

# RASCALITY REVISITED: IN DEFENSE OF GENERAL JAMES WILKINSON

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Perhaps no notable character in early American history has been more reviled and demonized, by his contemporaries and a later host of scholars, than has James Wilkinson. Following a meteoric rise in the American Revolution to the rank of brigadier general at age twenty, he became politically and commercially prominent in pioneer Kentucky, then served as the army's highest-ranking officer for nearly a quarter century, and was directly responsible for the security of the nation's expanding frontier. Throughout his life, he was linked with plots to separate western states from the Union and join or ally them with nearby Spanish provinces. His later ambiguous role as both accomplice and informer in the infamous "Burr Conspiracy" only exacerbated his public notoriety. Long after his death, secret Spanish archives revealed that he had sworn allegiance to the king and taken a pension and other payoffs for services to the Crown during both his civilian and military careers.<sup>1</sup> Confronted with this damning evidence, generations of historians have almost unanimously branded him as, at best, a greedy, unprincipled charlatan or, at worst, a traitor.

It is not the purpose of this paper to introduce new sources nor presume to rebut previous interpretations. Reviewing the life of a complex public man, however, it will focus upon two particular aspects of that life often neglected or minimized in accounts fixated upon his well-documented intrigue and deceit. The "bad" Wilkinson of fact and legend coexisted with a "good" Wilkinson,

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<sup>1</sup> Archivo Historico-Nacional, Papeles de Estado, Legajo 3893A, 3893B, Madrid; Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 178, no. 20, Seville.

who had a proven record of commendable achievements—areas of significant accomplishment interspersed among the tawdry tiles of a stained mosaic. After identifying these redemptive elements, this essay will reexamine the judgment history has pronounced upon the darker side of Wilkinson's nature, suggesting that conventional wisdom may have stressed style over substance, allowing appearances to distort reality. Pejorative conclusions drawn from unseemly behavior may well have been disproportionate to any actual harm or dire consequences inflicted upon his country or his fellow citizens by the man referred to in Spanish files as "Agent 13."

In his youth, Wilkinson was a worthy member of that gallant corps of revolutionary officers who professed and practiced an intense, almost obsessive concept of honor and duty, which they esteemed second only to the "glorious cause" itself.<sup>2</sup> What would move this certifiable patriot and freedom fighter, who had carved out a creditable record in that cause, to seemingly violate this sacred code of conduct, along with the interests of the very nation he had helped create? As America's first "double agent," he may well have been a paradigm for other members of the nation's military or intelligence service who have since trafficked with foreign powers, motivated more by monetary than ideological considerations.

Wilkinson's life was dogged by recurrent charges of venal dealings with Spain, and his involvement with Burr fed his enemies' fury. Prominent leaders publicly denounced him as disloyal, avaricious and immoral; one former associate published a lengthy book of "proofs" of his corruption.<sup>3</sup> He was subjected to several formal military inquiries or courts-martial and to two major congressional investigations. Powerful Virginia congressman John Randolph castigated him as "the only man I ever knew who, from bark to core, is a villain . . . human nature never appeared in so degraded a form."<sup>4</sup> Washington Irving, in a devastating caricature, ridiculed him as General Jacobus von Poffenberg, a

<sup>2</sup> See generally: Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: Free Press, Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Clark, *Proofs of the Corruption of General James Wilkinson and of his Connexion with Aaron Burr* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970; originally published in 1809).

<sup>4</sup> Royal Ornan Shreve, *The Finished Scoundrel: General James Wilkinson, sometime Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the United States, Who Made Intrigue a Trade and Treason a Profession* (Indianapolis: The Bobs-Merrill Company, 1933), 11.

pompous blowhard “whose bulk did not so much arise from his being fat, as windy . . . completely inflated with his own importance.”<sup>5</sup> A man people loved to hate, he was given little respect by most of his peers.

Time and history have been even less kind to Wilkinson. Posthumous evidence of his Spanish ties and other misdeeds led an imposing array of erudite scholars to conclude that the sum total of the general’s life’s work was hopelessly contaminated by the egregious nature of his improprieties. To Allan Nevins and Henry S. Commager, he was “corrupt, profligate . . . despised by all who knew him.” Thomas Abernethy considered him “the most skillful and unscrupulous plotter this country has ever produced.” A Jefferson biographer described Wilkinson as “cowardly, treacherous . . . faithless in all relations, public and private.” Stephen E. Ambrose calls him “a fabulous if despicable character.” Even two of his own biographers chose to title their works *Tarnished Warrior* and *The Finished Scoundrel*.<sup>6</sup>

Born in Maryland in 1757 into a respectable gentry family of English descent, Wilkinson was well educated by private tutors and at medical school in Philadelphia. Joining the rank-and-file of the patriot army besieging Boston, the eighteen-year-old physician, though militarily untrained, was bright, articulate, and self-confident. Early in his career he displayed a trait that defined his personality—an innate ability to ingratiate himself with superiors or others in positions to advance his ambitions. As a staff officer, he rose rapidly in rank while serving ably in General Benedict Arnold’s ill-fated Canadian invasion, and at the battles of Trenton and Princeton. As chief of staff to General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, he distinguished himself in the field, and after representing the American army in the ensuing truce negotiations, he introduced the two enemy commanders at the formal surrender ceremony on 17 October 1777.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Washington Irving, *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s A History of New York* (2 vols.; London: John Murray, 1821), 2:63.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *A Short History of the United States* (5th ed.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 162; Thomas P. Abernethy, *The Burr Conspiracy* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1968), 15; Shreve, *Finished Scoundrel*, 11; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 344; James Ripley Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior: Major General James Wilkinson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938).

<sup>7</sup> For detailed accounts of Wilkinson’s early life and Revolutionary War record, see generally: *Dictionary of American Biography*, 1958 ed., Vol. X, s.v. Wilkinson, James, 222-26; James Wilkinson, *Memoirs of My Own Times* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Abraham Small, 1816), 1: 1-761; A. J. Languth, *Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 417,

Wilkinson was awarded the high honor of delivering Gates's official battle report to the Continental Congress, then in session at York, Pennsylvania. Perhaps unaware that the dispatch singled out his own services, the courier failed to measure up to Pheidippides' nonstop run from the Marathon battlefield to Athens. After pausing along the way to visit his fiancée and to exchange multiple toasts over dinner with army comrades, the twenty-year-old colonel found that news of the great victory had preceded him to York. The exultant Congress nonetheless brevetted him to the rank of brigadier general, ignoring crusty old Samuel Adams's scathing observation that "a pair of spurs" would have been a more appropriate award for the message-bearer.<sup>8</sup>

The occasion also provided evidence of an even more serious latent flaw in Wilkinson's character. There was at this time a covert movement afoot among a small coterie of army officers, led by General Thomas Conway, to displace George Washington as commander-in-chief in favor of the wildly popular Horatio Gates. Wilkinson understandably backed his immediate superior and patron, but during a late-night drinking binge in Reading en route to York, he indiscreetly revealed the plot to a Washington loyalist, who immediately informed his chief. Once exposed, the "Conway Cabal" collapsed, but in the process Wilkinson had incurred the displeasure of both Washington and Gates, and seriously damaged his future prospects in the Continental Army.<sup>9</sup>

He voluntarily resigned his brevet commission and did not get another significant assignment until the Congress appointed him clothier-general (quartermaster) of the army on 29 July 1779, a post he held until his active service ended with his resignation on 27 March 1781. Although there are unproved allegations of irregularities in his accounts, his departure was more likely prompted by General Washington's repeated complaints that Wilkinson was spending less time at army headquarters than he was devoting to Congress and his new bride in Philadelphia, where he had married Ann Biddle, a member of the influential Biddle family.<sup>10</sup>

424, 452-56, 460, 463; Thomas Robson Hay and M. R. Werner, *The Admirable Trumpeter: A Biography of General James Wilkinson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 4-55; Shreve, *Finished Scoundrel*; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 16-58.

<sup>8</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

He served in the Pennsylvania militia and state legislature until the war ended and for several years thereafter, cultivating what was to become a ruinous lifetime practice of living beyond his means. Faced at age twenty-six with mounting debts and a growing family, he set his sights on the western frontier. His Biddle in-laws and other wealthy Philadelphians had acquired a number of land warrants in Kentucky, bought at heavily discounted prices from needy Revolutionary War veterans. Wilkinson was sent west to represent their interests in land speculation and trade; it was there that he would find ample opportunities to benefit both himself and the nation—and it was there that his inherent genius for connivance and intrigue would grow and flourish over the next thirty years.<sup>11</sup>

Within weeks after arriving at the Falls of the Ohio late in 1783, he had filed land claims totaling over thirty-five thousand acres throughout Kentucky's central Bluegrass section. Opening a mercantile store in the small settlement of Lexington, Wilkinson soon had clothing, linens, kitchen utensils, and other scarce finished goods flowing into the region from his eastern partners. To encourage sales, he introduced a system for payment of goods and debts in the form of specie (notes drawn on warehoused tobacco). He quickly became one of the sparsely settled area's most prominent citizens. On one of his extensive landholdings he laid out and founded the town of Frankfort (the future state capital). There he built probably the frontier's most imposing mansion—the first boasting glass windowpanes—and entertained both lavishly and often.<sup>12</sup>

Wilkinson wasted no time plunging into the byzantine world of Kentucky politics, quickly becoming a leader in a group called the "court" party, composed largely of young lawyers and judges, one of three loosely knit factions bent on shaping the future of what was then only a district of Virginia. In the early conventions called to address the region's many grievances against the mother state—which included unfair taxation, a chaotic land title system, and slow response to Indian attacks—this articulate band of political activists tended to dominate over the "country" faction of large landowners and slaveholders and the small farmer or landless "partisans," as each party followed a serpentine path in pursuit of its own agenda. But Kentuckians generally vented their most bitter resentment at eastern disinterest in regaining free

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-58.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

navigation of the Mississippi River, which the Spanish rulers of Louisiana had closed to American trade at New Orleans in June 1784.<sup>13</sup>

All three factions, at various times and in varying degree, supported detachment from Virginia, generally favoring a simultaneous transition to statehood, although some sentiment was expressed for an interim period of autonomous self-government to explore the advantages of other options, such as independent nationhood or alliance with Spain or Great Britain. A small core of Wilkinson-led separatists within the court party was willing to consider, as the price of opening a secure trade channel to the sea, outright assimilation of Kentucky and other frontier states and territories into the empire of Spain, a posture known to history as the "Spanish Conspiracy."<sup>14</sup>

Within four years after the general's arrival, the district's population had doubled from thirty thousand to an estimated sixty thousand. But with the closing of the natural river trade route, there was no outside market for the growing agricultural harvests produced by the newcomers; land transport or water shipment up the Ohio River was slow, expensive, and dangerous. Holding a small fortune of warehoused tobacco in specie, entrepreneur Wilkinson resolved to personally break the stranglehold at New Orleans and open trade with downstream Mississippi River towns and eastern markets, doing whatever it took to reach an accommodation with Spanish officialdom.

