Historians continue to speculate on the percentage of Letters of Marque that the Continental Congress versus state legislatures granted. Historian Sidney Morse, for example, claims that the Continental Congress—rather than the state legislatures—actually granted substantial number of Letters of Marques (or bonds).¹⁸ State legislatures nonetheless played a significant part. The Massachusetts House of Representatives, for example, also staunchly supported privateering; they documented as much by writing “permit as many Persons, within their Limits, as they shall think proper, to fit out Privateers and the sd Comee are also hereby directed to commissionate such Officers as they shall judge suitable for the above purpose.”¹⁹ The legislature placed no limits on the number of ships receiving Letters of Marque. This decision indicates that Massachusetts Representatives deemed privateering to be a necessary practice.

Pennsylvania politicians seemed to come to a similar conclusion. Understanding the financial motivations of privateers, colonial legislators had to grapple with sailors switching sides and joining the British for financial gain. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety stipulated the official punishment for treason on March 26, 1776 under the suspicion that “wicked and ill-disposed persons have seduced and inticed some of the Men belonging to the Boats, to desert the service and go into other employ.” The records then continue, “[anyone] who shall harbour and Conceal any Deserter (knowing him to be such) from the Continental Forces, or any other Forces raised within this or any other of the United Colonies, for the Defence of America, shall forfeit and pay any sum not exceeding fifty nor less than thirty Dollars, or suffer three months imprisonment.”²⁰ In effect, Pennsylvania was “cracking down” on privateers that showed no loyalty to the American cause. Nevertheless, privateers were critical to the war effort.

Effectiveness of Privateers and the Continental Navy

Before the French government decided in 1778 to send a fleet of twelve ships to support the American cause, privateers were the colonies' main naval defense against the British. Privateers experienced overwhelming success in the early parts of the war. In December 1775, Vice Admiral Samuel Graves of the Royal Navy wrote to Major General William Howe, "I wish it was in my power to give your Excellency more satisfaction on the Subject of your Letter," updating Howe on the effectiveness of the Royal Navy. Graves continues, "It is impossible for the Ships to keep on their stations or prevent the Rebels from making further captures."²¹ Additionally, Graves informed Phillip Stephens that "the Rebels watch the opportunity of the Kings Ships and Vessels being off the Coast, slip out in light good going Vessels full of Men, seize a defenceless Merchant ship and push immediately for the nearest Port the Wind will carry them."²² Graves' outline of a basic strategy for privateers as early as 1775 serves as evidence that privateering was common. Graves' decision to write to his colleagues in England about privateering further suggests that privateering significantly challenged the British forces.

Privateers held many advantages over the formation and maintenance of a standing navy. The lack of funding and the relatively small number of vessels made organization of a Continental squadron improbable. According to Volo, "Although small squadrons of American Privateers sometimes acted in concert, a lack of equipment and seamen for manning the more powerful Continental frigates suggests that the hope of combing the operations of their widely scattered warships was wildly ambitious." The Continental and State Navies did not have the leadership to operate as a cohesive unit. Volo further describes the "largest American Naval Operation" in 1779 as "an utmost disaster because it lacked both experienced leadership and an appropriate operational strategy."²³ It was for these reasons that politicians relied heavily on privateers to establish a legitimate naval presence in the Atlantic Ocean.

Privateering, however, was not an easy task—and was certainly not without risk. Nevertheless, early privateers experienced meaningful success during the early parts of the war; this was largely due to the skill and experience of the captains,

coupled with their familiarity of the coastal waters. Vice Admiral Richard Lord Howe describes the risk in his letter of 1777 to Phillip Stephens: “Several Privateers have been chased by different Cuizers: But from the better sailing –State in which the former can with facility kept, and other local Advantages, Without Effect.”²⁴ In many instances, captains of privateering vessels had been working in the maritime industry for many years prior to the start of the American Revolution and were very familiar with sailing in North American waters. Privateers also commonly used vessels that were lighter, faster and featured greater maneuverability as compared to their British counterparts.²⁵ These factors were critical in terms of engaging and outmaneuvering their opponents. During the early periods of the American Revolution, these successes at sea were some of the Americans’ only victories. Without the optimism the privateers were providing for the rebel cause, General Washington would have faced greater challenges in the war effort, especially in the recruitment of men.

Although Congress did not regulate them, privateering ships did create some problems. First, the reliability and loyalty of Privateers was a constant cause for concern. As Jacob Nagle writes in his journal, “[I] belonged to a passenger in the schooner and was not in the bill of lading. That private property he smuggled and put in his own pocket. Being ready, we took in a cargo of sugar and coffee, and the rest in Spacia, and put to sea.”²⁶ Nagle is explaining the act of smuggling that was all too common among privateers. Vessels like the one Nagle described would capture British goods and sell them without making any governmental authorities aware of the capture. If privateers smuggled cargo, then they would not have to pay a percentage to the government as outlined in the Letter of Marque. This willingness to break the law for fiscal gain shows that the first motive of privateers was to make money, as opposed to supporting the broader cause of winning the war.

