

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITING  
FACTORS OF WASHINGTON'S STRATEGY

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Military History

by

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## ABSTRACT

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITING FACTORS OF WASHINGTON'S STRATEGY, by Douglas D. Jones, 131 pages.

During the American Revolution, as the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, George Washington was responsible for determining the military strategy of the rebellious colonies. Throughout the war, diplomatic, social, and economic factors prevented Washington and his subordinate commanders from developing a strategy that allowed militia soldiers to fight in the same formations as soldiers of the Continental Army.

During the conflict, the Continental Congress took measures to maintain control of the Continental Army, which hampered Washington's ability to plan and execute military strategy. Although recruiting problems, training challenges, and complications with the command structure limited Washington's ability to form strategy and employ the Continental Army, by 1778, Washington and his subordinate commanders successfully developed a professional force that was capable of fighting against the British Army. Despite the militia's lack of discipline, inconsistent regulations and limited training, over time, Washington cleverly used the militia in specific roles to enhance his strategy. Once Washington understood how diplomatic, social, and economic factors restricted his strategy, he combined the military capabilities of the Continental Army in a complimentary manner with the strengths of the militia which enabled the rebellious Americans, with the support of European allies, to defeat the British.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well digested plan is requisite.<sup>1</sup>

George Washington

The American Revolution, which occurred from 1775 to 1783, pitted the nascent American military against Great Britain, the premier military power of the last half of the eighteenth century. Great Britain possessed almost all conceivable advantages in its effort to defeat America. Great Britain had a well-established government to direct the strategy politically, an adequate economy to support the war strategy financially, and a well trained and long established army and navy to execute the war strategy militarily. George Washington and his Continental Army lacked the support of a national diplomatic power, the financial support of a strong economy, and the advantage of a professional army and navy. Still, the United States, with the help of allies, defeated the British Empire. Clearly, Washington's employment of the Continental Army was essential in defeating Great Britain. Considered individually, the military effects of the Continental Army and the militia were wholly inadequate. Yet, the combination of these components aided by allied support acted against the British forces ultimately to win independence for the new country.

Diplomatic, social, and economic factors prevented George Washington and his subordinate commanders from developing a strategy to prosecute the military portion of the Revolutionary War with a deliberate and systematic plan for the deployment of the Continental Army in a unified effort with the militia. Although lacking a planned and

deliberate strategy to unify the efforts of the Continental Army with the militia, the United States won the American Revolution by defeating General Cornwallis's military at Yorktown in 1781. Both of the American military components, the Continental Army and the militia organization played key roles in ensuring victory.

Although the winner of the war is unquestionable, many questions still exist about the military strategy that the American generals used to achieve that victory. Some people may believe investigating the military strategy and the events that led to the development of that strategy in a war that occurred over 200 years ago is trivial. Nevertheless, understanding the strategy and the reasons Washington and his subordinate commanders developed the strategy they did are important to today's military. Washington, himself, made this point clear in his first annual address to Congress on 8 January 1790: "To be prepared for War is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace."<sup>2</sup> Successful preparation for any war must include understanding the strategy of past wars and the factors that influenced leaders to adopt a specific strategy.

Washington had to consider many difficulties, including diplomatic, social, and economic, factors, as he developed his military strategy. Before analyzing the military strategy of Washington and his subordinate commanders, it is necessary to examine the many challenges they faced. It is essential to know Washington's military background, especially his experience in the French and Indian War. In addition, it is important to understand the relationship Washington had with Congress. Considerations must also include the difficulties of establishing a respectable Continental Army that would influence much needed allied support. It is also essential to understand the capabilities and composition of the militia forces. Finally, it is necessary to analyze key battles that

occurred in the war to evaluate the strategy Washington and his subordinate commanders employed, and to determine how these battles influenced the development of strategy. By understanding these factors, it is possible to examine why Washington did not effectively adopt a military strategy that included a deliberate and systematic plan to unite the Continental Army alongside the militia.

In the past, many scholars have published works on George Washington. Most of these look at Washington's leadership abilities and his character and some even address Washington's role as a strategist. Nevertheless, the literature largely fails to interpret or assess Washington's strategic performance within the context of the times and the circumstances he faced.<sup>3</sup> Although Washington is generally accepted as conceptualizing the strategy that won the War for Independence, little is written on how Washington's strategy prosecuted the military portion of the Revolutionary War by deliberately and systematically planning for the deployment of the militia alongside the Continental Army. Likewise, scholars have not studied the diplomatic, social, and economic factors that influenced the military strategy adopted by Washington with the same level of effort as they have studied his leadership and character.

Although there are numerous secondary sources that discuss the Revolutionary War period, the bicentennial of the war brought about renewed interest by both scholars and the public. As a result, Don Higginbotham, a Dowd Professor of American History at the University of North Carolina, published *The War on American Independence*. In the preface, Higginbotham declares, "It is more an effort to examine military policy and attitudes toward war than it is an exercise in battles and campaigns."<sup>4</sup> According to *The American Historical Review*, *The War on American Independence* is a scholarly book

that uses complex and disparate factors to study how the military aspects between 1763 and 1789 set the course and outcome of the war.<sup>5</sup> This is one of few secondary sources that concentrate on studying how military attitudes, policies, and practices throughout the pre-war and war period interacted with society. Although the scope of Higginbotham's book makes it a leading secondary source, many other secondary sources, which are not as focused, give scholarly input to what factors influenced the development of the military strategy Washington and his subordinate commanders used and how effective that strategy was in winning the war.

Besides the numerous secondary sources that discuss the American Revolutionary War, several excellent primary sources are available. Many of Washington's own letters, speeches, and quotes have been published in a variety of sources. Many of Washington's correspondences are readily available through the internet at The Library of Congress. In addition to the historical collections of Washington, documents, letters, and speeches from other military and political leaders of the period also assisted in determining the validity of secondary sources.

By understanding the diplomatic, social, and economic difficulties that challenged Washington and his subordinates it is possible to understand why they developed a strategy that allowed the Continental Army and militia to fight as separate forces during the war. The examination of these challenges start with a review of the family background and experiences of Washington, especially his military experiences in the French and Indian War. Understanding the military background of Washington is instrumental in understanding the circumstances that structured Washington's strategy for prosecuting the war.

It is also necessary to address Washington's relationship with the Continental Congress. Washington understood his appointment as Commander in Chief was under the legal authority of the Second Continental Congress and he worked to develop a close relationship with the Congress throughout the war. Congress was responsible for appointing Washington's subordinates, supplying the army, manning the army, and on occasion, directing the military actions of Washington. Congress also dealt with issues regarding the state-controlled militia, allowing Washington to focus on commanding the Continental Army. Washington's relationship with Congress brought into focus diplomatic, social, and economic factors that significantly influenced the strategy Washington and his subordinates would develop.

The problems associated with creating, training, and employing the Continental Army, also played an essential role in the development of Washington's military strategy. Washington believed to win the war he would have to build a professional army. The Continental Army was his only answer. Lacking personnel, supplies, and discipline, Washington struggled to make his army a professional outfit that could be considered legitimate in the eyes of the British as well as potential allies. Insufficient in number, inadequately equipped, and poorly trained, the Continental Army was often incapable of living up to Washington's expectations. Despite these numerous challenges, Washington and his subordinate generals gradually developed a professional army that was capable of fighting against the British Army.

Another important aspect to consider is the militia. Both the laws governing the use of the militia and the capabilities of the militia played a part in determining what strategy Washington and his commanders could use. Often the militia was not legally

bound to fight in the places they were most needed. At times, the militia forces conducted conventional operations, conducted patrols to maintain internal security, guarded key locations, collected intelligence and often increased morale of the Americans while contributing to the factors that diminished the morale of the British forces. Despite these specific roles which the militia performed well, a lack of discipline, disparity in regulations, and inconsistent training prohibited Washington from employing the militia in the same manner as the Continental Army. Washington eventually realized the weaknesses of the militia put his plans at grave risk. Because of the weaknesses within the militia organization, Washington and his subordinate commanders developed a strategy that did not completely integrate the militia into the conventional efforts of the Continental Army.

Finally, a study of key battles of the revolution, including Lexington and Concord in 1775, the New York campaign of 1776, and the Saratoga campaign of 1777 will be analyzed to show how the circumstances that Washington and his subordinates faced affected the strategy they developed to fight the war. Washington learned from these initial battles to apply a flexible strategy that eventually considered the effects of the diplomatic, social, and economic factors that mitigated his ability to employ American forces against British forces.

Explaining the diplomatic, social, and economic circumstances that added to the difficulties that Washington and his subordinates faced during the revolution reveal why Washington and his subordinate commanders did not develop a strategy that completely integrated the Continental Army with the militia. The final discussion will suggest why understanding the strategy Washington and his subordinate commanders developed to

win the Revolutionary War over 200 years ago is important to today's military environment.

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<sup>1</sup>Washington to Congress, 8 January 1789, The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1745-1799 [document online]; available from <http://www.memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammemmgw> Internet; accessed 4 December 2005. Hereafter cited as Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel B. Baker, *Power Quotes* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1992), 320.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas M. Huber, ed., *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, August 2002), 56.

<sup>4</sup>Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1971), ix.

<sup>5</sup>William B. Wilcox, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 78 (Washington, DC: The American Historical Association, 1973), 478-480.

