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II
The Newburgh Conspiracy:
A Choice that Changed History

By Lauren De Angelis



Introduction

“Gentlemen: By an anonymous summons, an attempt has been made to convene you together; how inconsistent with the rules of propriety! how unmilitary! and how subversive of all order and discipline, let the good sense of the army decide.”¹

After mounting the podium in the Temple of Honor on March 15, 1783, George Washington began his speech with these moving words. Looking around at the angry faces of the officers of the Continental Army, Washington hoped that this speech would sway history. Either his men would listen to his wise words and choose loyalty to the government, or they would spurn his statements and lead their own revolution against it. In these few minutes, Washington held the fate of the United States of America, the new Republic, in his hands. It is safe to say that Washington felt uncertain about his capabilities to persuade his men. In one of the darkest moments in American history, Washington stood up with his head held high, ready to look into the eyes of his soldiers and declare that faith and loyalty must endure.

As the American Revolution was concluding in 1783 after seven arduous years of fighting, a bizarre event occurred in Washington’s camp in Newburgh, New York. The officers of the Continental Army responded to an anonymous summons that called for them to rebel against the United States government because Congress was delinquent in paying the officers. Stricken with poverty, the soldiers felt trapped in a destitute state that they feared would be permanent unless immediate actions were taken. This anonymous summons declared that only mutiny would bring forth change because entreaties and words had only resulted in empty promises and empty pockets.

In order better to grasp the viewpoint held by the officers in Newburgh, it is vital to understand what was going on in Congress during the beginning of 1783. There existed two factions within the government, which caused tension. This tension reached its pinnacle in Newburgh. The government had been set up so that the states held the most power while the national government remained weak. There were those in Congress, however, known as the

¹ GW to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

Nationalists, who felt that the national government needed more power. This need was seen most in Congress' inability to tax and raise revenue that would pay off the ever-increasing debt. Those who favored states' rights thwarted any chances of this from happening. Some members, therefore, hatched a plan to use the army as a means to achieve more control. By fueling the fire that existed under the army, the Nationalists hoped that they could convince the states to give them the authority to raise general funds and pay off the debt of the American Revolution. Although the Nationalists were willing to risk the Republic in order to do so, one man stood in their way: George Washington.

Washington played the most prominent role in the Newburgh Conspiracy because he alone stood between the army and Congress. He alone defused the tense situation that had developed due to an anonymous summons. Even prior to the summons, Washington was the liaison between Congress and the army. He continually pushed for better conditions, pay, and supplies for his men. In March 1783, he could have stood by and watched the army fix its own problems, but instead he chose to be proactive. Calling his own meeting, entreating Congress on the army's behalf, and promising justice in return for loyalty, Washington averted disaster by placing his own reputation on the line.

This chain of events could have swayed two different ways, but it was Washington's intellect and moderate nature that prevented extreme measures from occurring. He understood that he had to play many roles in order to preserve the Republic. Washington was a commander, liaison, and fellow soldier, which allowed him to identify with both Congress and the army. By listening to both sides, he was able to walk the middle line and prevent the mutiny while also advancing the army's cause in Congress. It is irrefutable that Washington made an astounding difference for not only his men, but also the government. His actions before, during, and after the events at Newburgh demonstrate Washington's dedication to his country and his loyalty to the Republican ideal.

Washington's role in the Newburgh Conspiracy is not a prominent topic in many articles and books about Washington's life. There may be a few pages or simply a short chapter dedicated to this momentous event in history. Although they competently discuss the event, they do not give justice to the extent of Washington's role during these few months in 1783. Many also do not even talk about the actions he took directly after the Newburgh Address to help secure funds for the army and smooth over relations between the army and Congress.

Richard Kohn writes two of the most prominent works regarding the Newburgh Conspiracy. His book *Eagle and Sword* devotes a chapter entitled "The Newburgh Conspiracy: Nationalism and Militarism," which gives a sound summary of the event, but mainly focuses on the situation in Congress and how it manipulated the army to rebel. Kohn does not go into great detail on Washington's contributions beyond a general explanation on his decisions to call his own meeting and read his own speech. By not establishing Washington's thoughts and motives behind his actions, Kohn is unable to portray Washington's indispensability throughout this event.

Not only does Kohn give a general background to the Newburgh Conspiracy in his book, but also chooses to analyze the supposed conspiracy in greater detail in his other well known article, "The Newburgh Conspiracy: Reconsidered." This work focuses on both the conspirators in Congress and their incriminating decisions, such as Robert Morris, who resigned as Financier, and the leading conspirators in the Newburgh Camp, especially Horatio Gates. These discussions are important when attempting to understand the Newburgh Conspiracy and are quite interesting,

but do not display the whole picture because both writings end with Washington's meeting. By ending so abruptly, Kohn is unable to show how the army's demands were met.

In other books that discuss Washington's entire life and military career, there appears to be a similar trend of neglecting a discussion on the results regarding pay for the army. In *George Washington's War*, Bruce Chadwick discusses the Newburgh Conspiracy in the chapter entitled "Coup D'état." Even though he discusses the event in more detail than other authors, Chadwick sums up Washington's meeting in four paragraphs. He moves quickly through Washington's actions using only three sentences to do so. Not only does he shorten his prose about the meeting, but also in what had happened after. He sums up his chapter by merely stating, "They left the temple slowly and returned to their posts"² This ending leaves the reader to guess what happened in the days and weeks following the event because he then moves his discussion to December 1783.

After analyzing various works, this pattern of incomplete narrative appears often. One book, however, did at least touch on the immediate after shocks of the Newburgh Conspiracy. That book is Stuart Leibiger's *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic*. Although his work focuses on the relationship between James Madison and Washington, it also gives more details about Washington's role and how he affected change in the subsequent weeks of the Newburgh Conspiracy.

For instance, Leibiger writes, "In the weeks following the Newburgh crisis, Washington sorted out what had happened...From Newburgh...Washington anxiously followed the revenue plan's fate" that could have provided the funds necessary for the army.³ Although he goes into some detail that is lacking in other sources, he too ends this scene in American history somewhat suddenly by saying the threat declined after preliminary peace. Yes, this is true, but there is so much more that can be said about Washington attempting to procreate funds and mediate after the preliminary peace is signed.

The authors who have written about the Newburgh Conspiracy divulge information regarding Washington's role, if one looks closely. They do a fine job at analyzing his character, actions, and influence; however, there is little discussion about how he affected change after the formal address. In order to fully understand the Newburgh Conspiracy, one needs to look at it from all sides and understand just how much effort Washington put forth to preserve the union. Therefore, this paper will set out to explore the Newburgh Conspiracy in general, but focus specifically on Washington's role after the address and how he altered the course of history. This will provide the final piece to the Newburgh Conspiracy puzzle, and thus help shed light on a turning point in American history!

