

Nothing to Hide

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
22 SEPT 93

CONFIDENTIAL

Precept from Poor Richard.

J. J. Charlevoix

One of the most egregious penetrations in the history of espionage was the British agent Edward Bancroft, who made himself invaluable to Benjamin Franklin as private secretary when Franklin was the American envoy in Paris working to get French aid for the revolution.¹ Franklin has been called a dupe and stubborn fool for ignoring repeated warnings about this man, who was not conclusively exposed until a collection of British secret service papers was published more than a century later. On the following pages, however, is reproduced a letter from Franklin acknowledging a similar warning,² which shows the attitude he took toward the security of his secretariat. It is also a classic contribution to doctrine for general application.

Paris, Jan. 19. 1777

Madam,

I am much oblig'd to you for your kind Attention to my Welfare, in the Information you give me. I have no doubt of its being well founded. But as it is impossible to discover in every case the Falsity of pretended Friends who would know our Affairs; and more so to prevent being watch'd by Spies, when interested People may think proper to place them for that purpose; I have long observ'd one Rule which prevents any Inconvenience from such Practices. It is simply this, to be concern'd in no Affairs that I should blush to have made public; and to do nothing but what Spies may see & welcome. When a Man's Actions are just & honourable, the more they are known the more his Reputation is increas'd & establish'd. If I was sure therefore that my Valet de Place was a Spy, as probably he is, I think I should not discharge him for that, if in other Respects I liked him. The various Conjectures you mention concerning my Business here, must have their Course. They amuse those that make them, & some of those that hear them; they do me no harm, and therefore it is not necessary that I should take the least Pains to rectify them.

I am glad to learn that you are in a Situation that is agreeable to you, and that Mr. Richie was lately well. My Daughter and her Children were so when I left them, but I have lost my dear Mrs. Franklin now two Years since. I have the Honour to be very respectfully

Cambray 12th January 1777

Sir

The agreeable manner in which I lived for several years in the once happy city of Philadelphia -- made too deep an impression upon my mind -- for either time -- distance or the vicissitudes of fortune to erase; you will not be surprised Sir -- after this declaration -- when I inform you -- that the unhappy situation of the affairs of America -- has caused me to pass many days in painful anxiety -- & sleepless nights since the commencement of the present war with England, hoping & fearing alternatively -- for the safety of the country in general but more particularly for the fate of those -- whom repeated acts of friendship and kindness -- rendered truly dear to my heart -- it is from these sentiments -- that I take the liberty of addressing you Sir -- being fully persuaded from the knowledge I have of your amiable character, that you will not only pardon the freedom I am now taking--but will also--keep the purport of this letter -- from the knowledge of any other Person -- or otherwise -- I shall be involved in *great trouble* -- but I am quite easy upon that head -- knowing that that it is to a gentleman of integrity -- I am writing and therefore without further preface -- I proceed to the purpose of this letter -- which is to inform you Sir -- that you are surrounded *with spies* -- who watch your every movement who you visit -- & by whom you are visited -- of the

latter there are who pretend to be friends to the cause of your Country but *that* is a mere pretense -- your own good sense will easily infer -- the *motive of their conduct*. one *Party* assures -- that you are seeking aid & support from *this Kingdom* the other *party* -- insinuate that you have given up *that Cause* & are making the *best terms* you can for the private advantage of your own family connections & friends I dare not be more explicit -- for weighty reasons to my self -- but on the truth of what I inform you -- you may strictly rely. as I am ignorant of your address -- I send this to Messrs Le Normond & Co. Rue St Honory -- to deliver to your own hand -- & shall rejoice to know that you have received it safe -- if at your leisure you favor me with a few lines -- please to address me at Cambrai -- that address will be sufficient -- as I have resided here for two years with five young ladies of fortune -- Doughters to my particular friends in England, who are all under my care--we return to England in the spring season -- where if I can render you any acceptable service -- to know your Commands will give me real pleasure. I make no doubt but you have many abler friends -- but I am sure none more willing then my self. I hope you left Mrs Franklin & your Doughter well -- an account whereof will give me pleasure I had a letter from my husband a few days since--but He does not mention the affairs of America.

Benjn Franklin Esqr.

1 The full story is told in Studies V 1, p. A53 ff.

2 Transcription of warning letter on p. 88.

Posted: May 08, 2007 08:00 AM