## CHAPTER 2

### WASHINGTON'S BACKGROUND

The real way to get value out of the study of military history is to take particular situations, and as far as possible get inside the skin of the man who made a decision and then see in what way you could have improved on it.<sup>1</sup>

Field Marshall Archibald Percival Wavell, First Earl

On 26 December 1799, in an eulogy to Washington, General Henry Lee, a cavalry officer during the American Revolution, constructed the phrase, "To the memory of the Man, first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."<sup>2</sup> The now famous phrase accurately reflected the emotions of the nation as it mourned the death of Washington. To this very day, American teachers instruct young children in history class that George Washington is "the father of their country." The famous phrases and mythical stories invented by earlier biographers such as the "Father, I cannot tell a lie" story created a god-like image of Washington. Mason Weems, a biographer of Washington, wrote the "Father, I cannot tell a lie" story based on information from a distant relative. The famous story depicts a young Washington having the moral courage to admit to his father that he had chopped down a prized cherry tree, even though his angry father had no idea who had committed the offense. The audiences of the time greatly approved of the story. This kind of work promoted a greater than life image of Washington with a romanticism of moral values but it was not based on fact or historical evidence. Although the earlier biographies of Washington were sometimes flawed as historical literature, they were important and relevant works in terms of understanding the cultural and political climate of early nineteenth-century America.

Unfortunately, the depiction of Washington in the image of a man that was not human and without flaws skews his image, making it difficult to understand his true character. The fact is that Washington was human, and understanding those human characteristics is important in analyzing the factors that influenced how, as the commander of the Continental Army, he would develop his strategy for militarily conducting the Revolutionary War. Gaining a true understanding of Washington is made more difficult because over the years many literary works did not want to challenge the reputation of one of the most admired figures in American history. Like any human, his family background, ambitions, and lifetime experiences coalesced to form Washington and his thought processes. Although insecure as a young adult, Washington learned from his early experiences and matured into a leader in the colony of Virginia. Throughout his life, Washington never lost his natural attraction to the cultural and institutional patterns of Britain, even though events would eventually force Washington to criticize the British imperial practices and policies.<sup>3</sup> A recent biographer of Washington, John E. Ferling, states “Washington who began his amazing ascent by carefully identifying with the habits and styles of the elite--and generally British--role models never abandoned the practice.”<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand Washington, and how his beliefs and experiences would play a role in his strategy as the commander of the Continental Army, it is best to start with his family background. There are notable parallels between the four generations of Washingtons that arrived in Virginia starting in 1656.<sup>5</sup> All tried to use the benefit of education, hard work, and social networking, including advantageous marriages, to improve their social standings. However, the struggles of George’s great grandfather, John, grandfather, Lawrence, and father, Augustine, may not have been necessary if it

were not for the English Civil War. John Washington arrived in Virginia only after he was unable to gain admittance into Oxford as his father, Lawrence, had. According to Martin Quitt, a specialist on Virginia's colonial period, "What we know about Lawrence Washington's career at Oxford reveals a man who was methodical and steady in navigating his way up a hierarchal organization."<sup>6</sup> Lawrence's advancements on the Oxford staff and his ability to ensure his son John would receive an Oxford education were cut short by his defense of the King of England who lost his sovereignty to a revolutionary regime. This meant that John, George Washington's great grandfather, would not enter adulthood with a clear understanding of his position in society or his occupation.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the expansionist mood and policies of Cromwellian England, one of the best occupations for a youth without a clear future to pursue during the 1650's was overseas trade.<sup>8</sup> Like many other mid-century immigrants, John pursued oceanic commerce in Virginia with no intention of settling in the colony. However, on his first trip, John was fortunate to find a patron in Nathaniel Pope, one of the most prominent merchant-planters in the Northern Neck and a wife in Ann Pope, Nathaniel's daughter.<sup>9</sup> The increased social networking and advantageous marriage set the conditions for John to remain in Virginia and begin what would be the first of three generations of George's ancestors to become successful planters, hold county offices, and serve as members of Virginia's House of Burgesses. Like John, Lawrence and Augustine died at a relatively early age before they could make the leap from gentry to aristocracy. However, each man worked hard toward advancing their hierarchal place in society and did so as a leader in the Virginia colony.

George knew his family history and proudly displayed the Washington coat of arms. With that history came ambition to better his standing in society and the knowledge that to do so would require an English education and successful relationships among the social elite. Although many people have a god-like image of a flawless George Washington, a look at his ancestry reveals he was possessed with an all too common drive for acceptance and social position.

After reviewing Washington's ancestry, the next step in assessing the strategic decisions Washington made during the Revolutionary War is to understand his life experiences, especially his military experiences and training. His experiences as Governor Robert Dinwiddie's emissary to the French, who were violating the territory of the Ohio Valley, as a military volunteer to General Braddock, and as a commanding officer of the Virginia frontier during the French and Indian War, allowed Washington to gain intercolonial recognition as a hero. All of these experiences played an important role in the formulation of the strategy Washington would use to win the war.

Washington was born into Virginia's landowner class. This group of Virginians held all the political power in the colony. The landowners imitated the manners, lifestyles, and social customs of English aristocrats. Throughout his life, Washington would continue to imitate these customs. On the social ladder, Washington's father was considered to be at the bottom-rung among the landowners. Washington's father had little land and only a few slaves, which gave Augustine little power or influence in society.

Washington's own ambitions to become more powerful and wealthier seemed to hinge on his ability to get an education in England with the rest of the English gentry. At the age of eleven, Washington's father died preventing George from pursuing an

education in England. Instead, Washington being the oldest child still at home began helping his mother manage the Rappahannock River plantation where he lived. Unlike the sons of most Virginian gentlemen, George never learned Latin or Greek. As Quitt assesses, “George inherited his family’s drive and ambition, but he may also have drawn his obvious insecurity as a young man from his family history and his inability, unlike Lawrence [his half-brother] and their male ancestors, to obtain an education in England.”<sup>10</sup> The opportunities for Washington to follow his ambition and reach the life style of the aristocracy were damaged by the lack of his education. Many scholars have pointed to Washington’s family background and his failure to obtain a proper education as the source of admittedly aggressive qualities in the young man.

With the responsibilities of taking care of his mother and unable to travel to England to receive an education, Washington turned to his older half-brother, Lawrence, who became his idol. Lawrence was George’s half-brother because Lawrence’s mother died and Augustine married Mary Ball who gave birth to George. As his idol and mentor, Lawrence, already considered a Virginian gentlemen, made up for Washington’s educational deficiencies by immersing him in that coveted life style. Lawrence had the same ambitions to improve his social status and had already received an English education. In the early 1740s, Lawrence served as a British Army officer in the Cartagena campaign against Spain and married into the Fairfax family who were part of the social elite, owning over five million acres in Northern Virginia. In addition, he was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses. Lawrence’s marriage to Anne Fairfax, the daughter of the powerful Fairfax family, not only improved his status, but also proved essential to Washington’s political and military ambitions. As Washington’s mentor, Lawrence

supervised his half- brother's entry into colonial high society and introduced him to the influential Fairfax family. Besides Washington's ability to mingle with the influential and powerful Virginians, which gave the young boy a chance to learn proper English etiquette, it gave him the opportunity to borrow books from their libraries to improve his education.<sup>11</sup>

In 1752, Lawrence died of tuberculosis. Before dying at the age of thirty-four, Lawrence had climbed to a higher social status than other Washingtons had ever reached. Under the terms of his will, George inherited the estate of Mount Vernon, in Fairfax County. More importantly, at the time of his death Lawrence was the adjutant for the colony of Virginia's militia. Washington had always admired his older half-brother and was enthralled by Lawrence's adventures in the British Army. Washington had also been enticed by his half-brother to seek a commission in the British Army. At twenty years of age, Washington skillfully worked with the required social circles in the colonial government, using his connection to the Fairfax family, to replace his half-brother as the adjutant. In his book, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, James Flexner points out that Washington knew the procedures for obtaining a commission and, "Thus following the mores of an aristocratic world, he secured, at the age of twenty, the title of major and the responsibility of training militia in skills he did not himself possess."<sup>12</sup> The appointment to adjutant of the southern militia district of Virginia gave Washington his first experience in inspecting, mustering, and training a militia unit in a region distant from his own home.<sup>13</sup>

In 1753, reports indicated the French military seized control of a tract of land beyond the Allegheny Mountains that was believed to be within the chartered limits of

the colony of Virginia. Upon receipt of the information, the British government sent orders to Governor Dinwiddie to demand an immediate withdrawal. Dinwiddie solicited volunteers to carry a message to the French, warning them they were trespassing on British land. With an ambition to secure a Royal preference for a commission in the regular British Army, Washington promptly volunteered. Washington stated in his *Journal to the Ohio, 1753*, “I was commissioned and appointed by the Honourable Robert Dinwiddie, Esq; Governor, & c., of Virginia, to visit and deliver a letter to the Commandant of the French forces on the Ohio, and set out on the intended Journey the same day.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the French refused to leave the area, Washington successfully delivered Dinwiddie’s message. During the difficult winter mission, which covered over 1,000 miles in less than three months, Washington gained intelligence on the locations of French outposts. He also noted key terrain, especially the importance of where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers joined to form the Ohio River at present day Pittsburgh. This location offered great commercial potential to both the French and British. The journal Washington kept on the mission was superb. It contained the locations, strengths, and size of French forts in the area. In addition, during the mission, Washington also gained the trust of several Indian tribes.<sup>15</sup>

Upon his return, Washington’s journal was published in both Williamsburg and London establishing a good reputation for Washington before he reached the age of twenty-two. Dinwiddie agreed with Washington’s assessment of the strategic importance of the location where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers forked into the Ohio River and promptly sent a small force to erect a fort at the unoccupied position.