Undaunted by inability to obtain a passport, he boldly embarked down the Ohio on two flatboats loaded with a valuable cargo of tobacco, flour, butter, and bacon; bribing or charming his way past intermediate Spanish outposts along the Mississippi, he arrived at New Orleans on 2 July 1787. Possibly due to his prominence and former rank, he was politely escorted to Governor Esteban Miro, and after long sessions with the governor, the general was allowed to sell his cargo through a local merchant, Daniel Clark. But matters of far greater significance than trading privileges had been discussed, and in the weeks that followed Wilkinson made a fateful and irrevocable decision that would preordain a life of ambiguity and controversy. By 22 August he had

<sup>13</sup> Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 56-57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59; Lowell H. Harrison, *Kentucky's Road to Statehood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 35. For a comprehensive analysis of the complex political cross-currents in early Kentucky, see generally: Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779-1792* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

carefully composed, signed, and delivered to Miro a secret oath of fealty as a subject of the king of Spain.<sup>15</sup>

Prefaced with the revealing assertion that “self-interest regulates the passions of nations as well as of individuals,” and explicitly stating his intent of “transferring my allegiance, from the United States to his Catholic Majesty,” the meticulously worded document struggles to clothe a suspect purpose in virtuous garb. In closing, it calls upon Miro to “bear witness to my principles, and that the motives of my conduct are the real advantage of the country in which I dwell as well as the interest and aggrandizement of the Spanish monarchy.”<sup>16</sup> From the very outset, the novice double agent adopts the rationalizing mantra of his ilk, insisting that his expatriation and subsequent behavior will benefit both his new and old allegiances.

Wilkinson wasted no time in demonstrating his potential value to his new sovereign, quickly delivering to the governor a lengthy “First Memorial,” presuming to outline “what ought to be the policy of the Spanish Court” in coping with its well-founded fear of American frontier expansion. In the turgid verbosity that would become his trademark, he described the west’s festering discontent with the eastern-dominated government, and its resultant sentiment for autonomy and independence. He recommended that Spain secretly support that growing movement, while in the meantime encouraging American emigration into its adjacent provinces, to better cushion the eventual absorption into the empire of any separatist entity that might ultimately emerge on the frontier.<sup>17</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, the memorial strongly urged continuance of the trade blockade at New Orleans, for use as a future bargaining chip with the westerners. Wilkinson hastened to add that exceptions to the embargo should be made for certain “men of real influence . . . to conciliate and prepare the Minds of the western Americans for the grand object.” As such a man, he proposed to return to Kentucky “to exert my political weight and influence,” reporting regularly to the governor using “trusty Couriers,” and ready to lend “my feeble assistance at all times” should the king choose to adopt his

<sup>15</sup> William R. Shepard, “Wilkinson and the Beginnings of the Spanish Conspiracy,” *American Historical Review* 9 (1904): 490-506.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 496-97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 499-500.

recommendations. In the meantime, he requested a license to ship up to sixty thousand dollars worth of Kentucky produce for sale at New Orleans.<sup>18</sup>

Displaying the acute fear of disclosure that was to pervade his entire relationship with the Spaniards, he devised an elaborate cipher code to be used in all correspondence, stressing the need for “the most inviolable secrecy . . . I have committed secrets . . . such as would, were they divulged destroy my Fame and Fortune forever.” He enclosed one such “secret”—a list and map of fourteen American settlements along tributaries of the Ohio River, intelligence of scant use to an empire largely concerned with maintaining the integrity of its own provincial borders.<sup>19</sup>

Thoroughly captivated, Miro promptly granted the general exclusive import privileges, though only for half the amount requested. The governor forwarded the oath of allegiance and “First Memorial” to Spain, strongly recommending using the services offered by its new subject (given the code name “Agent 13”), and suggesting that the king “signify to Wilkinson that he will be rewarded generously if he succeeds.” To head off rumors in the gossip-ridden city, Miro bruted it about that his lengthy meetings with the brash American dealt only with matters of commerce. Later on, the few shipments made under this initial license would give the general plausible cover for much of the cash he was to receive from Spanish sources.<sup>20</sup>

Wilkinson sailed off in triumph to the east coast, to visit family members and burnish relationships with powerful men of his acquaintance, including a visit to the squire of Mount Vernon. He stopped off briefly in Richmond to lobby (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) against Virginia’s impending ratification of the new federal constitution—well aware that the existing weak national confederation was much more suitable for his purposes in the west.<sup>21</sup> Back in Kentucky, dazzling frontier society with an ornate four-wheeled carriage drawn by four matched black horses and carrying two liveried outriders, the general immediately resumed his leadership of the movement to sever ties

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 501-503.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.

<sup>21</sup> Ten of the fourteen Kentucky delegates to the convention, mostly court party adherents, voted against the new constitution. Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 304; Temple Bodley, “Introduction,” *Political Transactions in and Concerning Kentucky* (first publication series, no. 31; Louisville: The Filson Club Historical Society, 1926), xlv.

with Virginia, holding out the goal of statehood to mask his real, but less popular, separatist views.<sup>22</sup>

Soon he was issuing a series of misleading coded reports to his Spanish handlers. A message of 15 May 1788 to Governor Miro confidently asserted that Kentucky was on the verge of achieving total independence both from Virginia and the nation. He predicted that as soon as an autonomous government could be formed, "a political agent will be named," (by implication himself), "with power to treat of the union in which we are engaged." The newly formed federal government, he assured the Spaniards, was too disorganized to interfere until the projected new alliance of all western states and territories would be "too strong to be subjugated by whatever force may be sent against us."<sup>23</sup>

Wilkinson's popularity soared as word spread that he had broken the Spanish embargo and held a personal franchise for downriver commerce through New Orleans. Had Kentucky attained statehood during this period, the governorship would almost certainly have been his for the taking.<sup>24</sup> He was the dominant figure at the climactic Seventh Convention in November of 1788, delivering several major addresses, one of which (so he told the delegates) was the full text of his "First Memorial" to Miro. Most of its compromising separatist language was deleted, leaving only an innocuous litany of the west's actual grievances and displeasure with the neglect of its commercial and political concerns by eastern indifference. The delegates, moved by the speaker's graphic depiction of frontier angst, passed a unanimous resolution of concurrence and appreciation. The copy of the *Kentucky Gazette* the general sent Miro had the full wording of the resolution but only a summary of Wilkinson's preceding address—convincing the governor that the convention had overwhelmingly endorsed separation and affiliation with Spain. With some adroit sleight-of-hand, "Agent 13" had elevated his stature with his empire-building Spanish patrons as well as his statehood-seeking fellow citizens, each ignorant of his advocacy of the others' cause.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 89-90; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> Alcee Fortier, *A History of Louisiana* (2nd ed.; 5 vols.; Baton Rouge: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1972), 2:134-35.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Etienne Arthur Gayarre, *History of Louisiana* (4 vols.; New York, 1854), 3:223-40; see also Wilkinson to Miro, 12 February 1789; Elizabeth Belle Drewry, "Episodes in Westward Expansion as Reflected in the Writings of General James Wilkinson, 1784-1805" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell

But his guile only disguised the bitter truth that the Seventh Convention was actually a conspicuous failure for the general and his small clique of separatists, marking the high watermark of their cause and the beginning of a sharp decline of his influence in Kentucky politics. The quiescent "country" party, alarmed by separatist sentiment among the delegates, organized strong popular opposition in the militia and common people to any illegal or "violent" detachment from Virginia and the nation. The convention ultimately bowed to the will of a clear majority of citizens who favored pursuit of the constitutional process leading to statehood. Ironically, Wilkinson, who had assured the Spaniards of an opposite outcome, was appointed by the delegates to draft the necessary enabling resolutions and addresses. In the aftermath, he lamely alibied to Miro that a clean break with the Union would have to wait until the people's support for independence was again aroused by the procedural barriers he wrongly predicted would further delay the attainment of statehood.<sup>26</sup>

The coincidental presence in Kentucky of a certain Canadian, Dr. John Connolly, purportedly to pursue old land claims, provided a new source of fodder for Wilkinson's growing double-agent virtuosity. Insinuating himself into the new arrival's confidence, he learned that Connolly's real mission was to promote a plan, devised by Canada Governor Lord Dorchester, to recruit up to ten thousand frontiersmen for an armed seizure and annexation of Louisiana. Offered a prominent role in the undertaking, Wilkinson chose instead to play upon ever-present Spanish fears of such ventures by exposing it to Miro. Then, proclaiming himself the savior of the king's empire, he proceeded to skillfully abort the British plot. After spreading rumors throughout the area that the Canadian was targeted for assassination, he discreetly arranged for a harmless mock assault upon Connolly, then graciously provided the panicky agent with an armed escort back to Lord Dorchester's Detroit headquarters. In reporting all this to Miro in full detail, the general failed to mention that, under a pseudonym, he had sent along to his Lordship, by way of Connolly, a treatise similar to his "First Memorial," outlining how

University, 1933), 52-54; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 91-92.

<sup>26</sup> Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, 168-79; Harrison, *Kentucky's Road to Statehood*, 68-72; Thomas P. Abernethy, *The South in the New Nation, 1789-1891* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 53-54.

England, rather than Spain, might exploit to best advantage western America's current dissatisfaction with its national government.<sup>27</sup>

The general proved to be equally adept at disposing of a serious rival for Spanish favor. In 1788 Colonel George Morgan arrived in the west with an ambitious plan sponsored by Diego de Gardoqui, Spain's minister to the United States. The colonel proposed to establish a large colony of American settlers on Spanish territory at New Madrid, on the west bank of the Mississippi River. It was projected as an idyllic communal society, providing its inhabitants with all their basic needs and comforts. Although seemingly in accord with Wilkinson's "First Memorial" recommendations, the general furiously opposed the project, denouncing Morgan to both Gardoqui and Miro as a bankrupt speculator driven only by the "vilest self-interest," and depicting the planned settlement as a potential threat to Spanish hegemony in the region. Miro, who as governor had the final say, sided with Wilkinson, and Morgan's land grant was eventually canceled.<sup>28</sup>

The episode provides a fascinating glimpse into the general's complex mind, exposing his innermost perception of human nature. On 1 January 1789 he insisted to Minister Gardoqui that his conversion to the king's cause was motivated solely by an unselfish desire to achieve "the reciprocal happiness of the Spaniards of Louisiana and of the Americans in Kentucky." Later, however, he more candidly muses that:

the human race . . . is governed by its own interest . . . . Some men are sordid, some vain, others ambitious. To detect the predominant passion, to lay hold of it, and to derive advantages from it, is the most profound part of political science.<sup>29</sup>

As future events were to prove, no man of his era was more proficient at the dark art of manipulating human "passions" than James Wilkinson.

His recent covert and political activities had not totally distracted the general from a pursuit promising more immediate rewards—the exploitation of his exclusive privilege of free navigation and deposit-and-trade rights at New Orleans. Soon after his return to Kentucky, Wilkinson assembled a huge fleet

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 89-90; John Mason Brown, *Political Beginnings in Kentucky* (first publication series, no. 6; Louisville, The Filson Club Historical Society, 1889), 182-89, 246-47, 254-56.

<sup>28</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 94-95.

<sup>29</sup> Fortier, *History of Louisiana*, 2:141-42.

of twenty-five flatboats, manned by 150 hands, loaded with a cargo of tobacco and other produce, much of it surplus goods piled up in warehouses. Entrusted to a reliable associate, the shipment reached the Crescent City intact and was sold in June of 1788.