Chapter 1

Congress' Predicament

In January 1783, Congress faced rising tension from the public creditors, especially those soldiers who had given up seven years of their lives to fight for American independence. These tensions culminated when a deputation of army officers arrived in Philadelphia on December 31, 1782. This deputation included General Alexander McDougall, Colonel John Brooks, Colonel

² Bruce Chadwick, *George Washington's War: The Forging of a Revolutionary Leader and the American Presidency* (Illinois: Sourcebooks, inc, 2004) 446.

³ Stuart Leibiger, *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press, 1999) 30-31.

Mathias Ogden, and Colonel Stephen Moylan. This deputation hoped to secure the funds that had been promised by Congress since the beginning of the war. It is evident in the memorial from the officers that the army was facing levels of poverty that would prevent it from maintaining a life after war. Stating, "Our distresses have brought us to a point. We have borne all that men can bear-- our property is expended-- our private resources are at an end, and our friends are wearied out and disgusted without incessant applications."⁴ These officers realized that they had exhausted all other outlets and needed Congress' help. However, help from Congress had previously proved to be limited.

As soldiers of the Continental Army, enlisted men were promised a certain amount of provisions that included food, clothing, and compensation. Delivering only seven or eight-tenths of the original sum, Congress was unable to satiate the officers' inherent needs. Also, those soldiers who had previously retired from service were unable to provide for themselves under the half-pay resolution of 1780, which provided officers with half pay for life, because the states were unwilling to support the resolution. They witnessed "with chagrin the odious point of view in which the citizens of too many states endeavor to place the men who are entitled to" half-pay.⁵ They believed that it was Congress' responsibility to pay them, not the states'. Therefore, the deputation asked Congress to commute this half-pay for life for full pay for a number of years or one large lump sum payment. However, Nationalists in Congress, such as Alexander Hamilton and Robert Morris, believed that Congress could not help the soldiers without first taking power away from the states.

Because the Americans feared a distant centralized government, they created a confederation that had a weak federal government and strong state governments. This meant that the states had the power to raise taxes, fund projects, and ultimately pay creditors who rendered services during the war. These stipulations inhibited Congress' ability fully to help the suffering soldiers in the army. To remedy this situation, Robert Morris, the Superintendent of Finance, declared that Congress needed the power to raise funds. In his "Observations on the Present State of Affairs," Morris stated, "To give Congress proper authority, the Confederation should be amended. Influence may be obtained by funding the Public Debts, on general Revenues."⁶ He strongly believed that the states would be unwilling to fund the current debt and also the interest imposed by previous ones. To avoid these problems, he believed the establishment of "general funds" under Congress would not only be accepted by more individuals, but also be seen as more just.

After the deputation presented their requests, Congress began to fear the power of the army. The Congressional Committee asked the deputation what actions would be taken if Congress was unable to help. They responded:

It was impossible to say precisely, that altho' the Sergeants & some of the most intelligent privates had been often observed in sequestered consultations, yet it is not

⁴ The Newburgh Conspiracy, December 1782-March 1783, *The memorial from the officers of the army*, [page 290-93]. <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/timeline/amerv/peace/newburgh.html>.

⁵ The Newburgh Conspiracy, December 1782-March 1783, *The memorial from the officers of the army*, [page 290-93]. <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/timeline/amerv/peace/newburgh.html>.

⁶ RM, Observations on the Present State of Affairs, January 14, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 304-306.

known that any premeditated plan had been formed; that there was sufficient reason to dread that at least a mutiny would ensue.⁷

Not only did this response foreshadow the events that would take place in March 1783 in Newburgh, New York, but also brought the reality of mutiny to the minds of congressional leaders. It is worth noting, however, that George Washington believed in his army's integrity. Writing to Robert Morris on January 8th, Washington gave reassurance regarding his army's intentions, while also declaring his hopes that the results would strengthen the ties between the government and the army. He declared, "I have no doubt of a perfect agreement between the Army and the present Contractors-nor all the advantages which will flow from the consequent harmony. Surely I am, the Army will ask no more of the Contractors than their indubitable rights."⁸ Washington knew the character of his army, and did not think them capable of overthrowing the government. These threats urged Robert Morris into action, but it should be noted that Morris was one of those individuals who wanted to use the army's anger against Congress in order to gain the right to tax. Despite his underhanded intentions, he did try to calm the situation in the beginning. Meeting with the deputation personally on January 17th, he stated that he had been searching for new sources of funds since October of 1782. However, these sources had not yet reached fruition. Morris sought to raise revenue by drawing against the Dutch loan of 1782 through the importation of specie from Havana. Not only did he execute this plan, but also decided to overdraw on the French loan of 1783. He believed this was in the best interest of Congress because the tension within the army was rising.⁹

This tension became most evident after General Nathanael Greene had advanced two months pay to the Southern army after the British were expelled from Charlestown in December 1782. The Northern troops felt neglected and wanted equality. Thus, Robert Morris decided to advance one month's pay to the Northern army to appease them. This would eventually prove to be troublesome, however, causing further deterioration of the faith that certain officers held in Congress. There was no solid relationship between Congress and the army. Because of this, the army was more likely to voice its concern or even take action against Congress.

Robert Morris risked bankruptcy to ensure that some payment went to the army, but this risk proved to be too great. On January 18th, Robert Morris learned that the overdraft was rejected, which meant that the government's resources were overextended. There was little he could do to raise funds for the soldiers because his personal attempts had failed. The states too had proved time and again unwilling to pay the soldiers. Therefore, he decided to resign on January 24th. Although he was in debt, Morris' actions point to his probable role in the ensuing Newburgh Affair. He knew of the army's discontent and wanted to cause excitement in the army so that it could be used to threaten Congress and the states to provide for general revenues.¹⁰ This argument towards Morris' guilt is only further strengthened when he demanded that the injunction of secrecy be removed from his resignation in late February 1783. By exposing the truth to the general public, he knew that he could manipulate Congress.

In order fully to understand Morris' desperate demand for general funds, one needs to grasp the concept of "general funds". When Congress debated this issue in January 1783, Alexander Hamilton talked extensively on the subject. He declared:

⁷ "Notes on Debates," January 13, 1783, Hutchinson et al., *PJM*, 6:32.

⁸ GW to RM, January 8, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:284.

⁹ RM to John Pierce, January 20, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:337-338.

¹⁰ Editorial Note, January 24, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:366.

That funds considered as permanent sources of revenue were of two kinds 1st such as wd extend generally & uniformly throughout the U.S. & wd. be collected under the authority of Congs. 2dly such as might be established separately within each State, & might consist of any objects which were chosen by the states, and which might be collected either under the authority of the States or of Congs.¹¹

The term “general funds” thus means the ability for Congress to tax all states, instead of allowing each state to tax individually. Nationalists in Congress of course favored the former option because it was far more simple than allowing the states to decide these issues separately. Likewise, Congress feared that the states would abuse the power of collections, which would eventually cause much corruption within the state governments. It was widely believed that those states who did not agree with commutation would supply funds inadequately or not all. Those who supported the states’ power, however, refuted the nationalists’ beliefs by stating that collections that had previously occurred statewide did not result in mass corruption and were handed out lawfully Nevertheless, the Nationalists hotly debated this issue and truly believed funding through the states would be inadequate to appease the public creditors.

