THE BOSTON TEA PARTY: COVERT ACTION, INTELLIGENCE SUCCESS

by

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Throughout history political leaders recognized the need to accomplish national ends using means where either the act itself or the actor must be disguised. As intelligence organizations began defining roles and missions these activities became associated with intelligence. So, although they may not appear to follow the typical intelligence cycle, covert actions are considered intelligence.

Covert actions in North America predate the United States intelligence community; in fact they predate the United States. Some of the earliest actions of the patriots, or rebellious colonists, fall neatly into the category of covert action. One such action is the Boston Tea Party.

Mark Lowenthal, following the definition from the National Security Act, explains that covert actions are “activities of the United States Government [undertaken] to influence political, economic or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent.” Since the activity of covert actions existed before the United States it is necessary to reduce the definition to its essential elements. Those elements are that the political organization, attempts to accomplish a policy objective while concealing its identity. That requires that the action be something other than a colonial mob or act of open rebellion or defiance. Further, it is important that the policymakers consider two risks; the risk of discovery and the risk of failure. Finally, covert action is often considered a “third option” i.e. an option to accomplish a political objective between taking no action and using overt military force. In order to demonstrate that the Boston Tea Party was indeed a covert action it will be necessary to identify the political organization behind it, the policy objective that it

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1 Mark Lowenthal, Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy (Washington: CQ Press, 2009), 165.

2 Ibid., 165-166.
sought to achieve, and that measures to disguise the actors were used. The metric to
determine the success of a covert action is to consider how effectively the policy
objectives were achieved.

Although the details may be lost somewhere in the cobwebs of elementary school,
every American recalls the basic outline of the Boston Tea Party. The colonists, tired of
repressive subjugation to the English government and taxes, grew rebellious. Eventually
they determined to take action. On 16 December, 1773, colonists disguised as Indians
boarded three ships in Boston harbor and threw all the English tea overboard. There is
plenty of evidence to support the idea that this was more than the type of random mob
activity that Boston had witnessed several years earlier.³

The colonists, led primarily by Samuel Adams and the Boston Committee of
Correspondence, effectively achieved their political and economic objectives at the
Boston Tea Party. The rebellious government was emerging in 1773; it was not until the
following years that the first and second Continental Congresses began to formalize the
national government. The colonial period from the time of 1765 – 1773 proved to be a
formative period for the United States. During that period the British government
imposed several laws and taxes that were resented by the colonists. Colonial activists,
rebels, or patriots used the British actions to instigate the revolution.

**Decision Makers (Political Organization)**

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³ Griswold, 95 – 105.
In the years prior to 1773, the Sons of Liberty was formed to protest British actions such as the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act. The Committees of Correspondence formed in major cities throughout the colonies to communicate revolutionary messages. In Boston, Samuel Adams performed leadership roles in both organizations. As the British government became less and less accepted by the people and before the Continental Congress formed, the decision makers of the revolutionary cause were groups such as the Sons of Liberty and the Committees of Correspondence. Essentially as the sovereign state became less accepted by governed it lost its legitimacy to govern, concurrently a shadow insurgent government began to form.

The months following the passage of the Tea Tax were marked by significant correspondence, notably between New York, Philadelphia, and Boston as those cities prepared to receive shipments of the detested tea. The cities of New York and Philadelphia managed to avoid receiving the shipments and forced them to be returned to England. At one point the Committee of Correspondence from Philadelphia chided Boston for breaking a previous boycott of British goods when they purchased tea.

As a leader of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, Samuel Adams could have been responsible for the meeting called and held on 13 December, 1773. Although this meeting is unusual because it lasted for a full day, included representatives from other towns, and no minutes were recorded. It is widely assumed that this is where the plans for the Boston Tea Party were laid. The composure, discipline, unity of purpose

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and execution of the operation all indicate that the Boston Tea Party was a well planned and conducted operation. It even appeared that Samuel Adams provided the final signal to commence the operation with a code phrase when he said “This meeting can do nothing more to save the country”. A final demonstration of the leadership and responsibility of the operation was shown in the way the Committee of Correspondence pledged to support anyone likely to suffer for participation. Thereby they acknowledged and accepted responsibility while demonstrating positive leadership and extending goodwill and support to subordinates in the cause.

**Policy Objectives**

It is well known that the colonists resented the treatment they received from England. The complaint most frequently leveled that led to the Boston Tea Party was that additional taxes were being imposed upon the colonists without their consent or voice within the government to represent them i.e. “taxation without representation”. This was a major cause which contributed to the British losing the consent of the governed in the colonies. A second complaint arose when the colonists discovered that British government officials were to be paid from the proceeds from taxes and tariffs on goods imported from England. This further removed the government from the governed and caused the colonists to feel that they would have even less leverage over government

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8 Griswold, 95 – 105.

9 Galvin, 268; Griswold, 92; Labaree, 141.

10 Labaree, 148.

11 Griswold, 41.
officials. The objectives of the operation were to refuse the duty, prevent the landing and sale of the tea, as well as to galvanize the population against the British and ferment the revolution. In the end the policy objectives were met.

**Secrecy (Concealed Identity)**

The third component of a covert action is the importance of hiding the actor’s hand. In the case of the Boston Tea Party, the participants were concerned with reprisals from the colonial governor. This was wisely considered because the governor’s reaction to the Tea Party was to charge the participants with treason, punishable by death. He was later talked down to charging the participants with burglary, punishable by branding. Although those were his intentions, only one person was ever arrested for participation in the Boston Tea Party, and he was later released because of a lack of evidence.

