

American Traitor: General James Wilkinson's Betrayal of the Republic and Escape from Justice

Howard W. Cox (Georgetown University Press, 2023), 367 pages, illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Welker

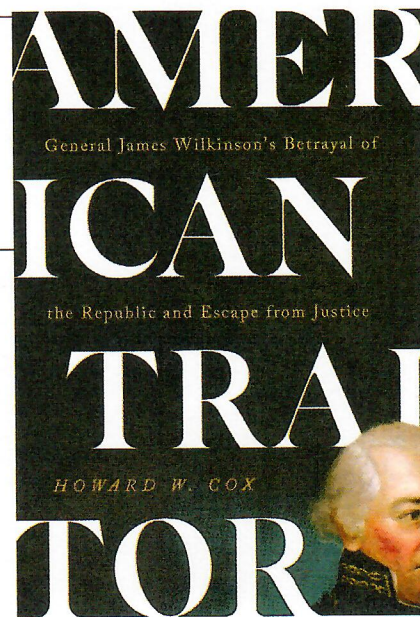
Former assistant CIA inspector general Howard Cox's look at one of America's worst—and the highest placed—traitors in the nation's nearly 250-year history is a well researched, thorough volume that stands as the definitive work on this unfortunate figure. Although most Americans know about Benedict Arnold, Rick Ames, and other infamous spies' treachery, Wilkinson's has long gone unnoticed, even though it had the potential to inflict significant damage on the United States. Moreover, unlike those traitors, Wilkinson repeatedly evaded justice throughout his long life. Cox's volume examines not only Wilkinson's deceit but, perhaps most importantly, how and why he evaded justice for so long. It marks a welcome contrast to some earlier biographies.

Cox weaves the fascinating story of Wilkinson's life throughout. Born March 24, 1757, in Charles County, Maryland, Wilkinson studied medicine before the Revolution interrupted and in 1775 was commissioned an infantry captain. He took part in the Battle of Bunker Hill and operations around Boston. Exceptionally ambitious, he quickly realized that line command was thankless work and instead obtained a position as an aide to Generals Nathaniel Greene and later Benedict Arnold during the retreat from Canada. In 1777, Wilkinson became General Horatio Gates' adjutant-general, carrying messages between Gates, Arnold, and other senior commanders at the Battles of Saratoga. This role took Wilkinson's natural penchant for self-serving intrigue and backstabbing to a new level, leading to his playing a central role in infighting between the top Continental generals that denied Arnold credit for his leadership accomplishments, feeding bitterness that played into the onetime patriot hero's later treason. Rising again through scheming, Wilkinson played a central role in the Conway Cabal, which used back-channel maneuvering to attempt to replace Washington with Gates as army commander. Forced by the Cabal's exposure to resign his commission, Congress appointed Wilkinson the army's "clothier-general" supply master,

but later removed him for "lack of aptitude."

Settling in Kentucky after the war, Wilkinson led efforts to split the region from Virginia. In 1787 he traveled to the Spanish colonial capital New Orleans to arrange trade deals for Kentucky but found instead an unexpected opportunity for personal profit and advancement. Meeting with Spanish officials, he proposed leading Kentucky not into statehood but rather into becoming a Spanish possession—which he would head—and offered to spy for Spain in exchange for support and money. Spain quickly accepted, dubbing Wilkinson "Agent 13." This bit of good timing was followed by another when Wilkinson's failed business efforts led him back into the US Army at just the moment President Washington needed to rebuild the military from the Continental Army's remains. By swearing allegiance to the United States as a military officer, having just sworn allegiance to the king of Spain, James Wilkinson became a spy and traitor to the United States.

Rising exceptionally rapidly through the ranks of the infant US Army, in 1792 Wilkson was appointed second-in-command to army chief and Revolutionary War hero General Anthony Wayne. This assignment offered new possibilities for his career and for spying for Spain. Tension between the two appeared instantly, and upon discovering his deputy's Spanish ties, Wayne moved to file charges. But Wayne's sudden death—Wilkinson was suspected of poisoning him—not only ended the investigation but at once made Spain's Agent 13 the US Army's commander.



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Switching his political affiliation and the Founders' disdain for things military enabled Wilkinson's to remain as head of the army through four presidential administrations. Throughout much of that time Agent 13 was reporting to his Spanish handlers and readily taking their money in return. Although Wilkinson flirted with Aaron Burr's cabal, which was planning to create a new nation beyond the Appalachians, in the end calculated self-interest led him to abandon Burr and become one of Jefferson's key witnesses in advancing charges against the former vice president. Yet Wilkinson was more loyal to Spanish gold than to President Jefferson, not only revealing to Spain the routes of American exploration parties of Lewis and Clark and others, but advising Spain to attack or capture them and offering other ideas to boost Spain at America's expense. Although later Spain's retreat from much of North America gradually ended his value as a spy, Wilkinson never ceased pursuing a pension from the king.

Cox explains and explores these and many more of Wilkinson's failed and often despicable acts—lapsed leadership during the War of 1812, leaving his troops in starving squalor so he could pursue his wealthy soon-to-be second wife, and backstabbing rivals, colleagues, and presidents—through the 1815 end of his army career and his 1825 death in Mexico City, where he was trying to exploit that nation's political upheaval for his own gain. Nowhere will readers find a more detailed, thorough biography of James Wilkinson.

Perhaps of even greater value, however, are the book's later chapters that explore the 1808, 1811, and 1815 legal inquiries and courts martial convened to weigh charges brought against Wilkinson for spying, malfeasance, and corruption. That despite the weight of considerable evidence in each of these cases Wilkinson managed to dodge justice each time has long challenged historians' understanding. Cox's conclusion shows that Wilkinson was as lucky as he was deceitful, in each case benefiting from facing imperfect and nascent US laws or being

either useful or inconvenient to political leaders' agendas. Wilkinson became helpful in Jefferson's ongoing struggle with Burr, but leaders like Washington, Adams, and Madison seemingly chose to ignore inconvenient facts about their army commander lest those issues further complicate or undermine their administrations' policy efforts. Cox, a former trial attorney, brings a unique mix of legal and historical analysis in evaluating and explaining each of these cases that will stand for years as the best explanation for Wilkinson's surviving these professional legal storms.

If Cox wrote this volume in part to fill a void left by the only other recent biography of Wilkinson—a work that has been criticized for being too indecisive and “fair” in weighing Wilkinson's actions—then he succeeds admirably.^a Readers never wonder about Cox's view that Wilkinson's life was one of self-serving treachery, betraying the nation that had given him so much. Reflecting this, nearly every chapter carries subhead quotes by contemporaneous fellow Wilkinson critics that will have the reader periodically laughing aloud with their intended snark.

My only quibbles with Cox's work are minor. His pursuit of detail sometimes heads so deep into rabbit holes that a reader must pause to recall how it fits with the main narrative, although patience is rewarded in each case. Infrequently, the author misuses intelligence terminology—for example, labeling Wilkinson in one instance a double agent, when in fact he was never doubled and spied only for Spain—but this is offset by applying his valuable legal insight to these historic intelligence issues.

Cox's book is particularly valuable as the nation begins celebrating its 250th birthday, adding scholarly insight about a little known—if despicable—figure whose account deserves to be recalled honestly and accurately. Intelligence officers interested in the early American role of their craft will particularly find Cox's *American Traitor* an informative, enjoyable read.



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a. Andro Linklater, *An Artist in Treason* (Walker Books, 2009).