Shortly after arriving at the site, the small force sent back word to the governor that a French invasion was imminent. Dinwiddie ordered Washington's regiment to reinforce the fort as soon as possible. However, Washington could not use his militia, because they could not be forced to serve outside of their home districts. This was the first of many times Washington would be frustrated in an attempt to use the militia during his military career. To fill the gap left by the unwilling militia, Governor Dinwiddie ordered the establishment of the Virginia Regiment. Washington was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel and placed as the second-ranking officer below Colonel Joshua Fry.<sup>16</sup> Washington began recruiting and training volunteers to accomplish the mission. Washington also had to find the uniforms, equipment, and supplies the force would need to be successful. The government of Virginia did not properly back his efforts. Colonel Dupuy in his book, *The Military Life of George Washington*, points out other faults, "His most serious deficiency was a lack of seasoned and experienced noncommissioned officers to assist him in drilling, training, and disciplining of his soldiers."<sup>17</sup> The problems incurred with attempting to use the militia, and recruiting, training, and equipping additional forces would reoccur throughout Washington's military career. This early experience started to form Washington's beliefs in the lack of effectiveness of the militia and reinforced his convictions on the need for a professional army.

In April 1754, Washington set out with an advanced party to reinforce the Ohio fork with 150 soldiers from the Virginia Regiment. The main body, which was planned to reinforce Washington's advance party, would never arrive due to the death of its commander, Colonel Fry. Upon the death of Fry, Washington was promoted to the rank of Colonel.<sup>18</sup> While moving toward the Ohio fork, Washington and his forces

encountered the garrison force they were to reinforce. The garrison force told Washington that the French had taken the fort, built it up with reinforcements, and named it Fort Duquesne.<sup>19</sup> Despite being outnumbered, the aggressive Washington decided to continue toward his objective. In order to recapture the garrison, Washington established Fort Necessity, a small fortification near Great Meadows, Pennsylvania.

While preparing the fort, an Indian chief, Half-King, whom Washington had befriended during his first mission to the area, warned the commander of an approaching French force. Washington quickly set an ambush and defeated the French force in a short battle. Historian Douglas Freeman characterized Washington's first combat action as a success stating, "The surprise had been complete; George's first skirmish had achieved the ideal of a soldier, the destruction of the adversary as a fighting force."<sup>20</sup> During the battle, Joseph Coloun de Jumonville, the leader of the French unit, was killed.

The French immediately sent out a larger force to find Washington and his garrison at Fort Necessity. The ground on which Washington established Fort Necessity showed the commander's lack of tactical experience. Three sides of the fort were surrounded by densely vegetated high ground. Making matters worse, the fort's shallow trenches offered little protection to Washington's men. Adding to the problems, rain filled the trenches and ruined the gunpowder.

On 3 July 1754, the French, with support from some Iroquois Indians, successfully attacked Fort Necessity. Placed in a bad location, with too few men and lacking arms and ammunition, Washington quickly surrendered to the French forces. After the surrender document had been translated for Washington, he believed it did not contain any offensive statements and agreed to its terms. The terms allowed Washington

and his unit to return to Virginia, after Washington had turned over his papers and journals. Unfortunately, the actual translation contained the phrase “assassination of de Jumonville” implying Washington had killed the leader dishonorably. Despite being branded an assassin by the French, the people of Virginia recognized Washington as a hero for his determination and bravery in directing his small force against the French.<sup>21</sup> When the Virginia Regiment disbanded before the end of 1754, Washington resigned instead of suffering the humiliation of accepting a lesser rank.<sup>22</sup> In his first combat incident, Washington experienced the excitement of victory, the humiliation of defeat, and the importance of establishing a garrison on defensible terrain.

Washington resigned as a colonel at the age of twenty-two. Militarily, he learned some of the legal rules that would prevent him from deploying the militia despite what he believed were legitimate requirements. Although aggressive by nature, he proved that he understood the importance of surviving to fight another day. Administratively, he learned the difficulties in recruiting, training, and equipping a new force. Politically, he learned the fact that the government may give a commander a mission but not the people, resources, or money to assist in accomplishing that mission. Besides the ability to learn these valuable lessons at an early age, Washington’s actions started to form his reputation as a local hero. Some of his insecurities as a young man were evidenced by the quick resignation when asked to return to the rank of lieutenant colonel, which for his experience and age was a fair request. Washington learned through his first combat experiences lessons that would influence his beliefs and strategies throughout the Revolutionary War.

Although the battle at Fort Necessity started Washington's military reputation, the specific event that occurred during the French and Indian War for which he is best remembered is his bravery during the defeat of British General Edward Braddock's army near the Monongahela River on 9 July 1755.<sup>23</sup> That year, Great Britain tasked Braddock to raise the forces necessary to remove the French forces from Fort Duquesne. Braddock arrived in Virginia in March of 1755. Washington still desired a royal commission and knew Braddock had the authority to grant the request. Washington volunteered his services to Braddock as an unpaid aide. In a letter to William Byrd on 25 May 1755 Washington wrote, "I am now preparing for, and shall in a few days set off to serve in the ensuing campaign. . . . [F]or here, if I am to gain any credit, or if I am entitled to the least countenance or esteem, it must be from serving my country without fee or reward."<sup>24</sup> Washington wanted to serve Braddock in a manner that would enhance his military career and enable him to gain more "knowledge of the military arts."<sup>25</sup> Washington had trained and disciplined his own provincials using the guidelines he read in British Army manuals. He viewed this as a great opportunity to develop his knowledge of the British Army under the mentorship of Braddock, whom Washington greatly admired.

In June of 1755, Braddock's army started toward Fort Duquesne with over 2,200 soldiers, which included a mixture of British regulars and provincial recruits. Washington's past knowledge of the area and experiences with recruiting, training, and equipping militia and provincials was very beneficial to Braddock enabling Washington to gain quickly the confidence of the general.<sup>26</sup>

The movement to Fort Duquesne was slow and methodical. Shortly after crossing the Monongahela River, French and Indian forces attacked the British advance guard,

which included both Braddock and Washington. The attackers lined the sides of the trail and used the cover provided by the woods to decimate the British. The British army panicked. As James Flexner points out, “The British regulars were entirely untrained in fighting out of formation, as individual men. Braddock indignantly denied Washington’s request to be allowed to lead the provincial troops into the woods and engage the enemy in their own way.”<sup>27</sup> Despite his admiration for the British ways of fighting, Washington understood the need for an enemy to fight out of formation, using the advantage of cover and concealment.

Braddock and Washington tried to control the actions of their army despite the intense battle. Soon, Braddock was mortally wounded and the British forces began running to the rear. Using the cover provided by the three provincial companies that had not panicked but remained to fight, Washington assisted in loading Braddock into a cart. Then Washington traveled throughout the night and next morning to reach the rear guard and supply train with instructions to move provisions, medical supplies, and wagons forward quickly.<sup>28</sup> Washington later praised the efforts of the provincials, while noting the cowardice of the British regulars. In a letter to his brother dated 18 July 1755, Washington described the action, “But, by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability and expectations; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, altho’ death was leveling my companions on every side of me!”<sup>29</sup>

Braddock’s campaign gave Washington the opportunity to further his battlefield experiences and to witness the daily activities of the British Army. Washington captured the army’s daily general orders in a small notebook for use in his own professional

development. Despite the decimation of the British forces, Washington avoided criticizing Braddock and confined his negative comments to the behavior of the enlisted men. These facts revealed that in 1755 Washington still had enormous respect for the British Army and still thirsted for a royal commission.<sup>30</sup> Because of his admiration for Braddock and his army, Washington was focused on them. He never considered the strategy of combining the effects of the provincial and the British regulars. The focus of his notes during his time as Braddock's aide was on administrative details. Even though Washington requested permission to lead the provincial forces, there was no thought of a unity of effort or a truly combined fight. Washington's view on the importance of a professional army without consideration of a combined effort, using both British regulars and provincials, prevented Washington from looking at the combined forces as a unified army. Instead, Washington looked at them as separate forces, one better than the other. Washington's view of the British regulars as being separate and better than the provincials would carry over to a view of a professional Continental Army being a separate and better force than the militia.

After Braddock's defeat, the British withdrew their forces to Philadelphia. This made it clear to the leaders of Virginia that they must defend themselves. In order to do so, Dinwiddie reconstituted the Virginia Regiment and Washington agreed to serve as its commander with the rank of colonel.

From 1755 until 1758, Washington worked diligently to make the Virginia Regiment a professional organization. He strived to impart a sense of fairness to all of his men. Washington's first surviving written address to his officers covered his views on discipline and justice.

I think it my duty, Gentlemen, as I have the Honour to preside over you, to give this friendly admonition; especially as I am determined, as far as my small experience in Service; my abilities, and interest of the Service, dictate; to observe the strictest discipline through the whole economy of my Behaviour. On the other hand; you may as certainly depend upon having the strictest justice administered to all: and that I shall make it the most agreeable part of my duty, to study merit, and reward the brave, and deserving. I assure you, Gentlemen, that partiality shall never bias my conduct; nor shall prejudice injure any.<sup>31</sup>

Washington's subordinates agreed that Washington was true to his word, which gained the respect of his men.