The contemporary diaries, letters, and reports explain that the Indian disguise was used to prevent individuals from being identified. They did not want to be known even to the observers, who were patriots because they did not want to put them in the difficult position of having to choose whether or not to identify them in case of prosecution from the colonial government.

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12 Labaree, 85.
13 Ibid., 148.
14 Labaree, 150.
Additional Considerations

Several additional considerations typically accompany a covert action plan. These, identified by Lowenthal, include a thorough consideration of the options, plumbing, risk considerations, and plausible deniability.\textsuperscript{16}

Some alternatives that must have been considered by the patriot leaders in Boston must have been; do nothing, armed resistance, and alternative operations. Doing nothing would have resulted in a success for the King and further subjugation of the colonists. The colonists would have been further removed from the political process i.e. lost ability to influence policymakers. Further, Boston would have proven to be out of sync with the rest of the colonies. Although the Sons of Liberty and other patriot groups earlier learned that mob violence can lead to counterproductive results, they may have considered armed resistance. Evidence of this is provided by aggressive announcements in the papers and the fact that all the pistols in the town had been purchased.\textsuperscript{17} At least one alternative course of action was proposed as an alternative to the tea party as it was carried out. Samuel Adams received a letter recommending that the tea be allowed to land because the patriots could track who purchased it and they could also deal harshly with future importers.\textsuperscript{18} In addition to the covert operation, for several months preceding the Boston Tea party the Committee of Correspondence and Bostonians overtly petitioned for the tea to be returned to England. As the colonial leaders recognized, failing to act and using

\textsuperscript{16} Lowenthal. 165 – 173.

\textsuperscript{17} Labaree, 134.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 138 – 139.
armed resistance would have undermined their own legitimacy either by appearing too weak to act or by initiating actions that could be responded to with harsh reprisals.

Plumbing, Lowenthal explains, are all the elements that must be maintained in place in order to support a covert action.\textsuperscript{19} The plumbing necessary for the operation remained in place as the networks of the several groups involved. Most important for this operation were the networks of individuals. These individuals existed in a number of secret societies, from the Sons of Liberty to the Masons.

As with any covert action, the colonists participating in the Boston Tea Party faced risks. Risks typically faced are failure and discovery. The colonists could have faced severe penalties if discovered. As noted above, the colonial governor was in no mood to provide amnesty. However, even if the primary actors faced even severe punishment, it is possible that the objectives of the action would still have been achieved. In fact, even if they failed to complete the operation and were attacked with hostile fire from the British Marines and naval forces present, they may have found themselves subject to another “Boston Massacre”. In the case of violent reprisals, either during or following the action, it is entirely possible that the population would still have been galvanized against British actions in the colonies. With the very limited level of violence committed by patriots, popular support was encouraged. It is notable that the patriots safely unloaded cargo other than the tea prior to destroying the tea and, upon completion of the operation, had the master inspect the ship to see that no damage other than to the tea was incurred.\textsuperscript{20}

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\begin{enumerate}
\item Lowenthal, 166.
\item Griswold, 103.
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Throughout the operation plausible deniability was maintained. Even among themselves many of the actors did not have knowledge of who the other participants were. And when one of the “Indians” realized a crewmember on the boat he had boarded was known to him, the “Indian” transferred to another boat. The plausible deniability allowed the governor’s council, in the days following the action, to resist the governor’s effort to indict participants.

**Conclusions**

The operations proved to be very effective. The Committee of Correspondence had concurrently been conducting more overt operations to accomplish the same objectives. With the knowledge of what they were attempting to accomplish, it is possible to measure the covert action. Primarily they wanted to prevent the landing and sale of the tea. As mentioned above there were patriots willing to track purchasers of British Tea. If those patriots found themselves able to conduct atrocities against other colonists for consuming tea, even rogue operators would have had the ability to alienate the population from the revolutionary cause. Preventing Bostonians from being tempted with British tea was the best way to prevent rogue patriots from harming the cause.

John Adams had been known to speak against mob actions. His partiality to judicious settlements is demonstrated by the competent manner in which he represented the British Marines indicted for the Boston Massacre in 1770. Even John Adams considered this operation a great success and famously commented on it in his diary:

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21 George Hewes.

22 Griswold, 101.

23 Griswold, 110 – 111; Labaree, 149.
This is the most magnificent Movement of all… there is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity in this last Effort of the Patriots that I greatly admire… This Destruction of the Tea… is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid, & inflexible, and it must have so important consequences and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an Epoch in History.  

The colonial governor was also a historian who maintained a contemporary record of events. In his record of the Boston Tea Party action he noted that “Adams… never was in greater glory”.  

While there were certainly reprisals and repercussions at the hands of the British in the form of the Intolerable Acts following the Boston Tea Party, no duty was paid on the tea aboard those three ships and the cause gained popular support. Further, all the officials entitled to earn money from the duty refused to accept payment from the king following the Boston Tea Party. Other members of the population, who had not committed earlier, now found themselves physically and morally committed to the revolutionary cause.

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24 Labaree 145.
25 Galvin 269.
26 Ibid.
27 Galvin, 268.