Those in Congress knew that this issue required an immediate decision because it was brought up by a public creditor who had the power to force the issue, namely the army. On January 28, 1783, James Madison rose and stated “the patience of the army has been equal to their bravery, but that patience must have its limits; and the result of despair can not be foreseen, nor ought to be risked.”¹² This statement shows Congress’ fear. The ensuing debates concentrated heavily on appeasing them. By the end of January, Congress decided to appoint a committee consisting of Samuel Osgood, Thomas Fitzsimons, John Lewis Gervais, Alexander Hamilton, and James Wilson, which began calculating the cost of commutation.

In early February, Congress focused on establishing a commutation that would be acceptable to the majority of states. The committee decided to grant five years full pay, which would equal to half pay for life. However, other members of Congress debated this resolution. Other possible options emerged; including 5 ½ years full pay in gross, which was turned down on February 4th. It became apparent that many members in Congress could not agree on the aforementioned commutation. This inability to compromise stems from the belief that Congress did not have the power under Articles of Confederation. Writing to Madison, Edmund Randolph demonstrates the importance of this point when he stated, “Congress ought not to raise a revenue by other means, than those prescribed in the confederation.”¹³ It was natural for representatives of individual states to resist in changing the already precarious status quo in the United States. Therefore, a decision regarding the commutation could not be reached until concessions were made by the states.

The indecisiveness of Congress in regards to establishing general funds in order to subsidize the debt, coupled with the impending peace, led some Nationalists in Congress to use the threat of the army rebelling to sway Congress. For example, the Assistant Superintendent of Finance Gouverneur Morris, wrote a letter to General Henry Knox beseeching him to influence the army to unite with all public creditors in order to receive just compensation. He stated, “The Army may now influence the Legislatures and...after you have carried the Post the public

¹¹ “Notes on Debates,” January 27, 1783, Hutchinson et al., *PJM*, 6:136.

¹² “Notes on Debates,” January 28, 1783, Hutchinson et al., *PJM*, 6:146

¹³ Edmund Randolph to JM, February 7, 1783, Hutchinson et al., *PJM* 186.

Creditors will garrison it for you.”¹⁴ Although Gouverneur Morris did not overtly urge the army to rebel, he hinted at action. He wanted them to use their power and influence to force Congress to establish general funds by using the army as a bluff. He expressed similar sentiments to Nathanael Greene on February 11th, but this time he stressed the approaching peace as a catalyst for the officers to act. He believed that it would “give very serious thoughts to every officer.”¹⁵ Although he did not specifically state what actions would be used, one can assume it would be through some type of violent threat. The “serious thoughts” Morris alluded to shows there were ideas circulating about the army’s power, but a letter by Alexander McDougall, under the pen name “Brutus,” solidifies the argument that at least some Nationalists wanted to use the army as a bluff in order to achieve their demands.

Alexander McDougall was himself an advocate for using the army in order to establish general funds to pay the ever-increasing war debts. He was one of the few who overtly declared using the strength and military power of the army to force this decision. To Henry Knox, he stated, “the sentiment is daily gaining ground, that the Army will not, nor ought not, to disband till Justice is done to them”¹⁶ It is clearly evident that this letter established the threat that heretofore had been alluded to in letters written by Gouverneur Morris. By declaring the army’s intentions, McDougall hoped that he could manipulate Congress into a just decision. However, it is apparent that McDougall did not judge the character of the army correctly because both Generals Knox and Washington were loyal to the national government and believed their army would prove to be loyal too.

In response to the concerns brought up by both McDougall and Morris, Henry Knox responded to Gouverneur Morris. He explained how the army had always been viewed as thirteen separate entities that now wanted to merge as one under the power of Congress. Although Knox did not specifically say how this was to be done, he reassured Morris by maintaining, “They are good patriots and would forward every thing, that would tend to produce union, and a permanent general constitution. But they are yet to be taught how their influence is to effect this matter.”¹⁷ Knox’s statement illustrates the army’s lack of guidance in the matter of influencing Congress. Knox, as one of the men who sent the deputation in December 1783, wanted the army to help its cause, but in his educated opinion, he did not feel the army was prepared for any military action against the government. Likewise, he himself believed that the national government would provide funds, which meant a rebellion would be unnecessary.

The resignation of Robert Morris, the letters written by Gouverneur Morris, and the declarations by Alexander McDougall point to their part in the Newburgh Conspiracy. Granted, there is no definitive proof regarding most of these individuals’ involvement; however, the words and actions of these men seemed to have been meticulously thought out in order to gain ground in the state-dominated Congress. Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had little power and had to fight against the dominance of the states. It is thus likely that those who were in favor of Congressional authority could have used more drastic means, such as threats, to gain rights in order to create a stronger nation.

In Congress, there was still no agreement regarding payment for the army, even though it had decided to sit as a Committee of the Whole. Concern was rising, which is seen in Alexander

¹⁴ GM to HK, February 7, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:417.

¹⁵ GM to Nathanael Greene, February 11, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:425.

¹⁶ Alexander McDougall to HK, February 12, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:120

¹⁷ HK to GM, February 21, 1783. Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:449.

Hamilton's letter to George Washington. Although Hamilton contacted Washington, one must understand that Hamilton was also an advocate for creating a stronger Congress. However, he did not want to go passed the point of no return. He therefore warned Washington of the potential threat, even though he may have secretly wanted the army to help create a more central government.

Hamilton spoke of the precarious state of the national finances and the fear felt regarding the army's next action. He entreated Washington to walk the moderate path that he was so used to. Stating:

This Your Excellency's influence must effect. In order to do it, it will be advisable not to discountenance their endeavors to procure redress, but rather by the intervention of confidential and prudent persons, *to take the direction of them*. This however must not appear: it is of moment to the public tranquility that Your Excellency should preserve the confidence of the army without losing that of the people. This will enable you in case of extremity to guide the torrent, and bring order perhaps even good, out of confusion,¹⁸

Hamilton shows the importance of Washington's leadership during this time. For without moderation, the revolution could have potentially turned into Civil War. Although this was the first letter written by Hamilton to Washington regarding the disposition of the army, Washington had known about their grievances for some time. He had informed Robert Morris of the complaints of his men as early as 1782 and had been working secretly to procure funds. Washington's actions were always done to benefit his men, which would be seen in his decisions to thwart mutiny and save the Republic in March 1783.

Washington knew that keeping the army at bay while funds were being created was vital in maintaining order. A problem that occurred was the tendency for troops to violate private property. This violation was seen as an act of disobedience, which could have been seen as a precursor to outright rebellion. In order to stop the troops from breaking the law, Washington did everything in his power to keep order through the creation of markets that would be used by both civilians and troops to buy and sell goods. Washington realized, however, that this was only a small measure that would only temporarily distract the troops from their present grievances. Washington confided in George Clinton, who was then the governor of New York:

In order to put a total stop to an evil which I am apprehensive will otherwise be of very pernicious consequence, it is my earnest wish and desire, that effectual Measures might be taken to prevent the Inhabitants from purchasing or receiving...public property that may be in possession of Soldiery.¹⁹

Washington's actions show that the soldiers needed to use illegal and dishonorable practices in order to procure the minimum for survival. Because Congress could not give these soldiers their just due, they had to find other ways to get it. Washington refused to tolerate this anarchy and used his power to alleviate some of his men's suffering.