On his orders, Wilkinson's entire eight thousand dollars profit in the venture was invested in finished goods and sent back up the Mississippi in a well-intentioned but ill-fated effort to open a two-way trade channel with the Spaniards. The shipment floundered with a near total loss of cargo when incompetent helmsmen were unable to overcome strong currents and bad weather. Subsequent consignments of tobacco shipped at his risk were rejected as spoiled or damaged after reaching New Orleans. Thomas D. Clark credits Wilkinson with laying Kentucky's early economic foundation, but his personal financial affairs were deteriorating even as his ventures brightened the region's agricultural climate.<sup>30</sup>

In 1789 Wilkinson deemed it necessary to accompany the next major shipment southward. The Spanish court's initial reaction to his "First Memorial" had been disappointing: his proposals were met with lukewarm encouragement at best, and he was promised only a vague "hope of remuneration" in the future for his ongoing service to the crown. Worst of all, contrary to his recommendation, the king had ordered the port of New Orleans opened to all river trade, subject only to a fifteen percent duty, severely reducing the advantage afforded by the general's duty-free monopoly.<sup>31</sup>

Following the failure of the Seventh Convention to declare Kentucky independence, as promised, Wilkinson sensed some slippage in Miro's confidence. The general, after protesting (perhaps too much) that he considered himself a "good Spaniard," was assured that "you are our agent, and I am ordered to give you hopes that the King will recompense you as I have already intimated." Still, he felt a need to strengthen his close relationship with Miro by a further demonstration of his value to Spain.<sup>32</sup>

After extensive discussions with the governor in New Orleans, Wilkinson submitted a lengthy "Second Memorial." In it, he no longer held out any prospect that the frontier territories might be absorbed directly into the Spanish

<sup>30</sup> Thomas D. Clark, *Kentucky: Land of Contrast* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 33; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 92-93.

<sup>31</sup> "Papers on Wilkinson's Relations with Spain," *American Historical Review* 9 (1904): 749-50.

<sup>32</sup> Fortier, *History of Louisiana*, 2: 142.

empire but still insisted that the basic interests of eastern and western America remained irreconcilable, making eventual separation of the latter into an autonomous nation all but inevitable. The crown, he argued, should actively encourage the formation of such an entity, since it would provide adjacent Spanish provinces with a potentially friendly buffer against the continuing menace of American expansion and British or French aggression.

As always, the general had a plan ready to meet the occasion. He recommended cultivating the good graces of the future independent state by "attracting to us the interest and regard of the influential men in the principal settlements," by lavishing "pensions and rewards among the chief men in proportion to their influence, ability, or services rendered." How were such men to be identified and attracted? Fortunately for the Spanish cause he, Wilkinson, if given the proper inducements, was ready and willing to name names, and to disclose the necessary "means . . . to win over to the actual service of His Catholic Majesty the distinguished 'notables' of Kentucky."<sup>33</sup>

His "Second Memorial" was replete with gratuitous advice and sweeping geopolitical generalizations. But the "good Spaniard" was bluntly and unmistakably explicit on one point: unless the empire soon came across with something more tangible than "hopes," all it could expect to receive from him in the future were "prayers and good wishes." His point was not lost on the ingenuous Miro, who promptly handed over seven thousand dollars in hard currency, ostensibly for personal expenses the general had incurred in the Connolly affair.<sup>34</sup>

Protesting that "throughout my life I have abhorred venality," the general accepted his Spanish silver and delivered to Miro a list and thumbnail sketches of twenty-two of Kentucky's most prominent and respectable men. Following each name was a sum, ranging from five hundred to one thousand dollars, the amount of annual pensions he deemed would be required "to Alienate them from the United States." On his honor role were inscribed the names of future governors, senators, congressmen, judges, and legislators. An equal-opportunity roster of proposed bribes, it even included Wilkinson's most bitter enemy, "country" party leader Humphrey Marshall—his buying price reckoned at an insultingly low six hundred dollars. Nearly all those named had

<sup>33</sup> "Papers," *American Historical Review* 9 (1904): 751-64.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 764-65.

<sup>have</sup>  
they desired to turn

I managed in Havana, without feeling as  
 a pensioner - get let that my friends be ap-  
 pointed - I thank high Heaven I shall be able  
 to considerate my name, & save my brethren  
 in Spain from thinking for my sake

James Wilkinson defending his honor in a 14 September 1808 letter to Soloman Van Ransselear  
 James Wilkinson Miscellaneous Papers, The Filson Club Historical Society

supported detachment from Virginia but most favored statehood over secession, and only three or four had, openly or secretly, shown the slightest interest in Wilkinson's concepts of a merger or alliance with Spain. So far as is known, only one "notable," Benjamin Sebastian, ever actually received a Spanish pension and that was mainly for spying on Wilkinson himself in years to come.<sup>35</sup>

The general's welcome windfall was only a temporary help to his rapidly crumbling finances, drained by his extravagant lifestyle, continuing trading losses, and mounting debts. As time passed, it became increasingly clear, even to the Spaniards, that Kentucky was moving inexorably toward statehood. Wilkinson realized that his credibility and value as a secret advocate of western independence was shrinking and with it any realistic hope of getting a Spanish pension. He sought, therefore, to demonstrate his worth in other ways, by informing the Spaniards of such perceived menacing projects as the Yazoo River venture and a road-building project along the upper Natchez Trace. But his trump card, his relationship with Miro, appeared to have been lost when the governor was recalled to Madrid and replaced by Hector, Baron de Carondelet.<sup>36</sup>

Sporadic Indian raids on isolated Kentucky settlers had continued into the early 1790s. The general, always active in the local militia, led two retaliatory forays across the Ohio into southern Indiana. He was commended by

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.; Fortier, *History of Louisiana*, 2: 143-44.

<sup>36</sup> When a South Carolina group planned to forcibly establish a large settlement on the Yazoo River in Spanish-claimed territory, Wilkinson suggested that Miro incite nearby Indian tribes to attack the intruders. The project never materialized. Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 100-107.

they <sup>have</sup> received & took

I managed my Honor, without feeling or  
conscience - get let, that my friends be ap-  
pealed - I thank high Heaven I shall be able  
to vindicate my Name, & save my Brethren  
in Arms from thinking for my shame -

James Wilkinson defending his honor in a 14 September 1808 letter to  
Soloman Van Ransselear  
James Wilkinson Miscellaneous Papers, The Filson Club Historical Society

supported detachment from Virginia but most favored statehood over seces-  
sion, and only three or four had, openly or secretly, shown the slightest interest  
in Wilkinson's concepts of a merger or alliance with Spain. So far as is known,  
only one "notable," Benjamin Sebastian, ever actually received a Spanish pen-  
sion and that was mainly for spying on Wilkinson himself in years to come.<sup>35</sup>

The general's welcome windfall was only a temporary help to his rapidly  
crumbling finances, drained by his extravagant lifestyle, continuing trading  
losses, and mounting debts. As time passed, it became increasingly clear, even  
to the Spaniards, that Kentucky was moving inexorably toward statehood.  
Wilkinson realized that his credibility and value as a secret advocate of western  
independence was shrinking and with it any realistic hope of getting a Spanish  
pension. He sought, therefore, to demonstrate his worth in other ways, by in-  
forming the Spaniards of such perceived menacing projects as the Yazoo River  
venture and a road-building project along the upper Natchez Trace. But his  
trump card, his relationship with Miro, appeared to have been lost when the  
governor was recalled to Madrid and replaced by Hector, Baron de  
Carondelet.<sup>36</sup>

Sporadic Indian raids on isolated Kentucky settlers had continued into the  
early 1790s. The general, always active in the local militia, led two retaliatory  
forays across the Ohio into southern Indiana. He was commended by

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.; Fortier, *History of Louisiana*, 2: 143-44.

<sup>36</sup> When a South Carolina group planned to forcibly establish a large settlement on the Yazoo  
River in Spanish-claimed territory, Wilkinson suggested that Miro incite nearby Indian tribes to attack  
the intruders. The project never materialized. Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 100-107.

President Washington and offered a chance to resume his military career, which would afford him a small but stable income and, more importantly, legal refuge from his creditors. The president, well aware of Wilkinson's links to the separatist movement, believed that a responsible army position would remove him from the political arena and "feed his ambition, soothe his vanity and by arresting discontent produce a good effect." On 22 October 1791, candidly admitting that he was again donning the sword in search of "Bread & Fame," he accepted a lieutenant-colonel's commission and command of Fort Washington near Cincinnati. Proceeds from the sale of his residence and other holdings in Kentucky proved sufficient to cover most of his debts.<sup>37</sup>

In pausing to review Wilkinson's eight years in Kentucky, which paralleled that district's evolution from a primitive frontier society to full statehood on 1 June 1792, his flirtation with separatism tends to overshadow his many contributions to that process. Historian Patricia Watlington lists his interests, including shipping, wholesale purchasing, retailing, monopoly on salt, lead and silver mining, banking, manufacturing, ferrying, and planting, and declares that, "for dramatic promise and for actual accomplishment no man in the West could equal James Wilkinson." His early political leadership spearheaded Kentucky's detachment from Virginia and thus, albeit unintentionally, prepared for its entry into the Union. His military abilities and experience were always at the disposal of his fellow citizens whose lives and property were exposed to Indian raids.<sup>38</sup>

While it is difficult to fathom Wilkinson's innermost beliefs and philosophy, there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of his early advocacy of western separation, which he viewed as the last, best hope of gaining open river navigation, so essential to the region and his own trading interests. On his first trip to New Orleans, intent only on cutting a favorable trade deal with the Spaniards, he found that their deep fears of American encroachment could be exploited to advance both his commercial goals and his personal political agenda. Governor Miro not only shared his views, but offered to enlist his services to promote them in his homeland—to actually reward him for efforts he fully intended to

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 108-109; Shreve, *Finished Scoundrel*, 86. Washington praised Wilkinson for "the zeal, perseverance, and good conduct, manifested by you, in the command of the expedition." Secretary of War Henry Knox to Wilkinson, 29 September 1791, Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1: 152-53.

<sup>38</sup> Watlington, *Partisan Spirit*, 86, 89.

make in any event. It was a no-brainer for the general; he realized that, even if the separation effort faltered, Kentucky's sentiment for detachment from Virginia could easily be misrepresented as favoring the Spanish cause—a prospect that his inborn instincts for intrigue could not resist.

Were the separatist activities of Wilkinson and his “Spanish Conspiracy” followers in the court party a betrayal of their country? Any fair appraisal of this issue must consider the context of the times in which the general lived. His was an entire generation of separatists—revolutionaries who had staked everything on a then-treasonable gamble to sever ties with a distant ruling regime deaf to their basic interests. They, too, had turned to a foreign power to support their cause, which would otherwise have likely failed. Their concept of nationhood was still nebulous; citizens professed as much (if not greater) allegiance to their home state or territory as to the shaky federation emerging from the Revolution. A discrete national identity had not yet formed—only time and many unifying shared experiences would forge the strong bonds of loyalty that exist today.