Besides fairness, Washington believed in the importance of discipline. In his general orders written on 29 July 1757 he wrote, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all."<sup>32</sup> Washington used his time as the commander in charge of all of Virginia's militia to continue to form his beliefs on the importance of a professional army. During this time, Washington's goal was to establish an army that did not fit the British depiction of colonial soldiers. The British viewed the colonials with disdain due to their messy hair, carelessly slung weapons, and formations that were both out of step and out of line. According to Higginbotham, "Washington was consciously endeavoring to transform the Virginians into a force that would be more equal to a British army regiment that any ever raised in English America."<sup>33</sup>

The years from 1755 to 1757 were dismal for Washington's small command and for British-American fortunes everywhere.<sup>34</sup> While the British lost Oswego on Lake Ontario and Fort William Henry in New York, Washington continued to struggle to recruit, train, and equip his forces. It was during this time that Washington advanced his goal of obtaining a royal commission to include the desire that for the good of his command, the recognition should go to the entire Virginia Regiment. Washington tried to

use his half-brother's unit in the battle of Cartagena as a precedent in which the British generals could use to grant his unit preferred status.

Washington believed this preferment would enhance his command because, on two separate occasions, British captains in charge of small units operating within Washington's theater of operations had refused to obey his orders because Washington only had a Virginia commission. By British law, any officer commissioned by the British would have jurisdiction over any provincial commission regardless of the rank. Washington was irate that a lower ranking officer would not follow his orders.<sup>35</sup>

In 1756, at a post on the Maryland side of the Potomac River that was administered jointly by Virginia and Maryland, Washington was so infuriated by an incident involving a captain in the Maryland militia, claiming to hold a British regular commission and refusing to acquiesce to Washington's authority, that he journeyed all the way to Boston to plead the case to General William Shirley for having his regiment placed on the royal establishment. At the time, Shirley was the Commander in Charge of the British Army in the colonies. Washington had with him a petition signed by his officers stating they should not be treated as inferiors to British officers of lower or similar rank. Furthermore, it stated the Virginians shared equal duty with the British regulars in both the duties and dangers of wartime assignments. Shirley believed he lacked the authority to grant such a request but he did iron out the dispute in Washington's favor.<sup>36</sup>

In 1757, Washington made his last attempt to secure a royal commission for himself and place his regiment on the establishment. This time Washington made a lengthy trip to Philadelphia to plead his case to Shirley's successor, John Loudoun,

Fourth Earl of Campbell, who at the time was the Commander in Chief of the British Army in the colonies. During his interview, Washington presented a similar petition from his officers only it was more detailed than the original presented to Shirley. Although the request was denied, it is significant to note the beliefs of the provincials under the command of Washington. Some of the officers had served the Virginia Regiment since it was established in 1754. They had completed three years of combat service. Referring to the British regulars, the petition noted to the fact that the Virginia Regiment never recessed in winter like the British Army. Referring to the militia, the petition painstakingly pleaded the case that the Virginians were not part-time soldiers but professional soldiers that had been regularly trained and regimented for three years of service in His Majesty's Service.<sup>37</sup> Washington had successfully built an army that believed itself to be a professional force equal to any British force.

Never being able to obtain a royal commission was a defeat to Washington. Making matters worse, his goal of securing the strategic area where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers forked into the Ohio River was still not in sight. However, in 1758 the opportunity to defeat the French at Fort Duquesne appeared. William Pitt, the First Earl of Chatham, the new Secretary of State and leader of the Commons, decided to conduct a three-pronged offensive against Duquesne, Quebec, and Louisbourg. Brigadier General John Forbes was in command of the British Army of regulars and provincials that had the mission to take Fort Duquesne. Washington successfully lobbied his capabilities and Forbes appointed Washington as the only provincial to head a forward division during the attack. During the movement, Washington commanded not only the Virginian unit, but also units from North Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware. When the

French recognized they were greatly outnumbered, they burned the fort and withdrew prior to the arrival of Forbes' scouting parties. Although there was no decisive battle, for Washington it had been the largest army in which he had served. Washington was once again able to learn and experience the daily activities of a professional army. Forbes was known for his administrative skills and his expertise in building and maintaining an army.<sup>38</sup> Focusing on improving his administrative skills, Washington studied Forbes with the same vigor he had studied Braddock. Although the experience would aid Washington as he would lead the Continental Army, once again he had not considered the advantage of operating the British regulars and colonials as one force but thought of them as two separate entities.

With Fort Duquesne finally in control of the Virginia colony, marriage calling, and a seat in the House of Burgesses awaiting him, Washington resigned his commission in the service of Virginia in 1758.<sup>39</sup> While Washington's men regretted to see their leader depart, there were some Englishmen and Virginians who did not feel any regret at the loss of Washington's service. On several occasions, during his commission Washington had made it clear to his superiors, both civilian and military, that he had little sympathy or understanding for their problems. He was quick to blame others for any obstacle that prevented his success and he became exceedingly political in his behavior.<sup>40</sup>

Although Washington was once close to Governor Dinwiddie, Washington's actions hurt their relationship. Believing that Dinwiddie was not supporting his efforts, Washington circumvented the governor and sent letters to leaders of the General Assembly critical of Dinwiddie. In a letter to the Speaker of the House, John Robinson, on 19 December 1756, Washington asserted that Dinwiddie, who had boosted the

colonel's career at every opportunity, wanted to discredit him. "My Orders are dark, doubtful, and uncertain; *to day approved, to-morrow condemned*: Left to act and proceed at hazard: accountable for the consequences; and blamed, without the Benefit of defense!"<sup>41</sup> It can be argued Washington's letters were necessary because war-making authority was divided in colonial Virginia and unlike the militia, Washington's Virginia Regiment had no political constituency. This forced Washington to lobby to a wide variety of leaders to gain the support his command required. However, the tone and disparaging remarks Washington chose to use about his superiors were excessive and lacked diplomacy.

Washington also sent letters criticizing his political leaders to the British Army leadership accusing the colonial politicians of being too cautious and lacking a military situational awareness. In 1757, Washington complained in a letter to Loudoun about the dearth of knowledge his political master in Williamsburg possessed. He also aired his grievances on having to travel away from his troops to explain and justify his accounts while enduring unfair remarks about his performance or the poor performance of his officers and men.<sup>42</sup> Again, some argue letters of this nature were meant to be only soldier-to-soldier and therefore were acceptable. The truth is such letters, which contained disparaging, behind the back remarks about his civil superiors, were unacceptable and had the potential to undermine his ability to get support and gain the trust of his superiors. Making matters worse, following in their leader's example, Washington's subordinates revealed their own hostility toward civilian superiors. At the time, Washington did not discourage the action, which later would be considered both politically dangerous and unethical.

At other times, Washington would air his grievances to his politicians about his problems at the expense of the British generals. When a British General, John Forbes, did not follow Washington's advice about the route the construction of a new road leading to the Ohio fork should follow, he encouraged Virginia officials to circumvent Forbes' decision and appeal straight to the king: "Let him [the king] know how grossly his Hon'r and the Publick money have been prostituted."<sup>43</sup> When finding out about Washington's remarks Forbes stated that, "his Behavior about the roads was no ways like a soldier."<sup>44</sup> Forbes, like many, understood Washington had a tendency to let his temper get out of control, but overlooked the shortcoming due to Washington's usefulness.

From the civil-military perspective, the letters and disparaging remarks Washington made as a young man were unacceptable for someone in his position. Nevertheless, as Forbes' comments suggest, Washington was merely revealing signs of insecurity. At the time, Washington was only in his mid-twenties, and he was quite successfully dealing with situations that resulted from his positions of great responsibility that most men would not reach in a lifetime.

From 1759 to 1774 Washington focused on improving his Mount Vernon estate. The manner in which Washington transformed his estate shows his affinity for Britain. Washington ordered seeds, cuttings, and bulbs directly from England to conform his gardens to those of English aristocracy.<sup>45</sup> Washington's admiration of the English culture would not deteriorate even though his view of its political structure would.

On 6 January 1759, Washington married a wealthy widow, Martha Dandridge Custis. The marriage increased Washington's wealth and his social status. Shortly after the wedding, Washington, who was now referred to as Colonel Washington, was elected

to the House of Burgesses. It was during this time that the ambitious Washington matured and seemed to become more secure as he became a wealthy landowner.

It was in the 1760's that Washington became alienated with British practices and policies. On top of his frustrations with the British Army for not recognizing his rank, Britain was now making it difficult for Washington to get a fair return on his tobacco in London. As a member of the House of Burgesses, Washington opposed the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Acts of 1767. The beliefs of Washington and many of the colonial leaders were revealed in a letter he wrote to George Mason on 5 April 1769. "At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that some thing should be done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors; but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question."<sup>46</sup>

By 1774, Washington was a hero in the colonies. The colonists based this reputation on Washington's journal that was published after he completed his mission of carrying Dinwiddie's warning letter to the French, and because of his courageous actions during the defeat of Braddock. Despite lacking the prerequisite English education, Washington had used the social connections afforded him by his half-brother, Lawrence, to obtain a commission in the Virginian militia and to quickly advance to the rank of Colonel. He used those same social connections to become a wealthy landowner and a member of the House of Burgesses. In addition, Washington benefited financially and enhanced his social status by marrying a wealthy, well-connected widow. Although he maintained his affinity for English culture, Washington was experiencing a growing

dissatisfaction with the policies and practices of the British King. Through his military experiences, Washington learned the restrictions on being able to deploy the militia and the difficulties in recruiting, equipping, and training a unit from scratch. Washington focused the majority of his military lessons on improving his administrative skills. He solidified his position that a professional army was the best. Washington's experiences and beliefs, up to this point in life, would play an integral role in how Washington and his subordinates would develop their strategy to employ forces during the Revolutionary War.