As Congress debated subjects ranging from a 25-year impost to dividing up the creditors in order to pay, the situation became more severe. Because they could not agree, the soldiers were forced to wait in a state of limbo. Hamilton, who was a veteran of the army and a close

¹⁸ AH to GW, February 13, 1783, Syrett, PAH, 3:254.

¹⁹ GW to George Clinton, February 17, 1783. Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

correspondent of Washington, told Congress about the growing ill will of the army towards both Congress and Washington. Stating:

He knew Genl. Washington intimately & perfectly, that his extreme reserve, mixed sometimes with a degree of asperity of temper both of which were said to have increased of late, had contributed to the decline of his popularity; but that his virtue patriotism & his firmness would it might be depended upon never yield to any dishonorable or disloyal plans into which he might be called.²⁰

Congress was sure that Washington would remain loyal; however, the concern for the army's intentions was still present. Unless they came to a decision soon, they would face a major threat that they hoped Washington would be able to extinguish.

During this tense time, Alexander McDougall sent another letter to General Knox under the name of Brutus. He spoke of Congress' fear and possible actions toward the army, if peace were made with Britain. He stated that Congress was indeed scared of the possible repercussions of a strong, central army during a time of peace. Therefore, he believed that "an attempt is soon to be made to split the Army into detachments to prevent their being formidable."²¹ If this split did in fact occur, McDougall felt that the states would cancel their militia debt. The inconsistency of payment from the states drove McDougall to his conclusions. In the face of these hard decisions, he felt it was nearly impossible to advise the army on how to achieve their goals.

The situation in Congress became disastrous when Robert Morris' resignation was published on February 26th. As previously mentioned, Robert Morris resigned after his actions to secure funds failed, but his resignation was not yet made public in order to avoid hysteria among both civilians, and more important, the army. His resignation brought about a financial crisis that seemed insurmountable due to the amount of credit Morris held. Without this man in office, many spectators felt that the republican experiment was near its end. Sir Guy Carlton, a British authority in New York, wrote to Thomas Townshend, the British Secretary of State for Home Affairs: "The manner and his language...seem connected with the [army] petition and to be part of the same plan, tending to place General Washington at the head of all power."²² This statement enforces the rumors that were circulating regarding Robert Morris' actions. By removing himself from power, Morris hoped to cause a panic that would in fact help Congress gain power; however his actions could have also caused the downfall of the republic.

Members of Congress feared the worst, especially with the publication of the resignation of Morris and increasing rumors regarding the army's intentions to refuse dispersion. Joseph Jones, a Congressman from Virginia, wrote to Washington about his fears and concerns:

That when once all confidence between the civil and military authority is lost by intemperate conduct, or an assumption of improper power, especially by the military body, the Rubicon is crossed, and to retreat will be very difficult for the fears and jealousies that will unavoidably subsist between the two bodies.²³

The working relationship between members of Congress and the army was clearly at stake in this comment. If the army acted on their feelings of discontent, then Congress would be unable to

²⁰ "Notes on Debates," February 20, 1783, Hutchinson et al, *The PJM*, 6:266

²¹ AM to HK, February 27, 1783. *PHK*, 11:165.

²² Editorial Note, February 26, 1783, Ferguson, *Robert Morris Papers*, 7:466.

²³ Joseph Jones to GW, February 27, 1783., *Timothy Pickering Papers*, 34:143.

trust or work with them again. By writing to Washington, Jones hoped to save the relationship that had remained in tact since the outset of the war. Washington again is seen as the only individual who was capable of using the advice of Congress and help the army to understand the financial constraints they were under.

Chapter 2 Washington: The Liaison

Washington himself was frustrated with the lack of control and power he had in regards to ensuring payment for his men. He wrote to Hamilton "that the public interest might be benefited, if the Commander in Chief of the Army was let more into the political & pecuniary state of our affairs than he is."²⁴ Washington knew that his status as commander of the Continental Army made it difficult for him to remain moderate because he did in fact want to help his men, but did not have the power to do so. He felt extreme anguish about the army's sufferings and the inability of Congress to decide how to alleviate them. Nevertheless, he did not lose faith in the army. He believed, "If there is such a disposition shewn as prudence & policy dictates, to do justice, your apprehensions, in case of Peace, are greater than there is cause for."²⁵ Although Hamilton may have had concerns about the allegiance of the army, Washington did not. Washington did, however, emphasize that Congress did need to keep an open mind to all concerns that the army had or else destroy everything that had been accomplished in the previous eight years.

Following Washington's advice, Congress tried to make a compromise on March 6th, which attempted to give Congress the ability to raise revenue while appeasing the reluctance of the states. Prior to this day, Congress had created a sub-committee to draft a revenue plan, which embodied a "5 percent *ad valorem* impost on virtually all imported goods as well as prize ships and their cargoes."²⁶ Not only would there be an impost, but also revenues from tariffs on wine, brandy, and rum, which would go directly to Congress. However, the states maintained the ability to create their own taxes in order to increase revenue. This compromise would allow revenue to be raised annually in order to pay the debt. Although this seemed like a plausible solution to the problem of wartime debt, Nationalists in Congress disliked the idea not only because it favored the states too heavily, but also went against the provisions of credit.

Robert Morris responded to Congress' compromise by asserting that public creditors had the right to ask for their payment up front on a specific date. They did not, under the law, have to wait for the debt to be paid over a number of years. He stated, the "Government have no Right to oblige Creditors to commute their Debts for any Thing else. Any Revenues for the public Credit must be such that Money may be borrowed on them to pay those to whom it is due"²⁷ He then listed issues he saw in this compromise that threatened the ability of the debt to be paid. This list included punctuality of payment, for whom the payments were intended, and the inability of Congress to send collectors.

During this heated debate in Congress, a letter arrived from General Washington addressed to Robert Morris. Expressing his fear that the mood of the army was worsening as

²⁴ GW to AH, March 4, 1783. Syrett, *PAH*, 3:276.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Editorial Note, March 8, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:518

²⁷ Editorial Note, March 8, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:525-526.

days progressed, he stated, "as danger becomes further removed from them their feelings seem to be more callous to those noble Sentiments with which I could wish to see them inspired."²⁸ These fears became alarming after an anonymous summons circulated throughout the Newburgh encampment on March 10th, which called for a meeting of the officers on Tuesday, March 11th, in order to respond to the problems that arose from their lack of payment.