Long after Wilkinson's day, better men than he still clung to a belief in the right of a cohesive region to peacefully disengage from an uncongenial larger entity and form its own autonomous government. That troubling premise would not be bloodily tested and finally resolved in America for nearly another “fourscore and seven years.”

The Spanish blockade at New Orleans was imposed years before Wilkinson's first meeting with Miro in 1787. In the year previous, the entire frontier had been infuriated when John Jay, foreign affairs secretary for the Confederation Congress, negotiated a pact with Spanish minister Gardoqui surrendering American claims to Mississippi River navigation for up to thirty years, in exchange for trade concessions to the northeastern states. For landlocked westerners, free river access was not the main issue—it was the only issue, and they were not mollified when the proposal was narrowly defeated by southern states. According to one respected southern historian, had the Jay-Gardoqui treaty passed, “Tennessee and Kentucky settlers, with Wilkinson at their head, would have set up an independent republic and made their own terms with the power which controlled the trade at New Orleans.” Other scholars have duly noted “the uncanny resemblance that many of the

grievances of Kentuckians bore to those of the American colonies before the Revolution.”<sup>39</sup>

To some extent, the so-called “Spanish Conspiracy” was little more than a fanciful charade played out by Wilkinson and a few kindred spirits, all fully aware that independence could come only with an overpowering surge of popular indignation propelled by intolerable conduct of the dominant eastern government. The general was only positioning himself to ride along the crest of that wave, should it materialize. But pragmatic realist that he was, Wilkinson could never have really believed that a separated western nation, populated mainly by diverse, free-spirited, monarchy-hating Protestants, would actually merge with the nearby domains of His Catholic Majesty. An arms-length alliance would have been a more likely scenario. So he felt comfortable in forming a limited and profitable relationship with the Spaniards, while pursuing his own parallel separatist agenda. The oath of allegiance to the king, routinely required of most foreigners doing business with Spain, was simply a perfunctory but necessary means to that end.

Without his subsequent course of conduct, Wilkinson’s role in the Spanish Conspiracy would hardly have disqualified him from an honorable and successful civilian career in the west. Of his three closest associates in that overblown affair, John Brown (the clique’s contact man with Spanish minister Gardoqui) went on to serve as one of Kentucky’s first United States senators; Harry Innes, named a federal judge by President Washington in 1789, enjoyed a long and unsullied tenure on the bench; only Benjamin Sebastian, found later by the state legislature to have been a Spanish pensioner, was pressured into resigning from Kentucky’s highest court, but he suffered no other censure or penalty.<sup>40</sup>

Prior to his reentry into the army, the general’s Spanish perquisites had been limited to his trade privileges—more a boon to his fellow Kentuckians than himself—and a single seven-thousand-dollar cash payment, some of

<sup>39</sup> Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 72-73; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 284. Brown, Innes, and Sebastian, prominent in the early “Court” party, all shared to some extent Wilkinson’s interest in exploring ties with Spain. All were described in Wilkinson’s infamous “List of Notables” to Governor Miro as “my confidential friends and support my plan.” See Shepard, “Wilkinson and the Spanish Conspiracy,” 749-50. These four were the principal targets of “Spanish Conspiracy” charges by federalists Humphrey Marshall and Joseph Hamilton Daveiss.

which covered costs he had actually incurred in warding off threats to Spanish territory from foreign or private aggressors. Those efforts, while of some value to his benefactors, were totally unrelated to the issues of disloyalty to, or dismantlement of, the Union. Accordingly, one must look beyond his Kentucky years to the record of his deeds and misdeeds after rejoining the army late in 1791 if the two centuries of opprobrium heaped upon Wilkinson's person and memory are to be justified.

As luck would have it, Colonel Wilkinson had barely settled into his command at Fort Washington before receiving word from Governor Carondelet that the king of Spain had belatedly awarded him an annual two-thousand-dollar pension, retroactive to 1789, to be forwarded incrementally in the coming months. Had this message arrived only a few weeks earlier, he would probably have declined his army commission. The "Bread" he sought was unexpectedly assured, but its source and delivery, if exposed, could seriously jeopardize his quest for "Fame." No longer a private citizen, he faced a moral dilemma compelling enough to give pause to even the most ethically challenged of men: could he continue to function as a paid secret agent of a foreign power and simultaneously serve as a high-ranking officer in the American army? Double-agent James Wilkinson not only could, he did—for many years to come, using the resources of each position to enhance his performance and value in the other.<sup>41</sup>

The Native-American inhabitants of the vast Northwest Territory north of the Ohio River did not recognize territorial rights ceded in the Treaty of Paris, and they had long blocked movement of white settlers into the region. Two major incursions, led by generals Josiah Harmar and Arthur St. Clair, had been ambushed and routed with heavy losses. Finally a five-thousand-man regular army, designated the "Legion," was put under the command of Major General Anthony Wayne with orders to seize and maintain control of the area. Wilkinson, who had coveted the top spot, was made brigadier general and placed second in command. Consumed with jealousy, all during the long, arduous, and dangerous campaign that followed he constantly but surreptitiously sought to undercut Wayne's position, both within the Legion officer corps and with government officials and legislators.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 128-29.

<sup>42</sup> For full accounts of the Legion campaign, see: Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 114-32; John Thornton Posey, *General Thomas Posey: Son of the American Revolution* (East Lansing: Michigan

Nevertheless, at the decisive victory of Fallen Timbers on 10 August 1794, Wilkinson, commanding the right wing of the attack, capably deployed and led his troops, thereby significantly contributing to the security of Kentucky and to the peaceful settlement of Ohio and eastern Indiana under the terms of the resultant Treaty of Greenville. He served creditably during the implementation of the treaty terms, and when Wayne died on 15 December 1796 Wilkinson automatically succeeded him as army commander-in-chief. For the next fifteen years, the integrity of America's exposed western and southern frontiers, bordering on the colonial provinces of His Catholic Majesty, would rest largely in the hands of Spanish secret "Agent 13."

From 1792 through 1796, even while he was deeply involved in conducting the Northwest campaign, several shipments of newly minted Spanish pieces-of-eight totaling twenty-five thousand dollars were sent forward by pack mule or water transport to the Legion's second officer. That was far more than the stipulated annual pension, but not all of it reached Wilkinson's furtive but eager hands. Couriers withheld large sums to cover expenses and claims, and one entire shipment was lost when its custodian was robbed and murdered by his own oarsmen. Captured in Kentucky, the fugitives were quickly remanded to Spanish authorities by Judge Harry Innes, the general's personal attorney, before any embarrassing questions could be asked.<sup>43</sup>

This was a time of unparalleled prosperity for Wilkinson. The money received dwarfed his meager army pay of one hundred and four dollars a month—the value the nation then placed on the services of one of its top generals. His one major usefulness to the Spaniards during this bountiful period was a warning that a force of western American mercenaries led by George Rogers Clark, instigated and financed by French minister Edmond Genet, was being recruited to invade and occupy the southern Spanish provinces. After apparently flirting with the notion of joining this venture, he chose to expose it in deference to his lucrative commitment to the king.<sup>44</sup>

State University Press, 1992), 132-47.

<sup>43</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 141-44; Carondelet to Folch, 20 January 1796, Clark, *Proofs*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-41; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 135. Clark's involvement with the French is well documented, but some of his biographers contend it posed no direct threat to American interests. "Correspondence of Clark and Genet", *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), 930-1107; James Alton James, *The Life of George Rogers Clark* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 408-37; John Bakeless, *Background to Glory: The*

Meanwhile, as high-level diplomatic negotiations to resolve the question of Mississippi River navigation stalled on other issues, Spain had re-ignited the west's displeasure with the American government by once again closing New Orleans to river trade. This gave the attentive Wilkinson an opening to prolong his intake of Spanish silver by resurrecting a basic ingredient in his original conversion to their cause. He tried to tweak Carondelet's interest in his predecessor's pet project—the incitement and support of western independence and possible union with the Spanish empire. Unlike Miro, however, this governor was not content to blindly subsidize a modest undercover political movement by the general and a few of his old separatist cronies. To the general's probable surprise and dismay, Carondelet responded to his ploy with a firm proposal to provide Wilkinson with full military and financial sponsorship as leader of an all-out revolutionary uprising against the United States.

Already fearful that word of his recent Spanish largess had leaked out to his superiors, Wilkinson hastily spurned Carondelet's bold offer to become "the Washington of the West." He shunned clandestine meetings in St. Louis between his former associates and high Spanish officials, and took decisive steps to distance himself from his covert double life. When notorious Spanish agent Thomas Power openly appeared at his army headquarters in the northwest, the general promptly placed him under guard and gave him an armed "escort" back to New Madrid. Any remote possibility of a western insurrection soon collapsed with the signing of the Spanish-American treaty at San Lorenzo on 27 October 1795, granting full, free navigation of the Mississippi River, and ratifying the extension of formerly disputed American territory along the southern border between the two powers.<sup>45</sup>

A prominent guest at President John Adams's inauguration in Philadelphia in March of 1797, the general was assigned the important duty of occupying the new region and enforcing its boundaries. Arriving at his southern army base near Natchez, Wilkinson was gripped by anxiety bordering on panic when he learned that border commissioner Andrew Ellicott had intercepted coded messages from his Spanish contacts and reported them to the government. Whenever he faced exposure and disgrace, his worst nightmare, the general became a man of monumental mendacity. He mounted a vigorous preemptive

*Life of George Rogers Clark* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 331-45.

<sup>45</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 139-56.

defense of his character with President Adams, flatly denying any current or former associations with foreign powers, and received this reassuring reply:

I esteem your talents; I respect your services and feel an attachment to your person. . . . I shall give no countenance to the villainous rumours and clamours of your connections with Spain and France.<sup>46</sup>

As confident of the new president's support as he had been of Washington's, and no longer distracted or compromised by his dual role as an active agent for Spanish interests (his pension payments having been suspended), the general was free to devote full attention to his demanding responsibilities on the new southern frontier. These included the amicable resolution of border issues with his former patrons and, equally important, coming to terms with the diverse indigenous inhabitants of the recently acquired region, the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and other Native American tribes.

Historians have taken only scant notice of Wilkinson's interest in, and rare knowledge of, Indian culture and customs. This faculty had been recognized during his recent stay in Philadelphia by his election to the prestigious American Philosophical Society, the nation's foremost scientific assemblage. He had been placed on a committee, chaired by Thomas Jefferson, which was assigned to the collection and study of Indian antiquities and relics. His long, wide-ranging service in the west gave him the opportunity to make many unique and valuable contributions to that committee.<sup>47</sup> Working out of his Fort Adams headquarters near Natchez, Wilkinson applied that expertise to three years of exhausting treaty negotiations with the proud tribal nations of Mississippi and Alabama, opening the area to peaceful American settlement. True to his political instincts, however, he found time to attend the 1801 inaugural of President Jefferson, who was to be his staunchest supporter and defender in the difficult years to come.<sup>48</sup>

Returning to his post, Wilkinson resumed his zealous guardianship of American frontier interests until 1803, when the Louisiana Purchase greatly

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-73.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-75; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 166-67.