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<sup>1</sup>Jay Luvaas, "Thinking at the Operational Level," *Parameters* 16 (spring 1986): 4.

<sup>2</sup>John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1919), 23.

<sup>3</sup>Don Higginbotham, ed., *George Washington Reconsidered* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 150.

<sup>4</sup>John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville, TN: Lightning Source, Inc., 1989), 482.

<sup>5</sup>Higginbotham, 15.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>8</sup>Colin Jones, Malyn Newitt, and Stephen Roberts, eds., "A World Elsewhere: Aspects of the Overseas Expansionist Mood of the 1650's," in *Politics and People in Revolutionary England: Essays in Honour of Ivan Roots* (New York, NY: Blackwell Publishers, 1986), 142.

<sup>9</sup>Higginbotham, 25.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>12</sup>James T. Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York, NY: Plume Books, 1974), 9.

<sup>13</sup>Higginbotham, 43.

<sup>14</sup>Saul K. Padover, ed., *The Washington Papers* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 30.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>16</sup>Higginbotham, 43.

<sup>17</sup>COL Trevor N. Dupuy, USA, *The Military Life of George Washington: American Soldier* (New York, NY: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1969), xi.

<sup>18</sup>Higginbotham, 43.

<sup>19</sup>Flexner, 15.

<sup>20</sup>Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington*, 39 vols. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons Publishing Co., 1948), I, 373.

<sup>21</sup>Flexner, 18.

<sup>22</sup>Higginbotham, 44.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>24</sup>Padover, 60.

<sup>25</sup>Washington to Robert Orme, 15 March 1775. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>26</sup>Dupuy, xi.

<sup>27</sup>Flexner, 24.

<sup>28</sup>Higginbotham, 40.

<sup>29</sup>Padover, 61.

<sup>30</sup>Higginbotham, 45.

<sup>31</sup>Washington's General Orders, 8 January 1756. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup>Washington's General Orders, 29 July 1757. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>33</sup>Higginbotham, 48.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>41</sup>Washington to John Robinson, 19 December 1756. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>42</sup>Higginbotham, 59.

<sup>43</sup>Washington in Letter to John Robinson, 1 September 1758. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>44</sup>Higginbotham, 60.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup>Washington to George Mason, 5 April 1769. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SECOND CONTINENTAL CONGRESS: INFLUENCING MILITARY STRATEGY

I can now inform you, that the Congress have made choice of the modest and virtuous, the amiable, generous and brave George Washington, Esquire, to be General of the American army, and that he is to repair, as soon as possible, to the camp before Boston. This appointment will have a great effect in cementing and securing the union of these colonies. . . . I hope the people of our province will treat the General with all the confidence and affection, that politeness and respect, which is due to one of the most important characters in the world.<sup>1</sup>

John Adams in a letter to Abigail  
Adams on 17 June 1775

The military strategy Washington developed throughout the war, and his ability to implement the strategy he wanted to pursue, was influenced by his relationship with the Second Continental Congress. This Congress appointed Washington as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army for primarily political reasons. With thoughts of Oliver Cromwell's famous New Model Army that subjected England to martial control after defeating Charles I, and suspicions that the interests of one colony would be sacrificed in favor of the interests of another colony, the delegates were always fearful of the power a standing army would possess. These fears influenced the decisions the Second Continental Congress would make throughout the conflict.

The delegates were always distrustful of the military and desired to keep the Continental Army under its control. The desire to keep a check on Washington's powers ensured the Commander in Chief never developed military strategy in a political vacuum.<sup>2</sup> The Second Continental Congress accomplished this by maintaining the authority and responsibility to appoint the senior subordinate commanders who would

carry out Washington's strategy, to determine the size of the Continental Army, and to supply the Continental Army with rations, arms, equipment, and pay. On a few occasions, the Second Continental Congress ordered Washington to conduct conventional battles for political reasons.<sup>3</sup> By maintaining the authority for these responsibilities, Congress influenced Washington's ability to form and execute military strategy.

Before discussing Washington's relationship with the Second Continental Congress, it is important to understand the background of that political body. At the time of the American Revolution, one of the most serious weaknesses that the colonies had to overcome was the lack of a central government.<sup>4</sup> The colonies overcame this deficiency through the Continental Congress, which could only exercise the powers authorized by the colonies because the assembly remained an extralegal body until 1781 when the Articles of Confederation were ratified.<sup>5</sup> This fact meant that the many decisions made by this political body were based on the interests of each individual colony. Sectionalism and state rights played a large role in the manner in which congress conducted the war effort. This was evident by a letter from Washington to John Sullivan, who at the time had retired from the Continental Army as a Brigadier General and was representing New Hampshire as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, "If in all cases, ours was *one* Army, or *thirteen* Armies allied for the common defence, . . . but we are occasionally *both*, and I should not be much out if I was to say that we are sometimes *neither* but a compound of *both*."<sup>6</sup>

In the late spring of 1774, as protests mounted in the colonies against the Intolerable Acts, the first of many calls for an intercolonial congress started. On 5 September 1774, the First Continental Congress convened at Carpenter's Hall in

Philadelphia. The fifty-six delegates, who represented all of the colonies except Georgia, denounced the Intolerable Acts and the Quebec Acts. In addition, the delegates criticized British revenue measures since 1763 and the peacetime stationing of British soldiers in colonial towns. The Congress pledged economic sanctions and prepared addresses to the King, Parliament, and the American people.<sup>7</sup> Probably, the most important outcome of the meeting was that the extralegal body agreed to reconvene on 10 May 1775 if its grievances were not addressed. The First Continental Congress focused mostly on their constitutional positions, which the delegates hoped, would force the King to address their grievances peacefully. Although this did not work, it set the conditions to allow the delegates of the Second Continental Congress to unite on a course of military action.<sup>8</sup>

As agreed, the delegates convened the Second Continental Congress on 10 May 1775 at the State House in Philadelphia. The first item of business was a report, which indicated the King and Parliament had rejected the colonies' appeals for a redress of grievances. The second item on Congress's agenda was a report from Massachusetts that stated, besides the fact the British had started the shooting at the battle of Lexington on 19 April 1775, that the British had also conducted many barbarous acts during the fighting.<sup>9</sup> The combination of these events caused the delegates to take a stand that would force them to unite.

Although the delegates had a long tradition of local government and an ample number of experienced politicians, the thirteen colonies also had a long history of jealousy among themselves. The delegates placed their inherent jealousies to the side in order to politically unite and lead Americans' in the spirit of revolution.<sup>10</sup> Although the Congress united, the endeavor it was about to undertake was beyond the scope of any of

the delegate's experience or expertise. The fact delegates had appropriated funds for a few hundred men, supervised the construction of frontier forts, and used their political influence to appoint ranking officers in their local militia did not qualify them to raise and administer an army with an authorized strength of over 20,000 soldiers. They definitely did not have the experience to fight a large-scale war against the most powerful nation on earth.<sup>11</sup> Although rife with inter-colonial jealousy, fearful of a large standing army, and barely qualified to meet its objectives, the Second Continental Congress was able to maintain enough unity and efficiency to influence the military strategy that would eventually force Britain to acquiesce to the independence of the colonies.

On 15 June 1775, the Second Continental Congress selected Washington as the Commander in Chief of the nascent Continental Army. The selection was primarily a political decision. By appointing Washington as the Commander in Chief, the delegates expected to arouse more military interest from the Southern colonies.<sup>12</sup> An effort that during the French and Indian War was notably lacking as, the Northern colonies contributed appreciably more to the war effort than the Southern colonies. During the mid-1770s, citizen support for an armed rebellion was confined to the Northeast. Therefore, the New England delegates, especially John Adams, proposed Washington, a native of Virginia, in an attempt to maintain support throughout the thirteen colonies.<sup>13</sup> Georgia, the most southern colony, did not provide official representation to the Second Continental Congress until 12 September 1775.