The anonymous letter was written by a Brigadier General named John Armstrong. He was one of the more radical members involved in the Newburgh Conspiracy because he in fact wanted the army to rise up against Congress. In his first Newburgh Address, he spoke of the government's lack of care towards the army. He asked the men if they could "consent to wade through the vile mire of dependency, and owe the miserable remnant of that life to charity, which has hitherto been spent in honor?"²⁹ These strong words strengthened the growing dissatisfaction of the army. Following these words, he demanded that these men give Congress an ultimatum. Armstrong asserted that the army would remain true if Congress followed through with the demands of the December deputation; however, if it did not, then the army would find an alternative way to achieve its ends. Armstrong stated, "If peace, that nothing shall separate them [Congress] from your arms but death; if war, that courting auspices, and inviting the direction of your illustrious leader, you will retire to some unsettled country, smile in your turn, and 'mock when their [Congress's] fear cometh on'"³⁰ These were sober threats that Washington took seriously because he knew that mutiny had been a possibility for some time.

On March 11, 1783, Washington's General Orders demonstrated his complete control of the situation. Having read the summons of this anonymous individual, Washington did everything he could to defuse the feelings the letter brought. He did not want to silence the officers by denying them their chance to speak their minds because he knew that this would only further inhibit progress. He called his own meeting, which he had the power to control, so that the situation did not get out of hand. Washington stipulated in his orders that "his duty as well as his reputation and true interest of the Army requires his disapprobation of such disorderly proceedings,"³¹ therefore a meeting would be held on that Saturday at noon.

Those in command at Newburgh knew that the course of history hung on this meeting. This fear can be seen in the letter General Knox wrote to Benjamin Lincoln, the Secretary at War, on March 12th, the day after Washington's orders had been issued. He asked Lincoln that Congress needed to take this threat seriously because Knox was not sure Washington's meeting would quell the storm created by the summons. He stated, "What will be the result? God only knows- Congress ought not to lose a moment in bringing the affairs of the army to a decision."³²

Not only can one see alarm in Knox's writings, but also in Washington's. On the same day Knox wrote to Lincoln, Washington wrote to the President of Congress. He informed the president that the army had planned an unauthorized meeting in which to discuss possible action against Congress. Washington told him that he was doing everything possible to aid the situation; however, he asked for the president's help. He declared:

I have nothing further to add, except a Wish, that the measures I have taken to dissipate a Storm, which had gathered so suddenly and unexpectedly, may be acceptable to

²⁸ GW to RM, March 8, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:538.

²⁹ John Armstrong to the Continental Army, March 12, 1783, Hunt, *Journals of Continental Congress*, 24:295.

³⁰ John Armstrong to the Continental Army, March 12, 1783, Hunt, *Journals of Continental Congress* 24: 296-297.

³¹ General Orders, March 11, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

³² HK to Benjamin Lincoln, March 12, 1783, Ferguson, *PHK*, 12:19.

Congress...that Congress have the best Intentions of doing ample Justice to the Army, as soon as Circumstances will possibly admit.³³

Washington did indeed try to help this matter the best way that he could at the camp, but he knew he needed Congress' help. He expected that the government would take this warning seriously and take action. In another letter addressed to Congress, he asked outright for immediate aid. He warned the members of Congress that if the army had met without approval, then they would have come to a decision that was too inconceivable to describe. Further to emphasize what needed to be done in order to avoid such occurrences, Washington stated, "if they [the army] are turned loose without liquidation of accts, and an assurance of that justice to which they are so worthily entitled," then the men had no other option, but to rebel.³⁴ Washington fought for his men, and did not allow Congress to forget the heroic acts that they had performed, which had earned them the right for pay.

Although this summons was circulated at the Newburgh encampment, Washington was aware that it did not originate within its confines. He realized that with the arrival of Armstrong from Philadelphia also came the arrival of the summons. Therefore, it was likely that Armstrong was the culprit. Though Washington did not divulge his hypothesis, he did allude to it in a letter written to Jones. Not only did Washington accuse Armstrong in this letter, but also members of the Continental Congress, such as Robert and Gourveneur Morris, for their alleged involvement. He declared:

That some members of Congress wished the Measure might take effect, in order to compel the Public, particularly the delinquent States, to do justice...it is generally believ'd the Scheme was not only planned, but also digested in Philadelphia; and that some people have been playing a double game; spreading at the Camp and in Philadelphia Reports and raising jealousies equally void of Foundation.³⁵

Washington seemed disgusted with these facts because he was trying to be the moderate leader who would keep this republican experiment from falling apart. If Congress did not support him in this endeavor, then there would be no hope. He had faith that Congress could help these soldiers while also solving the budget problem. They did not need to resort to underhanded and dangerous tactics to do so.

On March 13th, Washington disclosed to the army the resolutions that Congress had made on January 25, 1783. Reaffirming their rights to pay and security, these resolutions should have helped appease the army. Washington wanted to instill trust in the army regarding Congress' abilities. As Saturday approached, the day of the meeting, he hoped that the army would contemplate these resolutions and would realize that being honorable and loyal was the right thing to do. Although he was not sure that this plan would work, Washington carefully thought out his actions in order to keep the army from outright rebellion against the government.

Finally, Saturday March 15, 1783 arrived. It must have been a day of tension and apprehension for both the commanding officers and the men. At the meeting, which began at noon, General Gates presided. Although Gates was a general under Washington, his role in the Newburgh Conspiracy must also be observed because he was a prominent member of it. He was chosen by Congress to lead the mutiny, which he believed would help him take power from his

³³ GW to The President of Congress, March 12, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

³⁴ GW to AH, March 12, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:287.

³⁵ GW to Joseph Jones, March 12, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *The WGW*, 26.

adversary: Washington. Even though Gates presided over this meeting, he was in no way helping.³⁶

When the meeting began, Washington who, in a dramatic fashion, walked in to the assembly hall and stood at a podium in order to deliver his speech. Washington was not a fine orator like many of his peers, but he carefully prepared his speeches to properly convey his point. He began by formally addressing the anonymous summons. Washington stated:

the Author of the Address, should have had more charity than to mark for Suspicion, the man who should recommend moderation and longer forbearance...But he had another plan...in which...love of Country have no part; and he was right, to insinuate the darkest suspicion, to effect the blackest designs.³⁷

Washington juxtaposed his character with that of the author. He wanted to emphasize the fact that he himself was for the country and for his men whereas this author was selfish and did not understand the repercussions of the acts he wished the army to take. It appears Washington used this language to show the officers how this author did not know what was best for the army, and instead illustrated how he knew what needed to be done. Washington called himself the army's "faithful friend." He could have said commander or leader, but he saw himself as one with them. He suffered with them and truly wanted to help them. Throughout his entire speech, Washington reaffirmed that belief.

Not only did he continually affirm his allegiance to the army, he also pledged that Congress would provide for them. He stated:

I cannot conclude this Address...without giving it as my decided opinion, that the Honble Body, entertain exalted sentiments of the Services of the Army; and, from a full conviction of its merits and sufferings, will do it compleat justice.³⁸

Washington confirmed that he had no doubts in his mind that Congress understood the suffering of the soldiers. He promised them that Congress would pull through their budget problems and succeed in giving them fair compensation. All he asked of his men was patience because Congress was a slow governing body and to trust in his judgment. After all the years he had served them, Washington hoped that they would listen to him.