<sup>48</sup> In 1802-1803 alone, he logged more than sixteen thousand miles on public business through forests and inland waterways. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term, 1805-1809* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 221; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 185-93.

expanded his military jurisdiction. Unfortunately, it also afforded him an opportunity to restore his severed ties with Spain. While acting as one of two commissioners representing the United States at the formal cession ceremony in New Orleans on 20 December 1803, he encountered Vinzente Folch, Spanish governor of West Florida, one of the attending foreign dignitaries. Wilkinson approached Folch for back payments on his lapsed pension, and having done little in recent years to justify reinstatement, he resorted to a familiar tactic—a new treatise on colonial strategy. Among other ideas, his “Reflections” proposed an even swap of the Spanish Floridas for all territory west of the Mississippi River; he also suggested that patrols be sent out from Santa Fe to intercept and turn back the Lewis and Clark expedition, then just preparing to embark upon its famed trek into areas claimed by both nations. He then teasingly promised that, in the future, he would disclose “what was concealed in the heart of the President.” Folch, as much impressed with the general as Miro and Carondelet had been, promptly arranged to pay him twelve thousand dollars.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile Wilkinson, observing the rule of reciprocity implicit in true double-agency, was engaged in drafting for Jefferson a comprehensive monograph, “The Topography of Louisiana,” sharing the geopolitical input from his “Reflections,” but appending twenty-eight manuscript maps of the strategic border areas between the Mississippi and Rio Grande rivers. Much of this data had come to him from a young protégé, Philip Nolan, who had made several abortive raids deep into that region to capture wild horses. Nolan lost his life and his ears when his party was ambushed by Spanish soldiers in 1801. But the general used Nolan’s sketches and notes to good advantage, and after investing his newly acquired Spanish currency in a cargo of sugar, he sailed in the spring of 1804 for a year-long visit to the east coast, to open the most sensational and controversial chapter of his life.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 211-13; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 185-208. Four Spanish scouting parties were sent out to intercept Lewis and Clark, all unsuccessful. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 344-45. Wilkinson, knowing the region’s topography, well knew that the intrepid captains (both of whom had served under him in the Legion) were unlikely to be found in the immense and rugged northwest.

<sup>50</sup> Isaac J. Cox, “Hispanic-American Phases of the ‘Burr Conspiracy’”, *The Hispanic-American Historical Review* 12 (1932): 146; Shreve, *Finished Scoundrel*, 130-32; see generally John Edward Weems, *Men Without Countries* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1969).

Arriving in New York, Wilkinson conferred early and often with Vice President Aaron Burr. They had served honorably as fellow officers under General Benedict Arnold in the ill-fated colonial invasion of Quebec in 1776, and they shared a common vision of the southwest as a virtual cornucopia of wealth and glory. Many hours were spent poring over the general's maps of that region. Masters of intrigue, both driven by inordinate egotism and ambition, theirs was an oddly matched but potent combination. Burr valued money only as a means to power, while Wilkinson sought power only as a source of money.

Within a few weeks of their first conference, Burr (an expert pistol marksman) shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Few historians have ever suggested that Burr's motives were other than personal and political animus toward his Federalist rival, but it is a fact that the death of Hamilton, then a major general, restored Wilkinson's status as the army's highest-ranking officer. In temporary disfavor, the vice president was not reelected with Jefferson that year; he did, however, use his considerable influence to get Wilkinson an appointment essential to their plans—the governorship of Upper Louisiana Territory, a rare melding of civil and military authority in one person. Shortly after Jefferson's second inaugural, the two plotters left separately for the frontier, to launch what history has called—but never fully comprehended—the “Burr Conspiracy.”

After a four-day reunion at Fort Massac, near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, Burr headed south on a luxuriously appointed army barge toward New Orleans with letters of introduction to Wilkinson's contacts there; the general headed north to take command of his new St. Louis headquarters. The plot was under way, but which of the two conspirators conceived it is debatable; its scope, boldness, and ambivalence are strikingly Wilkinsonian, but Burr is from the outset clearly more dedicated and committed to its execution. The opening and final stages of the conspiracy are well-defined and generally accepted. A private army, raised in the east, would proceed under Burr down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, gaining adherents as it went, and rendezvous with Wilkinson and his army troops at Natchez. The ultimate objective of the combined force, under most interpretations, was Mexico City, with installation of the former vice president as emperor, the general as second-in-command. But the all-important intervening phases of the enterprise,

shrouded in its creators' widely varying and conflicting accounts, have long intrigued and confounded scores of historians and biographers.

Burr revealed his real intentions only to a few confidants. To all others whose backing he was seeking, he always molded the essential details to best engage his immediate listener's interest and support. To British minister Anthony Merry, he first outlined plans to foment western insurrection and separation from the Union; only later did he add the invasion of Mexico as a secondary objective. Seeking money and the use of a small fleet from the British, he promised an alliance of his new nation with the Crown but threw in a veiled threat to look to France as an alternate sponsor. Getting no encouragement from London, he turned brazenly to Spanish minister Casa Yrujo—deleting Mexico from his scenario, but dangling Wilkinson's old lure of an independent western nation as a friendly buffer zone between the eastern United States and His Catholic Majesty's North American provinces. Yrujo, no fool, not only rebuffed Burr but leaked stories of his plans to the press.

Many in Burr's inner circle were convinced that the expedition's first target was New Orleans, where bank reserves and shipping would be seized and sympathizers within the city recruited, preparatory to a seaborne invasion of Mexico via Vera Cruz. When courting Jefferson loyalists with no taste for treason, Burr denied the violation of any American territory but left the strong impression that the president had secretly approved a thrust directly into Spanish Texas. T. P. Abernethy's interpretation splits the forces, with Wilkinson's troops invading Texas, while Burr "revolutionized Louisiana and Mexico" from occupied New Orleans.<sup>51</sup> Most cruelly, many of Burr's young, naive rank-and-filers were told only that the party's initial goal was peaceful settlement of the vast "Bastrop Tract" on Louisiana's Washita River, an old Spanish grant to which the ex vice president had recently taken questionable title.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 291.

<sup>52</sup> For various versions and interpretations of Burr's plans, see generally: Mary-Jo Kline, ed., *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Milton Lomask, *Aaron Burr: The Conspiracy and Years of Exile, 1805-1835* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1982); Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Library of America, 1986); Walter Favius McCaleb, *The Aaron Burr Conspiracy* (New York: Dodd, Meade & Co., 1903); Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Arnold A. Rogow, *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); Abernethy, *Burr Conspiracy*; Malone, *Jefferson*.

Wherever he traveled in the west, the diminutive but charismatic Burr attracted influential and wealthy supporters. But in weaving his contradictory tales, he aroused a flood of public rumors, some of which preceded his arrival in St. Louis in September 1805 for further lengthy conferences with Wilkinson. Alerted by Daniel Clark, his close associate in New Orleans, the general, with a passion for secrecy and a pervasive fear of exposure, sensed trouble ahead for the undertaking. Hoping to divert Burr from his course, he asked Governor William Henry Harrison of Indiana Territory to name the ex vice president as territorial delegate to Congress. But Burr, obsessed with delusions of imperial grandeur and exhilarated by his popularity on the frontier, had no interest in the post, and he returned to the east fully resolved to put his grand scheme into operation.<sup>53</sup>

In St. Louis, meanwhile, Governor Wilkinson had proved himself to be an arbitrary and self-serving civil administrator, quickly alienating the three-judge legislative board, postmaster, land commissioner, and key elements of the little capital's polyglot citizenry. On the other hand, he diligently and ably promoted President Jefferson's policy of western exploration and development. While awaiting the uncertain return of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the general dispatched three scouting parties to map nearby tributaries of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, opening the surrounding areas to trade and settlement. After establishing cordial personal ties with resident Native American tribes in the region, he arranged for many of their chiefs to visit the president in Washington.

Late in his brief tenure, he sent a task force (including his own son) into the southwest; led by young protégé Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, its ostensible purpose was to explore the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red rivers. Whether by accident or design—historians suspect the latter—the mission penetrated all the way to the Rio Grande River, where it was peacefully taken into custody by Spanish troops and escorted to nearby Santa Fe. Released unharmed, the Pike party returned to the United States with invaluable data on that entire region.<sup>54</sup>

All these forays, while useful, admittedly had potential commercial as well as immediate military and political value, and Wilkinson's primary motives

<sup>53</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpter*, 248; Adams, *United States*, 760.

<sup>54</sup> Isaac J. Cox, "Opening the Santa Fe Trail," *Missouri Historical Review* 25 (1930): 35-66; Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 279.

have, as usual, been called into question. He was known to have had a financial stake in rerouting the fur trade from Canada through St. Louis, and an influx of new settlers would certainly have enhanced the value of his local land holdings. Pike's dangerous assignment was later linked (unfairly) to the Burr Conspiracy or, more plausibly, to the general's long-range designs on the Spanish southwest. But Wilkinson's enlightened and successful policy toward the Indian nations within his jurisdiction is above suspicion. Governor Harrison even used his negotiating skills and high level of trust among the chiefs to deal with tribes in neighboring Indiana Territory.<sup>55</sup>

In the east, Aaron Burr had been busily recruiting and promoting his cause. When further last-ditch overtures to the British and Spanish ministers proved futile, he procured private financing for the venture. By August 1806, moving a few weeks in advance of his gathering forces, he was back in the west, rallying supporters all along the Ohio River and in Tennessee, where General Andrew Jackson had bought into the Texas-conquest version of the plan. But as sensational reports of his activities and intentions began appearing in many frontier newspapers, Burr repeatedly found it necessary to solemnly assure Jackson, Harrison, Henry Clay, and other emerging young regional leaders that his conduct was not treasonable.<sup>56</sup>

As the year waned and his expedition was preparing to move downstream from Ohio, Burr ran into an unexpected obstacle in Kentucky in the formidable personage of U.S. attorney Joseph Hamilton Daveiss. That ardent federalist, a holdover from the Adams administration, sought to indict the republican former vice president for violating a federal law barring private citizens from taking up arms against any foreign country with which the nation was at peace. All year long, Daveiss had been bombarding President Jefferson with warnings, largely ignored, of Burr's seditious activities. He had sent the president a list of men he charged were plotting with Burr to dismantle the Union, naming not only Wilkinson and the other usual suspects of the old Spanish Conspiracy (John Brown, Harry Innes, and Benjamin Sebastian) but also such

<sup>55</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 222-25; Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 446.

<sup>56</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 86; Burr to Harrison, 27 November 1806, Clark, *Proofs*, appendix, 17. After Burr confidant Jonathan Dayton spun an outlandish tale of a planned Washington coup d'état to Casa Yrujo, the skeptical but intrigued minister contributed \$2,500 to the Burr cause. Lomask, *Burr*, 102-105.



Blennerhasset Island  
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unblemished political figures as Governor Harrison, Henry Clay, and Jefferson's own attorney general, John Breckinridge.

