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Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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General Washington's Newburgh Address

By Gleaves Whitney

The Ides of March in 1783. Washington had to keep his army from marching against Congress. The officers were understandably upset that Congress had not given them back pay for their many years of service to their country. They had willingly left their families and farms to aid the cause of freedom, and they simply wanted to be able to pay off their debts. As frustration mounted, someone high up the chain of command circulated a memo through the officer corps, urging insurrection. The malcontents planned a secret meeting.

Washington caught wind of the caucus and intervened swiftly. He denounced the treasonous plot and postponed the gathering by three days. This gave him critically needed time to think about how to give perhaps the most important speech of his life.

Now Washington, as you know, was crafty. He kept his own counsel and didn't alert the officers that he would be confronting them personally. So when they met on March 15th, they assumed their commander-in-chief would exert his authority through a surrogate. In this, they miscalculated badly. Remember, Washington had a keen sense of drama. All his adult life he had been a devotee of the theater.

Imagine the officers' surprise when, in the middle of their meeting, their commander strode in and made straight for the lectern. There was a tense silence. The General spoke from a prepared text for approximately five minutes. The remarks were built around a series of parallel constructions that emphasized the men's common sacrifice. They had become like family, and he only wanted what was just and right for them. But they must not be imprudent or disloyal, not after having gone through so much together, and not when so much was at stake. The men were moved by his appeals -- in fact, it was the most powerful speech they had ever heard him deliver.

But all this, powerful as it was, was just contrived to set the stage for the final act. After Washington finished his prepared remarks, he removed a letter from his coat pocket that he said he wished to read aloud. He began to read, then all of a sudden fell silent. Not a word came from his mouth as he fumbled awkwardly with the letter. Then he pulled a new pair of eyeglasses out of his pocket and remarked, "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind."

The high drama had its intended impact. The men stood in stunned silence. The gesture and words did more than any armed force could have to dissolve the insurrection, for it dissolved the rebellion in their hearts. As one officer later recorded, Washington's action was so disarming that it brought tears to the eyes of every man present. They suddenly felt inexpressible shame mixed with a renewed love for their leader. They pledged their abiding support to Washington and to the new republic.



Gleaves Whitney

Hauenstein Center Director Gleaves Whitney addressed the Grand Forum on February 3, 2004, at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum. The above text is excerpted from his talk.