To close his speech, Washington asked them to think about the repercussions of their actions. He did not want them to ruin their reputation as a loyal army. He implored, "in your favor, let me entreat you, Gentlemen, on your part, not to take any measures, which, viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained."³⁹ Washington believed strongly in the integrity of his army and hoped that these words were enough to convince them to change their minds and take a more moderate course.

His thought out speech asserted his opinion strongly, without alienating himself from his men. The officers, however, were unmoved. After his formal speech was delivered, Washington pulled out a letter from Joseph Jones that spoke of Congress' resolve to help the soldiers. As he did this, he dramatically pulled out his glasses, which he received from his doctor a few months prior to this event and murmured, "he had grown gray in their service, and now found himself growing blind"⁴⁰ This affected the men strongly because they now could better understand the

³⁶ Kohn, "The Inside of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 199-201/

³⁷ GW to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *The GWG*, 26.

³⁸ GW to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *GWG*, 26.

³⁹ GW to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *GWG*, 26.

⁴⁰ Kohn, Skeen, 288.

loyalty and sacrifice that their commander had done for them throughout the past seven years of service. The men were lost for words, and a number of accounts even state that some men cried. This poignant moment was a instant where the men looked at their actions and realized that they could not turn their back on one of the few men who genuinely cared about them.

It is hard to say whether or not Washington adlibbed these words on the spot or had previously planned them. Knowing Washington's character, however, causes one to believe that he might have thought about what could affect his men prior to the meeting. He had worked with them for years and knew what could bring about a response. Also, he had to do so in a dramatic fashion or else risk alienation. Likewise, it is interesting to consider that he had read his entire speech without his spectacles, yet could not when reading Joseph Jones'. Every word, phrase, and action seemed to be as dramatic as needed. He walked in dramatically, stood at a podium, and declared these thought out words to emphasize how important he viewed this meeting. Therefore, it is not surprising that he would think to use empathy and pity to manipulate the emotion of his men.

Upon completing his speech, Washington left, allowing, the officers to draft resolutions regarding ideas about what had just taken place. General Knox proposed a motion, which was seconded by General Israel Putnam. They resolved that the army would thank Washington for his speech and his allegiance to his men. Also, they agreed that Washington would know that they had deep respect for him and would not, could not disappoint him. The army then decided that a committee would be formed of one general, one field officer, and one captain in order to craft resolutions that the army could utilize in order to help solve this problem. For a half hour, the committee, which included Knox, discussed the army's options and future actions.

Although the anonymous summons had wanted to drive the men to outright rebellion, the outcome of the meeting was quite different. The resolutions that the committee passed did not speak of rebellion, but instead loyalty and forbearance. The army stated that they could not disgrace themselves with selfish actions and pledged "that the army continue to have an unshaken confidence in the justice of Congress and their country."⁴¹ The committee also decided that Washington needed to write to the president of Congress for redress of the army's problems. They saw Washington as a true intermediary and respected him for that quality. The army had seen Washington's leadership in action and hoped that his strength on the field would transfer to Congress.

Lastly, the committee declared their disgust with the anonymous author who had asked them to do the unthinkable. They firmly stated,

That the officers of the American army view with abhorrence, and reject with disdain the infamous propositions contained in a late address to the officers of the army, and resent with indignation the secret attempts of some unknown persons to collect the officers together in a manner totally, subversive of all discipline and good order.⁴²

It is logical to think that Washington's meeting with the officers had a profound effect on them. They went from supporting this anonymous author to completely rejecting his stance. This thus appears to be a fine example of Washington's ability to influence his men. Had another leader handled this situation, then it most likely would have ended differently. Washington's resolve to see his army through this storm only strengthened the already existing bond between them. Although there was tension between Washington's use of moderation and the army's want for

⁴¹ Cantonment, March 15, 1783. *Papers of Horatio Gates*, 13.

⁴² Cantonment, March 15, 1783. *Papers of Horatio Gates*, 13.

change, this tension eased because Washington articulated how beneficial moderation could be instead of civil war.

In the days that followed Washington's meeting, the he continually expressed his gratitude to his army. In his general orders, Washington stated, "notwithstanding the storm now has passed over...the officers have...given the most unequivocal and exalted proofs of patriotism"⁴³ Not only did he express these sentiments toward his officers, he also ensured that they understood what the resolutions entailed. He did this by allowing them to copy down the official papers if they saw fit, which showed the men that Washington was hiding nothing from them. By taking these actions and expressing his beliefs, Washington further took control of this situation because now all officers had access to the documents and the reasons behind them. This is a further testament to Washington's leadership capabilities, which were utilized during times of great distress.

Although Washington admitted that the storm had now passed over the men, he knew that the situation was not over. He understood that the soldiers were still suffering and would continue to suffer until Congress made a decision. He emphasized these facts to Joseph Jones in a letter on March 18th. He believed that the men were "too sore by the recollection of their past sufferings to be touched much longer upon the string of forbearance, in matters wherein they can see no cause for delay."⁴⁴ His statement illustrates the tenuous peace that had come over Newburgh, but shows that this peace could end at anytime if Congress did not take this situation seriously. From the outset of the war, Washington saw these men acting as soldiers and knew they should be paid as such. He entreated everyone in hopes that he bore enough influence to push Congress to a definitive decision. Washington wanted to make sure his men got paid because peace with Britain loomed, and he knew that the army should not, could not be disbanded until they got what they deserved from the government.

In the aforementioned letter, one can see the private concerns that Washington divulged to Joseph Jones. However, his formal letter to the President of the Continental Congress, more eloquently and fervently stated what the army needed from their government. Washington emphasized again his soldiers' patriotism, and requested that Congress validate the promises he had made to his men. He also stressed that it would be of utmost danger to dissolve the army without payment. For he believed:

the establishment of funds, and the security of the payment of all the just demands of the Army will be the most certain means of preserving the National faith and future of this extensive Continent.⁴⁵

Washington was well aware of the financial situation that America faced as a young country, but he believed that to dissolve the army without such financial security meant a life of destitution and poverty, which is a life these men did not deserve.

The entreaties of Washington did not go unacknowledged as Congress now realized the dire nature of the situation. Much was weighing on Congress at this time because not only was it facing a potential uprising from the army, but also many other problems that ranged from the

⁴³ General Orders, March 18, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

⁴⁴ GW to Joseph Jones, March 18, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

⁴⁵ GW to The President of the Continental Congress, March 18. 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

inability of securing further funding from France to the inability to cope with the resignation of Robert Morris. The entire state of affairs in the United States "gave peculiar awe & solemnity to the present moment, & oppressed the minds of Congs. With an anxiety & distress which had been scarcely felt in any period of the revolution."⁴⁶ It seemed evident to members of Congress that there was little time to waste. Decisions needed to be made at once or else they faced the fall of a republic.