Most delegates in the Congress believed that Washington, a family man and a large-scale cultivator, was making great sacrifices by committing militarily to the rebellion and would be eager to return to his former station in life at the earliest

opportunity.<sup>14</sup> This perception helped diminish the fears that most delegates had of a large standing army usurping the political power from the people. John Adams enhanced this perception in a letter to a fellow delegate also from Massachusetts, Elbridge Gerry, by describing Washington as, “leaving his delicious retirement, his family and friends, sacrificing his ease, and hazarding all in the cause of his country!”<sup>15</sup> In addition to the perception Washington would rather be enjoying his life at Mount Vernon, he was a politician and a delegate to Congress so he was considered to be one of them. By choosing one of its own members as the Commander in Chief, the delegates were able to alleviate some of the distrust of militarists while keeping the army under its own control.<sup>16</sup>

Although Washington was appointed for political considerations, he was widely recognized as one of the most experienced colonial militia leaders and was well known for his heroism in the French and Indian Wars during Braddock’s defeat.<sup>17</sup> Washington undoubtedly enhanced his reputation as an experienced militia commander by being the only delegate to the Congress to appear routinely at the meetings in his military uniform.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Washington’s military qualifications are well documented by many historians. Washington made strenuous efforts to become a professional soldier. He had volunteered without pay to assist Braddock in order to study the British general. As the commander of the Virginia Regiment, Washington stressed strict discipline and formal training based on European military literature. His Virginia Regiment received rare praise from senior British officers during the French and Indian War.<sup>19</sup>

Upon his appointment as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, Washington started immediate collaboration with Congress. Washington was determined

to cooperate with Congress and understood his relationship with the political body would significantly influence his ability to develop and implement strategy throughout the war. Washington continued to be actively involved in the debates of the Second Continental Congress by maintaining continual correspondence using both official and private letters to many of the influential delegates throughout the conflict. In addition to sending continuous official and private letters to the President of Congress, Washington also sent personal letters of explanations to the more influential members of Congress. These letters made Washington an active participant in ongoing congressional debates. Washington understood that congress had emplaced measures to limit his power so he used these letters to influence the congressional decisions that would affect his ability to conduct his strategy during the war.<sup>20</sup>

The selection of Washington as the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army was a politically motivated decision, but Washington's qualifications made the decision militarily acceptable. Washington truly understood the responsibilities that would come with the position. He also understood the importance of the Congress and its ability to influence the strategy of the Continental Army. Washington described his duties in a letter to his brother, John Washington:

I have been called upon by the unanimous Voice of the Colonies to take Command of the Continental Army. An honour I neither sought after, nor desired, as I am thoroughly convinced, that it requires greater Abilities, and much more experience, than I am Master of, to conduct a business so extensive in its nature, and arduous in the execution; but the partiality of the Congress, joined to a political motive, really left me without a Choice; and I am now Commissioned a General and Commander in chief of all the Forces now raisd [*sic*], or to be raisd [*sic*], for the defence of the United Colonies.<sup>21</sup>

As the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army from June 1775 until December 1783, Washington was undeniably the central figure in the American

Revolution responsible for determining the strategy of the war.<sup>22</sup> One of the means Congress used to ensure that it maintained control over the army and its strategy was that it kept the authority to appoint all of Washington's general officers. Although he was the Commander in Chief, Washington could only make brevet appointments below the rank of general officer. The authority for permanent promotions for both field and junior grade officers resided with the colonial legislatures. Each colony granted these promotions using their own rules and practices. Because officers below the grade of general received their promotions from within their respective colonies, these officers seldom commanded men from other colonies.<sup>23</sup>

Washington's ability to plan and implement strategy was influenced by the capabilities of his subordinate generals. Congress appointed twenty-eight general officers to help Washington lead the Continental Army. Although the officers were similar to Congress in that many had experience with the administration of small militia units, most of these officers were decidedly contentious and inexperienced.<sup>24</sup> Just as was the case with the appointment of Washington, politics and geographical considerations drove the appointments to general officer made by the Second Continental Congress.<sup>25</sup>

Massachusetts felt it had bowed to Virginia for the promotion of Washington and successfully pushed for the appointment of Artemus Ward as the first major general, second in command to Washington. Ward, who had been a colonel in the militia during the French and Indian War, resented Washington for being selected as Commander in Chief and resigned his commission in April 1776. Washington and Ward functioned together with shared antipathy.<sup>26</sup>

The Congress selected Charles Lee as the second major general subordinate only to Washington and Ward. When Congress hesitated to select Lee who also was from Virginia, Washington requested Lee's appointment thus ending the debate. Lee, educated in England, had received a commission in the British Army and earned the rank of lieutenant colonel before retiring with half-pay. Lee's experience gave the nascent Continental Army professional experience that it lacked. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a delegate from Pennsylvania, wrote in his autobiography that Lee was of, "use in . . . inspiring our citizens with military ideas and lessening in our soldiers their superstitious fears of the valor and discipline of the British army."<sup>27</sup> Although Lee's experience was instrumental in the early battles of the war, Lee's talents as a soldier were eclipsed by his erratic behavior and disheveled personal habits.<sup>28</sup> Surrounded by controversy, the Second Continental Congress dismissed Lee from service in January 1780.<sup>29</sup>

Initially Congress elected five brigadier generals. Although Congress believed five brigadier generals and three major generals would satisfy the military requirements, it fell short of satisfying the political demands. The colonies wanted a share of the general officers in some proportion to the quotas of troops they pledged to provide. To satisfy this political demand congress increased the number of major generals to four and the number of brigadier generals to eight despite the lack of a military requirement. New York, which was considered a strategic colony, militarily, was likely to be a critical theater of operations. Therefore, Philip Schuyler became the third major general. Besides militia experience, Schuyler was at the top of the social ladder in New York's provincial aristocracy and delegates believed his social connections would enhance his service.<sup>30</sup>

Only one of the eight brigadier generals appointed by Congress in the summer of 1775 came from outside of New England. He was Richard Montgomery, a resident of New York. The remaining seven brigadier generals came from New England because most of the soldiers pledged for service were from that region.<sup>31</sup> The regional imbalance of general officers continued throughout the American Revolution, but was not as prominent after major military operations shifted to the South in 1779.<sup>32</sup> The initial appointment of general officers by the Congress was primarily for political reasons. This practice did not change as few generals appear to have been appointed based on merit.<sup>33</sup> Washington himself made a similar point to Virginia delegate Joseph Jones, “Custom (for I do not recollect any Resolve of Congress authorizing it) has established a kind of right to the promotion of Brigadiers in State lines where there are Regiments enough to require a Brigr. to command.”<sup>34</sup> The process made John Adams declare that, “nothing has given me more Torment than the scuffle we have had in appointing the General officers.”<sup>35</sup> By placing political reason over the needs of the military, Congress diminished Washington’s ability to execute his strategy with the subordinates of his choice.

Throughout the war, Washington had to mediate countless conflicts involving his subordinate generals. There were numerous issues involving appointments and jealousies over whom should outrank whom. John Adams described the infighting in a letter to his wife, “I am wearied to death with the wrangles between military officers, high and low. They quarrel like cats and dogs. They worry one another like mastiffs scrambling for rank and pay like apes for nuts.”<sup>36</sup>

There are many examples of Washington’s general officers possessing the inability or unwillingness to subordinate their personal interests to the common cause.<sup>37</sup>

Some instances led Continental officers to resign, fight for a command, or challenge one another to a duel. The most famous example is the treason of Benedict Arnold. Although Arnold was a talented battlefield commander, his pride, ambition and temperament led to his treason. Arnold repeatedly quarreled with the Congress for failing to promote him with his peers. Believing Arnold deserved promotion equal to that of his peers, even Washington tried to work with Congress to resolve the oversight. Arnold also found fault with the support he received from the Massachusetts legislature and Pennsylvania Executive Council during his military efforts at Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 and Philadelphia in 1778.<sup>38</sup> Although the reasons Arnold switched his efforts to the British are complex, a major factor was that he felt patriot leaders repeatedly discredited themselves by subordinating his personal interests to those of politics and not military requirements. Although it is not possible to measure the effect of the distraction caused by the constant infighting over rank and other personal slights, it undoubtedly hampered Washington's ability to concentrate on devising and executing his military strategy.<sup>39</sup>

As the war progressed, Congress called upon European professionals and soldiers of fortune to improve the experience level of the Continental Army. Unfortunately, Washington was unable to take full advantage of the Europeans' military skill because of widespread resentment and jealousies of the colonial generals. One example of this occurred in 1777. Nathanael Greene, Henry Knox and John Sullivan threatened to resign if the French artillery officer, Phillipe Charles Jean Baptiste Tronson de Coudray was made senior to them. Making matters worse, Silas Deane, an American diplomat in France, had agreed that if Coudray would accompany a shipment of officers, men and materiel to America, Coudray would receive a commission as a major general with the

title of General of Artillery and Ordinance. Although Deane had exceeded his authority, Congress had to honor the agreement because they feared not doing so would jeopardize the French aid program. Besides dealing with the internal jealousies among his colonial generals, Washington's ability to direct the war was further hampered by resentment and jealousies that increased due to the introduction of Europeans as general officers in the Continental Army.

As the civil government, Congress retained responsibility for the manning, administration, and supply of the army. These responsibilities allowed Congress to maintain control over the army. Both the decision making and ability of Congress to man, administer, and supply the army constrained the strategy Washington and his subordinate commanders could develop and execute. Manning the army was problematic throughout the conflict. Even though Congress initially authorized a 20,370-man army, by December 1775 only 6,000 soldiers had enlisted.<sup>40</sup> The inability of Congress to man the army forced Washington to call for militia support which was not the strategy he wanted to use. The problem was further exacerbated because the enlistments of the soldiers that were present for duty expired at the end of the year. Despite Congress offering incentives such as a \$20 bounty for soldiers who would enlist for the duration of the conflict and land bounties just for enlisting, in the last three years of the war, less than half of the authorized 33,408 Continental soldiers were ever present for duty.<sup>41</sup> The soldiers that were present suffered from inequities of pay scales between the Continental Army and the militia, arrears in pay, and inflation. These problems plagued Washington and his subordinate commanders throughout the war and resulted in serious morale problems.<sup>42</sup>

Influenced by the inability of Congress, the lack of manning and reduced morale, these items constantly affected the strategy Washington and his subordinates could pursue.