After a dramatic confrontation with Daveiss in Judge Innes's crowded Frankfort courtroom, Burr, ably defended by the trusting Henry Clay, was discharged by a grand jury amid general acclaim, and was feted that evening at a gala public dinner. Wherever he had gone, Lexington, Nashville, Natchez, New Orleans—glasses had been raised by powerful and common men alike to the dynamic would-be conqueror of Mexico. But this was to be the last popular adulation he would ever know.<sup>57</sup>

Hurrying from Frankfort to Nashville, Burr took delivery of two supply-laden barges from General Jackson, then moved downstream on the Cumberland River to the Ohio, where he rendezvoused with his main forces on 27 December 1806. He was greeted with the grievous news that Ohio authorities, prompted by an emissary of the president, had seized fifteen boats and stores of badly needed supplies near the group's Blennerhasset Island

<sup>57</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 86; Malone, *Jefferson*, 224-25; Lomask, *Burr*, 142-49; Cunningham, *Jefferson*, 287.



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unblemished political figures as Governor Harrison, Henry Clay, and Jefferson's own attorney general, John Breckinridge.

After a dramatic confrontation with Daveiss in Judge Innes's crowded Frankfort courtroom, Burr, ably defended by the trusting Henry Clay, was discharged by a grand jury amid general acclaim, and was feted that evening at a gala public dinner. Wherever he had gone, Lexington, Nashville, Natchez, New Orleans—glasses had been raised by powerful and common men alike to the dynamic would-be conqueror of Mexico. But this was to be the last popular adulation he would ever know.<sup>57</sup>

Hurrying from Frankfort to Nashville, Burr took delivery of two supply-laden barges from General Jackson, then moved downstream on the Cumberland River to the Ohio, where he rendezvoused with his main forces on 27 December 1806. He was greeted with the grievous news that Ohio authorities, prompted by an emissary of the president, had seized fifteen boats and stores of badly needed supplies near the group's Blennerhasset Island

<sup>57</sup> Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 86; Malone, *Jefferson*, 224-25; Lomask, *Burr*, 142-49; Cunningham, *Jefferson*, 287.

staging area. About forty men on four remaining boats had eluded capture and floated down to Louisville, to join a similar number of recruits led by Davis Floyd, a young Indiana legislator serving as quartermaster of the little army. With a total complement of less than one hundred, far short of the number he expected and desperately needed, only a man of Burr's extraordinary hubris would have continued on—but the little ex vice president was truly obsessed.<sup>58</sup>

A juncture of momentous events had now brought Wilkinson's life to another pivotal crossroads. Earlier in 1806, a sizable Spanish force crossed the Sabine River and occupied a disputed area between Texas and Louisiana, threatening a major territorial war. On 6 May the general was ordered by his Washington superiors to leave St. Louis, take personal command of American troops deployed on the southwest border, and drive the Spaniards back across the Sabine. For reasons still a hot topic of historians' speculation, he did not move south for nearly four months. Keenly aware that Burr's expedition was already approaching from the east, Wilkinson's confidence in the success of the venture appeared to be eroding in direct proportion to his growing alarm over published reports in Kentucky and elsewhere openly linking him to a treasonable or criminal undertaking. Yet, as time sped by, no plausible escape hatch seemed open to him.<sup>59</sup>

As one Burr biographer metaphorically depicts the general's devious thought processes:

like a Roman haruspex divining the future in the entrails of a pig, he would study the run of events and jump whichever way promised the greatest profit to himself.<sup>60</sup>

Lingering long in St. Louis that summer, pondering the options open to him, his reading of the entrails boded nothing but ill for the outcome of the Burr Conspiracy.

On 22 September Wilkinson finally arrived at Nachitoches near the Red River, the last outpost facing nearby Spanish forces, and promptly sent to their commander, Colonel Simon Herrera, a demand to pull his troops out of the

<sup>58</sup> Isaac J. Cox, "The Burr Conspiracy in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 25 (1929): 272; Lomask, *Burr*, 137, 191-92.

<sup>59</sup> Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 276; Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to Wilkinson, 6 May 1806, Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 2: appendix, xc.

<sup>60</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 84.

disputed area. Herrera voluntarily withdrew to the Sabine but bluntly warned that he would attack should the Americans attempt to reoccupy the vacated terrain. With the choice of war or peace entirely in his hands, the general chose to ignore his orders and remain temporarily where he was.<sup>61</sup>

It was at this precise moment that the infamous "cipher letter" to Wilkinson arrived at Natchitoches on 8 October, delivered by a youthful Burr disciple, Samuel Swartwout. (A duplicate would arrive weeks later with another Burrite, Dr. Erich Bollman.) The letter's literal contents are open to question, but the various decoded versions provided by the general all contain an approximate timetable for the movement of Burr's forces as far as Natchez: "there to meet you; then to determine whether it will be expedient . . . to seize or to pass by B.R. [Spanish-held Baton Rouge] . . . in three weeks all will be settled."

The letter further asserted that a friendly, combined British-American fleet would await them at the mouth of the Mississippi River. It clearly spelled out the chain of command in the approaching campaign, and (presumably) the hierarchy of any ultimate governmental entity that might emerge: "Wilkinson shall be second to Burr only . . . Our project my dear friend is brought to the point so long desired. I guarantee the result with my life and honor. . . ." A cover letter from Burr's closest confidant, ex senator Jonathan Dayton, warned that plans were afoot in Congress for Wilkinson to be "displaced in next session." It closed with the stirring exhortation: "Are you ready? Are your numerous associates ready? Wealth and glory, Louisiana and Mexico . . ."<sup>62</sup>

Overnight, Wilkinson deciphered and agonized over the letters, then made a fateful decision. Under standing orders, he could march to the Sabine, provoke hostilities with the Spaniards, and start a conflict that would immediately decriminalize any direct thrust made by Burr into Spanish territory, thereby putting the two conspirators, joined in fighting a common enemy, on the glory road to Mexico City. Or, with damning written proof now in his

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 159-61.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 116-17. In an extensive commentary, the scholarly editors of the Burr papers make a strong case that Dayton had intercepted and rewritten the original cipher letter after it left Burr's hands, inserting brazen falsehoods designed to bolster Wilkinson's apparent loss of confidence in the enterprise. See Kline, ed., *Papers of Aaron Burr*, 2: 973-86. A major Burr biographer agrees with this premise; see Lomask, *Burr*, 118-22.

hands, he could denounce Burr to the government and assume a heroic posture as defender of New Orleans and Louisiana against a seditious attack. The latter course entailed more political risk, because of his prior involvement in the conspiracy, so clearly evidenced by the cipher letter itself. But on balance, it seemed to offer higher potential rewards and a greater chance of success than a problematic military conquest of Mexico and uneasy power-sharing with Aaron Burr—and that was the path he selected.

When morning dawned after a sleepless night, the general informed Colonel Thomas H. Cushing, his second-in-command, of a “treasonable” enterprise led by Burr and backed by powerful men, which (he said) he had just been invited to join but instead intended to oppose with all his strength. Inexplicably, he waited two weeks before dispatching his first report of the plot to President Jefferson. Only later still did he send a decoded version of the cipher letter, after carefully doctoring those portions most clearly reflecting his prior participation in the plan.

During that interim, Wilkinson busied himself negotiating and signing, entirely on his own authority, a neutral ground agreement with high Spanish officials, providing for a truce and an agreed one-hundred-and twenty-mile unoccupied zone between the two nations, pending final diplomatic settlement of the disputed boundary lines. At the time, he was unaware that new orders were en route from Washington directing him to make just such an agreement. Singlehandedly, he had averted a war that Burr desperately needed to lend some shred of legitimacy to the imminent approach of his pathetic little band of about ninety to one hundred lightly armed men down the Mississippi.<sup>63</sup>

Wilkinson’s behavior throughout the year 1806 has been widely denigrated as calculating and opportunistic. He is charged with treachery for his disloyalty to Burr, without receiving any corresponding credit for loyalty to his country. It has been generally assumed that his act of betrayal was a sudden decision triggered by the fortuitous arrival of the incriminating cipher letter. But respected historian T. P. Abernethy believed that the general had lingered in St. Louis because he had *already* decided to turn against his cohort and knew that if he obeyed orders by heading south and engaging the Spaniards, the resultant

<sup>63</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 166-70. For the full text of the agreement, see Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 2: appendix, xcvi.

hostilities would keep him from forcibly blocking Burr's entry into New Orleans, "and now he was apparently determined to do just this."<sup>64</sup> This interpretation presupposes that Wilkinson, a major player in the plot, knew with absolute certitude that the Crescent City, not Texas, was to be Burr's first and immediate target. The general was also in a unique position to know, from Burr's previous visit to New Orleans, that his co-conspirator had many sympathizers there who were likely to support his seizure of the city and to join his crusade for the conquest of Mexico.

Under these assumptions, the general's course of conduct after reaching Natchitoches seems to have been above reproach, and it would have been regarded by history as both loyal and prudent had it been pursued by any military commander other than the enigmatic Wilkinson. Acting with full knowledge that an undefended New Orleans was threatened by an approaching seditious force of indeterminate strength, he overrode orders by making an honorable truce, thereby freeing up his troops to deal with a much more insidious threat to American sovereignty and political stability than a border clash with a militarily feeble Spanish provincial government. Only Wilkinson could have so effectively defused the powder keg on the Sabine that an officer less familiar with Spanish frontier mentality might have ignited.

Granted that the general's character and his prior involvement in the Burr Conspiracy make his every move in the drama suspect—measured solely on a standard of outcomes, his performance on this occasion has some merit, particularly when one considers what course American history might have taken if Wilkinson had either left New Orleans exposed to Burr or marched to join him at Natchez as originally planned.

But having decided otherwise, for whatever reason, the general ordered Colonel Cushing and most of his border troops ahead of him to New Orleans to begin fortifying the city, while he hurried to the bedside of his dying wife outside Natchez. That personal tragedy, however, did not distract him from issuing a torrent of letters, mostly aimed at exploiting his recent actions to best advantage. Fervently pledging to die defending Louisiana against an army he estimated at over seven thousand men, he pleaded with his superiors in Washington for heavy reinforcements, authority to declare martial law—and for an increase in his salary. To Spanish governor Folch he sent an urgent warning of

<sup>64</sup> Abernethy, *South in the New Nation*, 276.

the danger the advancing Burrite force posed to Baton Rouge and his West Florida province.

His most inspired effort, a Wilkinson classic, was to dispatch a trusted personal envoy directly to Jose de Iturrigaray, high Viceroy of New Spain in Mexico City. Arriving there, he presented the general's formal petition for reimbursement of \$136,000 in expenses allegedly incurred in "risking my life, my good name and my property" in averting a border war "without the knowledge of my government," and in ongoing preparations to turn aside Burr's attempt to invade and seize the crown jewel of His Catholic Majesty's North American empire.<sup>65</sup>

The viceroy, unlike his more naive provincial governors, was unmoved by the general's professed sacrifices, apparently feeling that he had already been well rewarded for his devotion to the crown. That skepticism was shared by the astute Spanish minister to Washington, Casa Yrujo, who attributed Wilkinson's betrayal of Burr to a desire to preserve his "considerable pension from the king." Reporting to his government on Wilkinson's actions, the minister shrewdly observed:

the separation of the Western States has been his [Wilkinson's] favorite plan . . . when the latter [Burr] persisted in an idea [the invasion of Mexico] so fatal to Wilkinson's interests, nothing remained but to take the course adopted. By this means he assures his pension; and will allege his conduct on this occasion as an extraordinary service, either for getting it increased, or for some other generous compensation. . . .<sup>66</sup>

Wilkinson's extravagant estimate of Burr's forces was probably based upon projections made in the planning stage of the conspiracy, for there is no way the general could have known their actual numbers, and his conduct after arriving in New Orleans on 25 November reflects a genuine belief in the city's dire peril. Sounding a general alarm, he mobilized civilians to erect barricades at key approaches, impressed harbor craft for possible future evacuation, and stationed gunboats upriver to intercept the invaders. Armed squads patrolled the streets, ordered to put down any uprising of Burr supporters; known or suspected Burrrites were rounded up without warrants.