Congress again debated the matter of enacting general revenue to pay the creditors. During these debates, the question of practicability kept occurring. Hamilton asserted that, under the Articles of Confederation, the possibility for creating a general revenue was near impossible. His position on this subject was not new because he had continually pushed for a more nationalized government. Others also voiced a similar opinion. For example, Stephen Higginson of Massachusetts "described all attempts of Congs. to provide for the public debts out of the mode prescribed by the Confederation, as nugatory."⁴⁷ This is just one example of the growing discontent regarding the national government's inability to intervene in state affairs.

Finally on March 21st, the *Report on Half Pay for the Army* was drafted. In this report, Congress stipulated plans to alleviate the suffering of the Continental Army. This document resolved:

That such officers as are now in service and shall continue therein to the end of the war shall be intitled to receive the amount of five years full pay in money or securities on interest at six per Cent as congress shall find most convenient, instead of half pay promised for life by the resolution of the 21 of October 1780.⁴⁸

Not only did Congress provide for those officers in service, but also those who had previously retired. They too would receive payment "collectively in each state of which they are inhabitants"⁴⁹ It seemed that Congress was making every effort to help all those men who had served in the past and in the present.

Although the resolutions had been written, Congress had not passed them yet. Because of Washington's entreaties, on March 22nd, Congress was more willing to accept and pass the resolutions put forth. The members had the events of both Newburgh and Washington's advice fresh in their minds, which may have truly manifested a fear that would not subside until a decision had been made. Therefore, after some revisions, Congress passed these resolutions after a motion made by Eliphalet Dyer of Connecticut on March 22, 1783. It appeared as if progress was occurring.

Now that these resolutions had been passed, Congress had to ensure that the impost on imported goods was executed properly and lawfully. Formal peace was in America's grasp, which only further increased the need for the impost. The army would soon disband and ask for their funds. One sees this concern in a letter written to Gouverneur Morris:

The People of America must begin to pay taxes...Peace is in a manner made...now we must help ourselves...the differences in the price of country produce and of importations must enable People to pay with a tolerable degree of convenience to themselves.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ "Notes on Debates," March 17, 1783, Hutchinson et al., *PJM*, 6:266.

⁴⁷ "Notes on Debates," March 20, 1783. Hutchinson et al., *PJM*, 6:370.

⁴⁸ "Report on Half Pay for the Army," March 21, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:301.

⁴⁹ "Report on Half Pay for the Army," March 21, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:301.

⁵⁰ Matthew Ridley to GM, March 24, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:630.

It was evident that those in power knew that the state of the Union depended on a communal effort to allow the United States to repair its credit. Although the letter showed confidence in this system, Robert Morris did not agree with Gouverneur Morris because he saw a bleaker picture about both foreign and domestic affairs.

Robert Morris had always wanted to incite the army to grab what was theirs and overturn the dominance of the states in the process. He saw threats coming from every side and did not know if the United States would survive all of them. He stated, "When I make observations I cannot forbear adding that if no excesses take place I shall be sorry that ill-humours have appeared. I shall not regret importunity...from the army."⁵¹ His statement shows that he did not fully believe that the impost and commutation would actually work because of the states inability to sacrifice for the creditors. He did state that progress was being made however and Congress had convinced eight states to provide for the commutation of half pay. It thus appeared that progress was being made in order to help the soldiers, but nevertheless the potential issues arising seemed quite probable.

Although it was evident that Congress was making an effort to help the Continental Army, Washington still intervened on their behalf because he did not want them to be manipulated by the government. He wrote a letter to Hamilton that spoke of his concerns. He declared, "while I urge the army to moderation...and endeavor to confine them within in the bounds of duty, I cannot as an hon{est} man conceal from you, that I am afraid their distrusts ha{ve} too much foundation"⁵² Washington was alluding to the continuing rumors that had been spreading in the army. This mistrust lay in the possibility that the army may be disbanding without first getting their full pay. To Washington, Hamilton was extremely blunt about the concerns the general had made to him. He thus replied to Washington by stating:

The army...express an expectation that Congress will not disband them previous to a settlement of accounts and the establishment of funds. Congress will not disband them previous to a settlement of accounts and the establishment of funds. Congress may resolve upon the first; but they cannot constitutionally declare the second. They have no right by the Confederation to *demand* funds.⁵³

Hamilton saw this as a real problem, but was quite pragmatic about the situation. He realized that to have the army remain intact during peacetime would not only cost the country more, but also could cause unrest during times of inactivity. Hamilton reassured Washington about Congress' intentions. He told Washington "that Congress are doing, and will continue to do, everything in their power towards procuring satisfactory securities"⁵⁴

Washington was indeed frustrated by the Articles of Confederation because they had continually caused his army to be treated with little dignity and respect. He wanted the country on a more solid foundation, especially since he had witnessed firsthand the weak nature of the Articles. He told Hamilton, "No man in the United States is... more deeply impressed with the necessity of reform in our present Confederation than myself...almost all the difficulties...of the army have their origin here."⁵⁵ This statement only reaffirms Washington's beliefs and understandings regarding the national government. These statements also show his tendency to

⁵¹ RM to GW, March 25, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:636.

⁵² GW to AH, March 24, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:304.

⁵³ AH to GW, March 25, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:307.

⁵⁴ AH to GW, March 25, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:308.

⁵⁵ GW to AH, March 31, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:310.

favor nationalism over states rights because he was tired of seeing his army suffer continually. He wanted justice and he knew it would be hard if the states still retained great power.

Despite his frustration, Washington was grateful to those members in the Continental Congress, including Madison, Jones, and Hamilton, who had helped ensure that his men received the commutation for half pay. He announced Congress' resolutions on March 20, 1783, which brought some peace among the officers because they knew that they had affected change. Washington even wrote to the President of Congress stating, "The Commutation of the Half Pay... will give great satisfaction to the army; and will prove an additional Tie to strengthen their Confidence in the Justice, and benevolent intentions of Congress towards them"⁵⁶ It appeared that the relationship between Congress and the army was not sullied forever because neither held complete contempt for the other. However, this does not mean that the army was completely content with resolutions because they could never completely trust the government again.

Although Congress had helped the army, members of high rank discovered that there had existed members in Congress, including Robert and Gouverneur Morris, who did not have the best interest of the army at heart, but instead only wanted to use the army for their own personal gains of getting the resolutions passed by the states. Washington alluded to the army's outrage in a letter to Hamilton dated on April 4th. Washington stated:

some Men (and leading ones too) in this Army, are beginning to entertain suspicions that they... are to be made use of as mere Puppets to establish Continental funds; and rather than not succeed in this measure, or weaken their ground, they (Congress) would make a sacrifice of the army and all its interests.⁵⁷

Washington warned Hamilton that the army was not happy about this discovery. The men felt like they were mere chess pieces that the members of Congress could play with. Hamilton responded to Washington by saying there were two different types of men in Congress: those who were for the power of the individual states and those who yearned for Continental politics.⁵⁸ It was the division and tension between these two groups that drove those who wanted Continental politics to use any means, including the army, to achieve these ends. Hamilton told Washington the reasons behind why certain actions occurred, such as Robert Morris' resignation, was the fact that no other alternatives existed at the time. Literally, it was a desperate time that called for desperate measures, and Hamilton did not apologize for these actions.