Just as Congress lacked the means to effectively man and pay the Continental Army, they also could not provide the materiel required to execute the war. Congress started with almost none of the supplies required to arm, clothe, shelter, and otherwise support the army. The shortages could not be made up because manufacturing in America was still undeveloped when the war began. This meant that all shortages had to be obtained through capture, from an ally, or purchased abroad on credit.<sup>43</sup> The inability of Congress to supply the army is epitomized by the winter quarters of Washington and his forces at Valley Forge from December 1777 until June 1778. It is estimated that 2,500 of 10,000 soldiers died even though no hostile activity occurred.<sup>44</sup> Similar to manning challenges, the inability of Congress to supply adequately the Continental Army limited the strategy Washington and his subordinates could plan and execute.

At times Congress directed Washington's strategy by directing specific military operations for reasons that were primarily political.<sup>45</sup> The two most notable occasions were Congress ordering the invasion of Canada in 1775 and the defense of New York City in 1776. Later in the war, Congress relied more on their military commanders to formulate strategy.<sup>46</sup>

In 1775, without informing Washington, Congress ordered Schuyler to attack Montreal. The delegates thought the invasion would incite the people to revolt against Britain making the region another rebellious colony.<sup>47</sup> Also, in the late summer of 1775, Washington was growing impatient with the stand off in Boston and ordered Benedict Arnold, a colonel at the time, to advance through Maine to capture Quebec. After the

campaign bogged down, Arnold sent an emissary to Philadelphia to obtain reinforcements. Congress voted on January 19, 1776 to send reinforcements to Canada. Although Congress and Schuyler had proposed Washington send part of his trained Boston force, Washington resisted because he did not want to diminish his already small force that was in a standoff with the British. Therefore, he proposed a plan to raise a 728 man regiment to reinforce Canada. It was not until April, after the British Army left Boston, that Washington sent four of his battalions to Canada. The Canadian campaign eventually failed. As springtime thawed the navigable waterways leading to Quebec, the British reinforced their army and were able to force the Americans to retreat.<sup>48</sup> The Canadian campaign depicts how, early in the war, Congress directed strategy, which curtailed Washington's ability to do the same.

The defense of New York City in 1776 was another example of Congress directing military operations for political purposes. Despite the fact Manhattan Island was bound by water that gave the British Navy great maneuverability while diminishing the Americans' ability to move troops, in January 1776 Congress ordered Lee to defend New York City. After planning the best defense possible, Lee reasoned that New York City could not be made an impenetrable fortress but that it could be made a favorable battlefield that the Americans could use to cost the enemy many thousands of men in its struggle to obtain it.<sup>49</sup> Washington arrived in New York City on 13 April 1776 to establish his headquarters. From that time, he had his men work feverishly to prepare a defense of the city. By early September, the question of abandoning New York City was paramount. Knowing it was impossible to defend the city, but also that it was of strategic importance to the British, Greene wanted to burn the city. Although New York delegate

John Jay backed Greene's plan, Congress rejected the idea on 3 September 1776 and ordered that the city could not be damaged. As Washington and his subordinates considered the futility in defending the strategically located city against the more powerful British Army and Navy forces, Washington wrote Congress about the situation:

We [Washington and his subordinates at NYC] all agreed that the Town was not tenable if the Enemy was resolved to bombard and Cannonade it: But the difficulties attending a removal operated so strongly, that a Course was taken between abandoning it totally and consenting [*sic*] our whole strength for its defence; nor were some a little influenced in their Opinion, to whom the determination of Congress was known, against an Evacuation totally; suspecting that Congress wished it to be maintained at every hazard.<sup>50</sup>

Not wanting to be responsible for a disastrous defeat, within two days of receiving the letter Congress quickly resolved, "that Mr. President inform General Washington, it was by no means the sense of Congress in their resolve of the third inst. [*sic*] respecting New York, that the army, or any part of it, should remain in that city a moment longer than he shall think it proper for the public service that troops be continued there."<sup>51</sup> Upon the clarification from Congress, Washington immediately changed his strategy to defend New York City and made plans to evacuate the area of Manhattan Island south of Fort Washington as soon as the supplies could be evacuated.<sup>52</sup> However, the change in strategy came too late. The British attacked before Washington could evacuate the supplies. The generals of the Continental Army spent nine months on what they felt was a futile campaign before a clarification from Congress allowed Washington and his subordinate commanders to alter the strategy for defending New York City. Like the Canadian campaign of 1775, the campaign to defend New York City was directed and influenced by Congress. Both incidents show that political factors diminished

Washington and his subordinate commanders' ability to develop and execute their strategy.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, the Second Continental Congress influenced the military strategy Washington and his subordinates planned and executed. Always wary of the power of a standing army the delegates took measures to maintain control of the Continental Army. The measures included; appointing all general officers, manning and equipping the army, and at times, directing military strategy, all of which hampered Washington's ability to plan and execute his strategy.

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<sup>1</sup>John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1775, quoted in John Gabriel Hunt, ed., *Words of Our Nation* (New Jersey, NJ: Random House Value Publishing, Inc., 1993), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Huber, 58.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>4</sup>Mark M Boatner III, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 264.

<sup>55</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 81.

<sup>6</sup>Washington's General Orders, 17 December 1780. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>7</sup>Boatner, 265.

<sup>8</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 82.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>10</sup>Boatner, 264.

<sup>11</sup>Higginbotham. *The War of American Independence*, 82.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Don Higginbotham, ed., *George Washington Reconsidered* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 155.

<sup>15</sup>John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 18 June 1775. Letters of Delegates to Congress at the Library of Congress [document online]; available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:/temp/~ammem\\_8ZFE;](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:/temp/~ammem_8ZFE;); Internet; accessed 4 December 2005. Hereafter cited as Letters of Delegates to Congress at the Library of Congress.

<sup>16</sup>Higginbotham, *George Washington Reconsidered*, 86.

<sup>17</sup>Huber, 57.

<sup>18</sup>Boatner, 1,167.

<sup>19</sup>Higginbotham, *George Washington Reconsidered*, 148.

<sup>20</sup>Marshall Smelser, *The Winning of Independence* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 375.

<sup>21</sup>Washington to John A. Washington, 20 June 1775. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup>Huber, 56.

<sup>23</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 91.

<sup>24</sup>George F. Scheer, "Washington and His Lieutenants: Some Problems in Command," *Military History of the American Revolutions: Proceedings of the Sixth Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy*, Stanley J. Underhahl, ed. (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1976), 139.

<sup>25</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 89.

<sup>26</sup>Boatner, 1,161.

<sup>27</sup>George W. Corner, ed., *Autobiography of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton, NJ: 1948), 155-156.

<sup>28</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 89.

<sup>29</sup>Boatner, 607.

<sup>30</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 90.

<sup>31</sup>Seth Pomeroy, William Heath, and John Thomas were from Massachusetts. David Wooster and Joseph Spencer were from Connecticut. John Sullivan was from New Hampshire. Natanael Greene was from Rhode Island.

- <sup>32</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 90.
- <sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>34</sup>Washington to Joseph Jones, 22 July 1780. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>35</sup>John Adams to James Warren, 20 June 20 1775. Letters of Delegates to Congress at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>36</sup>John Adams to Abigail Adams, 22 May 1777. Letters of Delegates to Congress at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>37</sup>Scheer, 139.
- <sup>38</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 402.
- <sup>39</sup>Huber, 69.
- <sup>40</sup>Boatner, 262.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 263.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 842.
- <sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.079.
- <sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 1,137.
- <sup>45</sup>Huber., 58.
- <sup>46</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 92.
- <sup>47</sup>Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1984), 62.
- <sup>48</sup>Boatner, 178.
- <sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 797.
- <sup>50</sup>Washington to Congress, 8 September 1776. Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup>Boatner, 799.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CONTINENTAL ARMY: ESTABLISHING A PROFESSIONAL FORCE

I admire the American troops tremendously! It is incredible that soldiers composed of men of every age, even of children of fifteen, of whites and blacks, almost naked, unpaid, and rather poorly fed, can march so well and withstand fire so steadfastly.<sup>1</sup>

Baron Ludwig von Closen of the  
French Army

The strategy developed by Washington and his subordinate generals was greatly constrained by the capabilities of the Continental Army. Before conducting military operations, Washington and his subordinate generals had to consider both the number and the training of the soldiers available. The size of the Continental Army never came close to reaching the requirements authorized by Congress. Recruitment always failed to reach its goals. An additional problem was transforming the men that were present for duty into well-disciplined and trained soldiers. As Washington tried to form and maintain an army, his ability to implement strategy was limited to the size and quality of the forces he commanded. Another factor that affected the implementation of strategy was the command structure of the army. Although Washington was given command of “all the continental forces, raised, or to be raised, for the defence [*sic*] of American liberty,”<sup>2</sup> he never had complete command and control. In addition to the command challenges already discussed with the Continental Congress, often the militia did not fully recognize his command authority. Another piece of the command structure that affected Washington’s ability to formulate strategy was his relationship with the general officers appointed by Congress to serve in the Continental Army.

Before discussing the Continental Army, it is necessary to clarify the ambiguity of the term and to understand what is meant when the term is used. Three categories of soldiers fought during the American Revolution. The Continental Army was comprised of soldiers who had enlisted for a lengthy term of service (possibly the duration of the war), who received payment from the Continental Congress and served in a unit clearly defined by Congress as a Continental unit. The second category of the American soldier was the militia. Also an ambiguous term, by law the militia was comprised of soldiers that were called into service, as required, by their colonial (after 4 July 1776 their state) government for short periods. The majority of the times, the members of these militia units were at home pursuing everyday civilian activities. At various times, states also needed soldiers for longer periods of time than authorized by the rules of the militia. When this occurred, states formed units for a stated number of months for a specific purpose such as guarding the state's frontier. These were called state regiments. Often these soldiers were drafted from the militia, with each militia regiment required to furnish a specific number of soldiers. Adding to the ambiguity of terms, a state could place a militia unit in Continental service. Because each state had its own techniques and requirements of raising militia, it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

For the purpose of clarity, only two categories of soldiers will be discussed, the Continental Army and the militia. These two categories fit well with the opinion of the Continental officers of the revolution who considered any unit that was not a Continental regiment to be a militia unit.<sup>3</sup> The category of militia will be discussed in more detail following the discussions of how the Continental Army limited Washington's ability to implement his strategy.