<sup>65</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 170-74; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 257-62.

<sup>66</sup> Adams, *United States*, 838-39.

When Governor W.C.C. Claiborne denied his demand for a declaration of martial law, Wilkinson proceeded to exercise de facto military authority, and when the territorial legislature refused to suspend the right of habeas corpus, he defied lawful writs issued by local judges. Swartwout and Bollman, the cipher letter couriers, and General John Adair (a close Burr associate) were seized, hurriedly put aboard vessels, and shipped off to the east coast—quite possibly to silence them. Freed by due process upon their arrival, they would soon make the general pay dearly for his temerity.<sup>67</sup>

During his brief governorship of Upper Louisiana, James Wilkinson had amply demonstrated his utter unfitness for civil administration. A career soldier, he had little regard and less tolerance for the basic concepts of law or the orderly processes of the justice system. The profession of arms is, of necessity and by its very nature, an authoritarian way of life. Orders issued by generals are obeyed without question. In undertaking the defense of New Orleans, Wilkinson faced not only an invading army of unknown (only later found to be laughably weak) strength, but a city with a diverse national and ethnic population known to contain a sizable element of Burr partisans—a potential “fifth column.” Given those circumstances, the commander’s use of arbitrary and extra-legal measures, indefensible in retrospect, was clearly justified in his own mind as a military exigency.

Wilkinson’s first report to Washington exposing the conspiracy galvanized the administration. President Jefferson immediately issued a proclamation directing all western civil and military authorities “to be vigilant in searching out, and bringing to condign punishment, all persons . . . engaged . . . in such enterprize.” A message to Congress a few weeks later was supported by the recently received cipher letter and other inculpatory documents. The president, perhaps injudiciously, named Burr as “the principal actor, whose guilt is placed beyond question.” Shock swept the nation as its recent vice president was publicly branded a traitor; many of Burr’s most vocal supporters and admirers hastened to condemn him. Coming ashore at a river landing near Natchez on 10 January 1807, expecting to find his ally Wilkinson with his troops, Burr reacted to the news of his betrayal with a single word: “perfidious!” But the game was up, and even he knew it. Arch-conspirator Aaron

<sup>67</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 182-85; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 262-65; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 234-35.

Burr, himself no slouch at manipulation and guile, had finally met his match in the wily Wilkinson.<sup>68</sup>

The so-called "Burr war" ended ingloriously, well north of New Orleans, without a shot being fired. Burr surrendered peacefully, but after a local grand jury failed to indict, he fled into hiding, fearing he would be killed for the five thousand dollar bounty Wilkinson had put on his head. The proud and powerful politician had once come within a hair's-breadth of the presidency itself. Now, disguised in an old blanket coat and wide-brimmed beaver hat, he was hunted down through the marshes of Mississippi, arrested after weeks of pursuit, and in March brought under heavy guard to Richmond for trial. Most of Burr's "army" were soon released, and after selling their boats and provisions, settled in the region. None ever reached the promised lands in the Bastrop tract.<sup>69</sup>

Wilkinson was summoned to Virginia in the torrid summer of 1807 as chief witness against Aaron Burr and five associates charged with treason. The Burrrites he had shanghaied to the east had publicized his despotic behavior in New Orleans, and in the hindsight of the actual insignificance of the city's danger, the general became the object of widespread indignation and ridicule. Steadfastly defended by President Jefferson (for reasons still perplexing to many of his biographers), the beleaguered soldier became a convenient lightning rod for the administration's political enemies. Chief Justice John Marshall, a leading Federalist, presided over the Burr trial, while the foreman of the sixteen-man grand jury was John Randolph, irascible leader of the rebellious "Quid" faction of the Republican party in Congress. The jury eventually returned indictments against all of the accused but only after Wilkinson's four days of grueling testimony was largely discredited and his tampering with the cipher letter exposed. Only by the narrowest of margins, (seven to nine), did he himself escape indictment as an accomplice in the plot.

Burr's ensuing trial came to an abrupt conclusion when Chief Justice Marshall, after narrowly construing the constitutional crime of treason, sent the case to the jury without hearing from Wilkinson or most of the other prosecution witnesses. The former vice president was acquitted, and all other proceedings against him and his confederates were dropped. Aaron Burr never again

<sup>68</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 179-82, 198-202, 208-209; Burr to Cowles Mead, 12 January 1807, Kline, ed., *Papers of Aaron Burr*, 2: 1008-1009.

<sup>69</sup> Lomask, *Burr*, 211-24.

held public office; after a humiliating exile in Europe vainly seeking backing for another quixotic conquest of Mexico, he settled into an obscure law practice in New York City until his death.<sup>70</sup>

As surely as the Burr Conspiracy destroyed its namesake, it dealt an equally mortal, if more gradual, blow to its betrayer. Wilkinson was poorly cut out for a key role in a national political controversy. Personal attacks never failed to provoke his considerable pomposity and histrionic attributes, offering an irresistible target to the Federalists and Quids. On 27 October 1807 the implacable John Randolph launched a congressional probe of the general's long-rumored Spanish connections. When Wilkinson challenged the congressman to a duel, he got only the contemptuous response: "I cannot descend to your level." Throughout 1808 the investigating committee took damaging oral and written evidence from Daniel Clark, Thomas Power, and other former associates from the general's shady past. Meanwhile, a less partisan military court of inquiry, convened by Jefferson at Wilkinson's behest, completely cleared him of the same charges in June of 1808.<sup>71</sup>

During this period, high-seas encounters and impressments of American seamen by British warships had created a war scare and provoked a major military buildup by the government. Early in 1809 the president sent Wilkinson, still the army's ranking officer despite his battered reputation, back to his reinforced New Orleans command. The general had maintained friendly (if uncompensated) relations with his Spanish contacts,<sup>72</sup> and Jefferson, well aware by now of such reputed ties, entrusted him with a delicate diplomatic mission. After reassuring the Spanish governors of Texas and the Floridas that the new troops in Louisiana posed no threat to their provinces, he was to probe their views on separation from the mother country should Spain fall to Bonapartist rule, suggesting the possibility of allying with the United States against further European empire-building in the New World.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-56.

<sup>71</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 284-90; verdict of court of inquiry, 4 July 1808, Clark, *Proofs*, appendix, 53.

<sup>72</sup> After Spanish governor Folch sent Wilkinson's court of inquiry a sworn statement that his archives had no record of pensions paid the general, he confided to his American friend that he had prudently shipped all his "Agent 13" files to Havana before issuing the exculpatory affidavit. Isaac J. Cox, "General Wilkinson and His Later Intrigues with the Spaniards," *American Historical Review* 19 (1914): 806-10; Folch to Wilkinson, 10 February 1807, Clark, *Proofs*, appendix, 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> Isaac J. Cox, "The Pan-American Policy of Jefferson and Wilkinson," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 1 (1914): 212-39.

This historic concept, foreshadowing the Monroe Doctrine and our future Pan-American policy, is so suggestive of Wilkinson's forte for bold global strategizing that one wonders if he might not have had a hand in its formulation, perhaps while discussing the region's political dynamics with President Jefferson. There is, however, no evidence of record to support such a speculation.

The Spaniards reacted guardedly to these overtures, doubtlessly concerned, if not alarmed, to find themselves discussing possible treason against their native country with their own longtime "Agent 13," acting as spokesman for American foreign policy. They were, however, more open to his assurances on the troop buildup in the region, perhaps because that effort was soon mired in disarray and controversy. The general was later charged by his enemies in Washington with gross personal misfeasance for the tragically high mortality of soldiers from camp diseases during the summer of 1809. Military doctrine properly places ultimate responsibility upon the commanding officer for his troops' welfare, but from all accounts, the climate, unhealthy terrain, lack of medical services, and other factors beyond his control significantly contributed to the disaster.<sup>74</sup>

Coinciding with this major military scandal was the publication and widespread circulation of arch-enemy Daniel Clark's three-hundred-and-forty-nine-page *Proofs of the Corruption of General James Wilkinson*,<sup>75</sup> a slanted and damaging compilation of affidavits and documents bearing upon Wilkinson's involvement with Spain and the Burr Conspiracy. Facing a new national furor, the general hurried back to Washington, where a second congressional panel had opened a new investigation into his recent military performance. For two years the hearings in both committees dragged on, never issuing any findings or concluding reports, as the administration's critics found it more politically profitable to keep the sensational issues alive and in the public eye.

When his self-published rebuttal to Clark, euphemistically entitled *Burr's Conspiracy Exposed and General Wilkinson Vindicated* failed to quell the controversy, the general petitioned the president to refer all charges pending against him to a military tribunal for a general court-martial. But Thomas

<sup>74</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 290-99.

<sup>75</sup> See note 3.

Jefferson, Wilkinson's unflagging supporter, had recently been succeeded in office by a decidedly less admiring James Madison. The new president welcomed the opportunity to bring closure to the matter, hoping privately that a military court would rid him of the troublesome general, once and for all.<sup>76</sup>

The widely publicized proceeding opened before a twelve-officer court at Fredericktown, Maryland, on 4 September 1811, with much of the high drama of the Burr trial. The resplendently uniformed general, with a characteristic flourish, strode up to the presiding officer and surrendered his sword, "the untarnished companion of my thigh for forty years." The accused's lead defense counsel was Roger B. Taney, later successor to John Marshall as chief justice of the United States, who was so sure of his client's innocence that he waived any fee for his services. The exhaustive list of eight major charges and twenty-five specifications ran the full gamut of Wilkinson's public and private life, from his first trip to New Orleans in 1787 to his last command in Louisiana.

After a four-month trial, Wilkinson was acquitted on all charges, the court declaring unanimously that he "appears to have performed his various and complicated duties with zeal and fidelity and merits the approbation of his country." But the general was to look in vain for such approbation, either from his country or its president. After scrutinizing the six-hundred-page trial transcript for six weeks, Madison ruefully prefaced his signed acceptance of the court's decision with the gratuitous comment "with regret." Nevertheless, Wilkinson had regained his sword, his immediate status as highest-ranking army general, and his old command as protector of the southwest frontier, just as war approached with the old foe of his revolutionary days.<sup>77</sup>

Disembarking at New Orleans in July of 1812, the general first learned that hostilities with England had begun. Over the next year, he ably defended both sides of Louisiana against British-allied Spanish forces, and again prepared the Crescent City for attack—this time by a real and powerful enemy. Never a commander to put his men at needless risk, he negotiated a bloodless evacuation of the outnumbered Spanish garrison at Mobile, thereby extending the

<sup>76</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 300-304; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 263-66.