Washington again faced the rising tensions of his men, but these tensions did not culminate in another anonymous summons because the army was disbanding. Those in power felt that it was not necessary to keep the full army functioning until the final settlement had been reached, therefore Washington could begin to send soldiers home. However, Washington did not do so until he could secure an advance of pay for his men. Washington thus asked Morris, who had not yet left office:

for... 2 Months pay to the Army previous to the dissolution of... I cannot but hope... that the measure will now become practicable... because I know that... disagreeable consequences may be apprehended unless the proposed expedient is adopted.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ GW to AH, March 30, 1783, Ferguson, *WGW*, 26.

⁵⁷ GW to AH, April 4, 1783, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 26.

⁵⁸ AH to GW, April 8, 1783, Syrett, *PAH*, 3:318.

⁵⁹ GW to the Superintendent of Finance, April 9, 1783, Fitzpatrick, 26.

Although Washington asked for this advance, the government still did not have funds to provide for such a payment. The payment would average \$750,000, an amount that taxes and the states could not readily come up with. Robert Morris decided that “the most therefore which can be done is to risk a large Paper Anticipation.”⁶⁰ The issuing of a paper anticipation was extremely delicate because the states had to pay the money back or else face a complete destruction of the nation’s credit line. However, Robert Morris believed that the creation of paper money was practicable in order to more easily and peacefully dissolve the army.

Washington labored intensively for his men and even convinced Congress to allow the army to keep their firearms and accoutrements “as an extra reward for their long and faithful services.”⁶¹ Also, the army would be given certificates that could be redeemed for an amount of land that each soldier was entitled to. It is quite evident that Washington went above and beyond the call of duty for the army because he truly cared for them. He wanted to ensure that his army was not forgotten and neglected by those in power because without these men, who sacrificed everything for the sake of independence, there would have been no victory.

Despite Washington’s efforts, the impost would not be ratified by the states and failed much like the impost of 1781. There were many states, especially in the New England area, that still felt that the impost was in fact a pension, something they refused to give to the soldiers. Even though the impost failed, the labor he put forth for his men shows how great a leader Washington truly was. During a dark hour of American history, Washington weathered the storm and kept the United States Army together, which proved to be vital in ensuring that the Republic survived the American Revolution. Washington could have joined the coup or could have stepped aside to allow it to occur, but he did not because that meant the government no longer had control. Civilian control of the military is a cornerstone of the American Constitution, a cornerstone that Washington believed in strongly.

Chapter 3

Washington’s Role in Retrospect

The country faced a crisis early in 1783 for many reasons stemming from Congress’ inability to collect and redistribute general funds for public creditors. The Articles of Confederation prevented it from doing so because Americans feared a strong central government after having been subjected to the tyranny and injustice of George III. They did not want to fight for their freedom from one monarch in order to be subjected to another. Having power within each individual state ensured that this would never occur. These fears however almost brought about the demise of this newly-formed republic in March 1783. After analyzing what would be known as the “Newburgh Conspiracy,” one should see how close the United States of America came to a military mutiny and overthrow of the government. George Washington’s role in this affair helped the government and the people rise up in the face of adversity in order to preserve this tenuous union.

⁶⁰ RM to A Committee of Congress, April 14, 1783, Ferguson, *PRM*, 7:701

⁶¹ “General Orders,” May 1, 1783, Ferguson, *WGW*, 26.

Washington was not a man who took threats lightly because he knew how precarious the republic was. He saw how his men had suffered because there was no cohesive way to receive funds in order to distribute not only pay, but also food, clothing, and other equipment. Time and time again he saw how his soldiers descended into poverty and financial depression. It pained him to know that there was very little he could do to prevent it. Washington always walked a moderate path so that he would not alienate himself from others. Although this moderation caused tension with his men, it also allowed for Washington to take on the role of a liaison, which is a role that prevented a mutiny.

As a liaison, Washington wrote hundreds of letters to those in power so that they were well aware of the dire situation. He knew how to articulate precisely what needed to be done in a way that was not threatening. By writing to many members of Congress, Washington developed a close relationship with its leading members, including Hamilton, Madison, Robert Morris, and Joseph Jones. Because these men were continually in contact with Washington, they were able to better understand the mood at Newburgh. Using Washington's advice, they would be able to help influence Congress by showing how Washington was an able commander who not only understood the debt problem, but also understood the plight of the people. Washington knew this country well and knew his men even better, which gave a more personal incentive to solve this national problem. Washington was a truly able liaison because he utilized his influence and took control during this dark time.

Although Washington was a liaison, he played many other roles during the Newburgh Conspiracy. Another important role Washington had to take on during this time was that of a steady commander. As previously stated, Washington believed in taking a moderate route. He even stated during his address to the officers that the anonymous author did not understand the importance of "moderation and forbearance."⁶² The question then arises how did Washington utilize his moderate nature in order to save the army from a mistake that would have forever sullied the Continental Army.

The soldiers at Newburgh were extremely tense and angry with Congress for neglecting to follow through with the promise of the 1781 impost. They had gotten to the point where extra legal action was the only logical next step. Many of the men looked toward Washington to lead them in this endeavor, and were angry when he did not. Looking at the character of Washington, it is unsurprising that he would not lead such a mutiny. These extreme actions went past the point of no return. He believed in Congress and its ability to aid the soldiers. Washington took control of the situation by calling his own meeting that was on his own terms. This thus allowed the men to formally address their concerns, but in a way that was organized and nonviolent. This truly was a testament to Washington's moderation because he did not silence his men completely, but instead gave them a place calmly to state their problems.

Lastly, Washington also had to play the role of a soldier. Although he was the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, Washington identified with the common soldier. This was a crucial role because his men could not view him as a distant dictator. If that were the case, then they would not have been as loyal to him, and his efforts to appease them would have been for naught. Washington established a close relationship with the army by being one with the soldiers. One sees the strength of this bond when some of the men cried as Washington declared that he had gone gray and blind in service to them. He was not just their commander, but instead

⁶² George Washington to the Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783. *The Writings of George Washington*, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia.

so much more. He was a mentor, a friend, and a trusted confidant who always had their interests at heart. He suffered with his men continually. For example, he stayed in the camp every winter instead of going back to his home at Mt. Vernon because he did not feel that it was right for them to bear the elements while he did not. Washington truly balanced his roles as a commander and a fellow soldier, which endeared him to his men and helped him save the Republic.

Few men have existed in history who were as great a leader as George Washington. Facing a mutiny in the spring of 1783, Washington maintained control while not alienating himself from both Congress and the army. He did so by playing many roles throughout these tense months. He was indeed a strong individual who was not swayed to act irrationally. Instead, he persevered using his best judgment. Although the army did not get the funds that it had wanted, he did however keep it from making a mistake that could have changed the course of history. Yes, the financial situation was dire in 1783 because of Congress' inability to raise funds, but Washington did not allow that fact to destroy all that he and the army had worked for. Washington did, in fact, make a choice that changed history, and it was a choice that allowed for the United States of America to prosper into what it would become today.

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