The Continental Congress also struggled with treasonous sailors such as John Goodrich, a wealthy merchant from Portsmouth, Virginia. Goodrich and his son understood that privateers could profit from the war regardless of which side they supported. The Goodrich family was ultimately responsible for the capture of over 100 American ships. Following the British retreat from New York City, John Goodrich and his son sailed for England,

where they received a pension for their efforts in disrupting American commerce. Goodrich was not the only Englishman involved in privateering; British privateers commonly captured ships off the coast of Europe. This was explained by William McCreery in an October 10, 1777 letter to John Adams: “The Carolinians have been peculiarly unlucky of late in the vessels which they Sent to Europe. Four out of five which got into the Bay were taken, & I Saw a Letter from Cadiz yesterday.”²⁷

By 1777, the British were becoming more familiar with American privateering tactics and made strategic adjustments. In his December 4 letter to William Bingham, Robert Morris writes how he believed British merchant ships had armed themselves: “to counter this display force, he recommends a Stout Privateer because I imagine the British ships will now come out very generally Armed and little will be done to the small ones.”²⁸ Privateering was becoming more difficult, expensive, and dangerous as British ships began arming themselves in anticipation of engaging privateers. This adjustment by the British likely had some impact on the effectiveness of American privateering efforts and ultimately led to a greater reliance on the French fleet as the war progressed. Although privateers became less influential following France’s intervention in the war, the significance of the practice during the initial years of the war cannot be understated. Privateering provided the American rebels with the necessary funds and supplies to sustain the fight against the British.

Studying the privateers complicates the patriot-loyalist narrative about the American Revolution. Critics of this claim might argue that many participants in the American Revolution fought for high-minded liberal principles. In one of the foremost scholarly examples of this interpretation, historian Gordon S. Wood argues that the Enlightenment writings of John Locke and Thomas Paine ignited the animosity of the American colonists toward British oppression, leading to the fight for independence from the British Empire.²⁹

In a more critical approach to the American Revolution, the struggle for independence in colonial America was more parochial. The war was fought by countless ordinary people whose names have been lost to history. They lived their lives while embracing their beliefs and values. The privateers exemplified these soldiers. They

were foremost working professionals—sailors, as it were, similar to other skilled tradesmen, merchants, or planters. And like those men in other professions, their main goal during the 1770s was to provide for their families while making a healthy living during a period of intense political and economic uncertainty. This is not to suggest that no privateer was sympathetic to the cause of American liberty. But the historical evidence suggests quite a few of these men were primarily seizing the opportunity to get rich, and it would have been fortuitous that this endeavor aligned with their political leanings.

From a different vantage point on privateers, political elites viewed the privateers as a tool in the fight against British tyranny, and were making strategic decisions about fighting the war based on the value of privateers. While the perceived nature of privateers adds insight to the historical record, the political elites would not have been concerned with how privateers saw themselves, and the privateers would have been largely disinterested in how the political class perceived them. The political elites would have grasped the immense value of privateers, and likely worried (to some degree) about the precedent of piracy being set in the waters off the American coastline that might continue after the war. However, it is reasonable to assert that the political class accepted this situation and determined that post-war precedents regarding privateering could be handled another day—that is, after the war had been won.

Notes

¹ James L. Nelson, *George Washington's Secret Navy: How the American Revolution Went to Sea* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 27.

² Nathaniel Godfrey, *Pilot Nathaniel Godfrey's Report of Action Between the Schooner Margueritta and the Rebels at Machias, June 11th, 1775* (Report). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Volume 1. (Accessed April 10, 2018).

³ John A. McManemin, *Revolution on the High Seas: A History of Maritime Massachusetts during the Revolutionary War* (Spring Lake, NJ: Ho-Ho-Kus, 1988), 39.

⁴ Eric Foner. *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 179.

⁵ Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), vii.

⁶ Carl Swanson, *Predators and Prizes: American Privateering and Imperial Warfare, 1739-1748* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 5.

⁷ Continental Congress, *Journal of the Continental Congress*, October 30th, 1775 (Notes). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4. (Accessed April 28, 2018)

⁸ James M. Volo, *Blue Water Patriots : The American Revolution Afloat* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 46.

⁹ Warren, James. *Letter from James Warren to John Adams*, August, 1777 (Letter). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 8. (Accessed April 28, 2018)

¹⁰ Avery, John. Letter from John Avery to John Hancock, 1777 (Letter). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 8. (Accessed April 28, 2018)

¹¹ Congress of North Carolina, *Acts of the State of North Carolina*, December 24th, 1774 (Acts). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 8. (Accessed May, 3, 2018)

¹² THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 14

¹³ THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 14

¹⁴ HE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 33.

¹⁵ Nelson, *George Washington's Secret Navy*, 235.

¹⁶ Volo, *Blue Water Patriots*, 44.

¹⁷ Continental Congress, *Journal of the Continental Congress*, November 25th, 1775 (Notes). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, volume 4. (Accessed April 24, 2018)

¹⁸ Sidney G. Morse, "State or Continental Privateers?" *The American Historical Review* 52, no. 1 (1946): 69. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1845069>.

¹⁹ Massachusetts Armed Vessels Act, 1775 Mass Acts, ch. 7, Preamble, reprinted in *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1886), 436–37.

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²² Howe, Richard. *Letter from Vice Admiral Richard Howe to Phillip Stephens, 1777* (Letter). Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Volume 8. (Accessed May 2, 2018).

²³ Volo, *Blue Water Patriots*, 70.

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- ²⁶ THE NAGLE JOURNAL A DIARY OF THE LIFE OF NAGLE, JACOB, SAILOR, FROM THE YEAR 1775 TO 1841 - DANN, C, EDITOR." *American Heritage* 40, no. 3 (1989): 28.
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