<sup>77</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 304-307; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 268-75; Robert A. Rutland, *James Madison: The Founding Father* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 220-21; verdict of court-martial, 25 December 1811, Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 3: 496.

disputed national border in West Florida to the Perdido River.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, as American military fortunes elsewhere faltered, Wilkinson's creditable performance in the southwest gained him a promotion to major general and recall from New Orleans in June 1813 to assume a pivotal command on the St. Lawrence River front with Canada.<sup>79</sup>

Despite his many personal shortcomings, the general had usually handled his frontier military duties in reasonably capable fashion, controlling vast expanses of territory with few troops and resources. But on the northern front, given a massive army and a limited theater of operations, he proved to be strangely ineffectual. Time and an intemperate lifestyle had taken a heavy toll on his fifty-six-year-old body; for extended periods he was unable to take the field. One of the few Revolutionary War generals still active, he made the classic military error of using the strategy and tactics of the last war in the new conflict. Secretary of War John Armstrong often came to army headquarters to contradict or overrule Wilkinson's orders, and the civilian supply system failed to make essential deliveries. The Canadian campaign floundered, and the general was relieved of his duties on 24 March 1814. While awaiting yet another court-martial, he fled Washington in August just ahead of the burning and desecration of public buildings by British cavalry, his offer to "take command of the militia and save the city or forfeit my life" having been ignored by the government.<sup>80</sup>

Facing his final military tribunal the following January against four specifications of dereliction of duty and drunkenness on duty, Wilkinson produced medical evidence that his physical ailments required frequent doses of laudanum, a painkiller with mood-altering side effects. After two months, the court ruled that "no censure attaches to the accused from all or any of the specifications." The general's sword and status were again formally restored to him, a result approved by President Madison on 18 April 1816, this time without comment.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 312-13. Wilkinson had a personal interest in the area, having acquired Spanish title to Dauphin Island, opposite Mobile Bay, through a British trading house in 1806. See Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 280.

<sup>79</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 279-84; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 308-14.

<sup>80</sup> Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 284-305; Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 313-25, 327-28.

<sup>81</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 329-31; verdict of court-martial, 21 March 1815, Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 3: 496.

When peacetime demobilization ended Wilkinson's army career later that year, his country provided no pension or benefits for his thirty years of active service. Seeking money as much as vindication, he published his massive but highly selective three-volume *Memoirs*, bitterly denouncing Madison, Armstrong, Randolph, and many others whose enmity he had incurred through the years.<sup>82</sup> Spurning appointment to minor offices, he retired to life as a marginally successful planter in Louisiana with his second wife and their two young children. But his old fervor for fame and fortune in Mexico was rekindled when revolutionists under Augustin de Iturbide overthrew Spanish rule in 1821. At first denied entry into the country at Vera Cruz, he managed to arrive in Mexico City just in time to attend Iturbide's coronation as emperor on 18 May 1822 as an honored guest.<sup>83</sup>

The years had not eroded any of the old soldier's charm or cajolery. He was soon enjoying Iturbide's complete confidence, providing the new ruler with broadly drawn "Observations" and "Reflections" on regional and world politics. In return for his guidance, he sought a land grant on the Texas gulf coast for himself and trade preferences for associates in Louisiana. Although President James Monroe had wisely denied him the post of minister to Mexico, Wilkinson was easily the most prominent and influential American in the capital. But just as his financial goals were about to be realized, Iturbide's government fell, and the general had to start the process all over again with Bustamante, the new revolutionary leader.<sup>84</sup>

On 28 December 1825, the sands of time ran out on a life as variegated as it was remarkable. Toward the end, he had been reduced to taking handouts from his son, Joseph Biddle Wilkinson, for subsistence and such small indulgences—e.g., the distribution of Bibles in the capital—as he still allowed himself. All the many thousands of dollars the general had received from his trading ventures, land speculations, and Spanish emoluments had long since been squandered on lavish entertaining and a generally improvident way of living. But the real tragedy was that, for the basest of motives, so much raw energy, ability, and intellect had been utterly wasted during an erratic life consumed by obsessive secrecy and paranoiac fear of exposure, by countless hours furtively composing elaborate and often insightful treatises never destined for public

<sup>82</sup> See note 7.

<sup>83</sup> Hay and Werner, *Admirable Trumpeter*, 341-42.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 342-46.

enlightenment, laboriously encoding or decoding covert correspondence, or anxiously awaiting the arrival of the next silver-laden pack mule.

Attended by the highest civil and military officials of the Mexican government and many resident foreign dignitaries, the general was laid to rest with pomp and ceremony in the cemetery of the church of the Archangel San Miguel. He remains there to this day, having found an uneasy peace, if not riches and glory, in the very city which had long been the focus of his hopes and dreams.<sup>85</sup>

James Wilkinson left his own defiant self-evaluation for those who would judge him harshly:

In reviewing my past life, there does not appear to me any thing for remorse, and but little for repentance; though certainly very much for regret. My transgressions against the laws of my Creator have been too many, but they have been venial; and I trust have found their remission in a contrite heart. . . . I have lived in the service of my country, to which my life, labours, and best faculties have been zealously devoted . . . I have suffered many and grievous persecutions, alike unprovoked and unmerited, which were frequently produced by the most meritorious acts of my life.<sup>86</sup>

Words and deeds are the common currency used to measure the life of any public person. A fair assessment of that life should encompass not only the substance of those words and deeds but their underlying rationale and purposes as well as their impact upon the major events of the times. In the case of James Wilkinson, the empirical record alone, stripped of these supporting elements, does indeed largely sustain the condemnatory judgment most scholars have pronounced upon him. But a closer look at his motives and the realistic effect his conduct had on the history of his era, arguably suggests a basis for mitigating the severity of that unfavorable consensus.

Throughout Wilkinson's life, a major element in every key decision was his incessant quest for funds to feed a constant and insatiable appetite for extravagance. But while money was always his endgame, that game was always carried on within the boundaries of a self-imposed and unspoken, yet

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 347-48; Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior*, 340.

<sup>86</sup> Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, 1:5.

discernible, field of play. During his long, lucrative dalliance with the Spaniards, seldom if ever does he appear to have placed personal gain over important national concerns, usually finding a way to gratify the one without seriously compromising the other. As secret agent of a foreign power, his overall role was less that of a mechanic of active political change than a more benign portrayal as a consultant or adviser to the crown. Background, opinion, and fanciful scenarios dominate his ponderous essays and reports; most of what little hard data they provided was already known to the Spanish or readily obtainable elsewhere. The general's most useful services to Spain dealt with threats to its empire from British- or French-inspired incursions or privately financed filibusterers and freebooters of little consequence or relevance to the basic interests of the Union.

Burr learned to his sorrow what the Spanish governors never understood—that Wilkinson's propensity for intrigue, for concocting audacious and wide-ranging plans of action, stopped short of any personal implementation of those plans. Had it been otherwise, he would have been a very dangerous man and a grave threat to America. A born theoretician and strategist, he was not a doer—a gifted plotter, but not a bomb-thrower, summarily rejecting Carondelet's call to become the "Washington of the West," and exposing rather than joining Burr. His very nature recoiled from actively executing schemes of his own devising. Some might consider this quality a major character flaw—but it became his saving grace, preserving his tenuous claim to virtue.

In retrospect, Wilkinson's epiphany at Natchitoches may well have been his finest hour, when, to his everlasting credit, he chose to block, rather than join, Burr's march on defenseless New Orleans. Nor did he choose to follow the odious example of his former Revolutionary War commander, Benedict Arnold, by betraying his own men to the Spaniards or taking a command in their forces, as a totally committed enemy agent might have done. To the contrary, both on this occasion and later, during the War of 1812, his military record against his former Spanish patrons was exemplary.

It was undeniably reprehensible for the general to continue his secret agency after resuming his army service. None of his known behavior while in the military, however, could be fairly characterized as treasonable, at least not in the strict constitutional sense expounded at the Burr trial by Chief Justice Marshall: he committed no overt act giving aid or comfort to an enemy then waging war against the United States. If Wilkinson was unfaithful, it was to

Spain, not his native country. It was clearly he—not the Spaniards—who set the parameters of his employment in their behalf. Unequivocal betrayal of the nation was well outside the limits he imposed on his covert activities, and there is no record of any instance where he crossed those limits for monetary gain. The sum total of all the general's services to Spain do not appear to have cost the life of a single American soldier or the loss of a square foot of American soil.

But the tacit "no harm, no foul" rule of basketball officiating applies to history only if the offender's positive achievements outweigh his misdeeds. For all his admitted flaws and failings, Wilkinson's contributions to his country, so often neglected by critics put off by his persona as a paid secret agent, are impressive and incontroverted. To disregard his combat service in the Revolution and the Northwest Legion campaign would be unconscionable. Kentucky was very likely a better place for his eight years there—his leadership in commerce and politics is well documented. Overall, the developing frontier clearly gained more than it lost from his long military service in the west—he was, during most of the nation's formative years, a tireless and successful guardian of its borders against the encroachments of three rapacious European empires. His skills as negotiator and treaty-maker pacified hostile indigenous peoples all along the frontier, facilitating white settlement. Exploratory expeditions dispatched into the uncharted northwest and southwest regions produced significant data and maps for the government, and artifacts and specimens for the scientists of the American Philosophical Society.

General Wilkinson's official record is clean. His peers, after weighing all the evidence then available, never returned a guilty finding in any of the many judicial inquiries, courts-martial or congressional probes brought against him. Politically, in an era of bitter partisanship, he shifted effortlessly from the federalism of Washington and Adams to Jeffersonian democracy, all the while retaining the respect and support of the first three presidents. Despite the rumors and charges swirling about him, they understood, far better than his enemies, his value to the nation on the frontier. Their approval would, of course, have dwindled had the "smoking gun" reposing so long in Spanish archives surfaced in their lifetimes. Perhaps even that damning revelation would not have daunted the pragmatic Jefferson, always grateful to Wilkinson for exposing the Burr Conspiracy. He surely must have had some strong inkling of the general's reputed links with Spain when he trusted his much-maligned

military commander to open the most delicate of diplomatic initiatives with Spanish provincial governors.

Wilkinson was not a noble human being. He was blatantly opportunistic, mercenary, manipulative, a bit of a rogue and scoundrel and, of course, (as any successful double agent must be), a consummate liar. He was probably less than the sum of his parts—not quite the villain depicted by historical consensus, certainly not the blameless hero he portrayed himself to be. The general represents perhaps the best and the worst of his generation. Although clearly not a candidate for sainthood, he does not deserve Theodore Roosevelt's intemperate judgment that "in all our history, there is no more despicable character."<sup>87</sup> That epithet, denoting a nature so depraved as to be devoid of all redeeming qualities, hardly seems to apply to a man of Wilkinson's positive accomplishments, to an active member of learned and biblical societies, who throughout his life reportedly shared his early medical skills with anyone in need, and was (by all accounts) a faithful husband and devoted father.

The record suggests that he often did the right thing for the wrong reasons. Much of the general's best work was motivated, in part if not entirely, by self-interest—but that fact does not diminish its fundamental value to the nation. Far from being the "good Spaniard" he once professed himself to be, a plausible case can be made that James Wilkinson was, almost in spite of himself, a good American.

<sup>87</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (4 vols.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995; originally published 1889-1896), 3: 124.