In the late 1700s armies were relatively small. Commanders carefully trained and painstakingly disciplined their soldiers. It took two years of training to turn a man into a soldier. Generals preferred to engage enemies on open and flat terrain. These favorable conditions made it easy for commanders to synchronize their tight, linear formations to achieve success. During this period, commanders could maneuver well-disciplined troops in a methodical manner. The reliance commanders had on these techniques made battle in forested terrain, attacks at night, and winter campaigns full of unwanted risks.

Washington adhered to these norms. He relied on Humphrey Bland's *Treatise of Military Discipline*, the classic British military manual of the day.<sup>4</sup> The manual was used to train soldiers and create order and discipline through demanding and precise drill.

Washington believed a regular army with order and discipline was essential to defeating the British Army. Washington ensured his soldiers understood his beliefs through his General Orders, "An Army without Order, Regularity and Discipline, is no better than a Commission'd [*sic*] Mob. . . . [I]t is Subordination and Discipline (the Life and Soul of an Army) which next under providence, is to make us formidable to our enemies, honorable in ourselves, and respected in the world."<sup>5</sup>

In 1775, despite Washington's conviction that a well-disciplined army was necessary to defeat the British Army, most of the delegates in Congress believed more along the lines of General Charles Lee, that the militia could defeat the British military. This also fit well into the delegates' mindset that a strong standing army went against the liberties the rebels were fighting to obtain. However, Congress figured the likely scheme of fighting would require field armies prepared to engage the British in their own style of fighting.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the delegates believed that the militia, whose irregular actions

were considered organized banditry by most Europeans, could not lend legitimacy to the patriot cause.<sup>7</sup> Congress knew that to secure alliances, the efforts of the rebellious colonies must be considered legitimate within the international community. If Congress could possess a trained army, it would make its efforts legitimate. Congress also knew that the militia by itself could not cover the enormous amount of land that stretched over 1,500 miles from New Hampshire to Georgia. Therefore, the Congress established a Continental Army to fight the British Army but set measures that would allow the delegates to keep administrative control over the army. Samuel Adams mimicked most of the delegates' opinion of a standing army when writing, "A standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People. Such a Power should be watchd [*sic*] with a jealouse [*sic*] Eye."<sup>8</sup> Although Congress felt compelled to authorize a Continental Army, the delegates ensured they had control over its operations.

From its infancy, the Continental Army was designed to mirror that of the British Army. It was organized with the same divisional and regimental structure as the British forces. The artillery system adopted by the Continental Army also mirrored the British artillery system. Colonel Henry Knox recommended that instruction to artillery officers use the same methods for teaching gunnery as the Woolwich School in England.<sup>9</sup> Important differences between the British Army and the initial Continental Army were the length of enlistment and the reason soldiers volunteered. Whereas the British soldier committed to a long term enlistment, often 20 years or more, the Continental soldier initially served for only one year and always intended to return to civilian life.

The size of the army and the length of each soldier's enlistment were some of the most important measures Congress used to control the army. By limiting terms of enlistment, Washington was forced to reestablish his Army at the end of 1775 and again at the end of 1776. It was not until the disastrous New York campaign of 1776 and the realization that the conflict would not be short, that Congress yielded to Washington's pleas for long-term enlistments. In a letter to his brother, John, Washington outlined short-term enlistments as the biggest problem facing his efforts to formulate a strategy to win the war.

If every nerve is not strain'd [*sic*] to recruit the New Army with all possible expedition, I think the game is pretty near up, owing, in a great measure, to the insidious Arts of the Enemy, and disaffection of the Colonies before mentioned, but principally to the accursed policy of short Inlistments [*sic*], and placing too great a dependence on the Militia the Evil consequences of which were foretold 15 Months ago with a spirit almost Prophetick [*sic*].<sup>10</sup>

Short-term enlistments prevented Washington from effectively creating the well-disciplined and highly trained army that he believed was necessary to win the war. Based on his previous military training and character, Washington actively attempted to train the Continental soldiers in the military tactics of the eighteenth-century so his army could encounter and defeat his British opponent in a conventional-style battle.<sup>11</sup> It was not feasible for Washington to successfully train and discipline the soldiers in his army until he could keep them in his command longer than one year.

The size of the Army also prevented Washington from implementing his strategy of fielding an army that consisted of entirely Continental soldiers and only having to call out the militia in extraordinary circumstances.<sup>12</sup> During most of the war, the Continental Army did not enlist enough soldiers to meet the requirements specified by Congress.

Prior to securing an alliance with France, the size of the Continental Army was dependent on the population of the thirteen colonies. According to the British American Department, approximately 2,500,000 people inhabited the colonies. This number included 600,000 Negroes. Congress estimated the number of inhabitants to be 3,000,000.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the number considered, the estimated number of soldiers available to fight for the patriot cause would be much smaller after subtracting the loyalist, neutralist, elderly, women, and children.

Figuring the conflict to be a short one and that the suggestion of a protracted struggle would cause considerable damage to the patriotic movement, Congress mandated the initial enlistments of 20,370 soldiers to be short and by law enlistments expired at the end of the year. John Adams explained the logic behind the Congressional decision to authorize only short enlistments in his autobiography.

The truth is, I never opposed the raising of men during the war. I was always willing the General might obtain as many men as he possibly could, to enlist during the war, or during the longest period they could be persuaded to enlist for, and I always declared myself so. But I contended that I knew the number to be obtained in this manner would be very small in New England, from whence almost the whole army was derived. A regiment might possibly be obtained, of the meanest, idlest, most intemperate and worthless, but no more. A regiment was no army to defend this country. We must have tradesmen's sons, and farmers' sons, or we should be without defence; and such men certainly would not enlist during the war, or for long periods, as yet. The service was too new; they had not yet become attached to it by habit. Was it credible that men who could get at home better living, more comfortable lodgings, more than double the wages, in safety, not exposed to the sicknesses of the camp, would bind themselves during the war? I knew it to be impossible.<sup>14</sup>

Washington's initial army consisted of soldiers from the Massachusetts militia. To give the army a Continental appearance, militia companies from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia were also placed on Continental status.<sup>15</sup> By November of 1775, Washington was in command of 17,000 soldiers. Unfortunately, the terms of their

enlistments were scheduled to expire at the end of the year. By mid-November 1775, only 1,000 inhabitants of the thirteen colonies had enlisted to serve in the Continental Army. A month later, the number only increased to 6,000. Due to poor recruiting, on 1 January 1776, Washington was faced with the task of creating a new army within six months of creating the first because Congress insisted on short-term enlistments.

As the army of 1776 was recruited, Congress was still very cautious of authorizing a professional long-term military establishment. They also recognized the logistical problems that would occur in feeding and clothing a sizable army. Still hoping for a short war, Congress maintained the one-year enlistment. This decision forced Washington and his army to relive the problem of having the enlistments of all the soldiers in the Continental Army expire at the end of 1776. Fortunately for Washington, the troubling New York campaign of 1776 led the delegates to overcome their fears of a standing army and start authorizing extended enlistments that eventually included allowing soldiers to serve throughout the duration of the war.<sup>16</sup> Longer enlistments allowed Washington to maintain soldiers in service long enough to instill discipline and train his army on the intricacies of fighting eighteenth-century tactics.

Washington's problems with recruiting a Continental Army continued throughout the war. The Continental Army seldom consisted of more than 20,000 soldiers. Under his direct command, Washington rarely had more than a few thousand soldiers to conduct military operations. The number of Continental soldiers steadily decreased after 1779 because early war recruits had returned home. Many men supportive of the revolutionary cause felt more compelled to serve in their local militia because it offered many benefits over the Continental Army. The greatest strength the Continental Army reached was in

November 1778 when it spiked at 30,000. By January 1781, the number plunged below 10,000 despite a Congressional authorization of 33,408.<sup>17</sup> Even after Congress authorized a formidable-sized army with long-term enlistments, recruitment could not meet the authorizations. The size of forces available to Washington continuously hindered his strategy and the capabilities of the Continental Army.

Knowing the size of the army would affect its capabilities, Congress and Washington instituted measures to keep track of the army's strength. One of the first instructions given to Washington by the Continental Congress was to inform the delegates as quickly as possible as to the number of soldiers under his command.<sup>18</sup> This was important information to Congress because they were responsible for feeding, equipping, and clothing the Continental Army. In addition, it allowed the delegates to monitor to what extent each state was fulfilling its required quotas in raising soldiers for service in the Continental Army. Like Washington, Congress understood the importance of the returns and appointed Horatio Gates as the Adjutant General with the rank of Major General. Gates had been a major in the British Army during the French and Indian War. One of only three professional soldiers among the initial generals selected by the Continental Congress, Gates contributed much in molding the Continental Army.<sup>19</sup> He had shrewd administrative skills and became Washington's right-hand man during the critical task of establishing an army. Gates wrote the first army regulations and maintained the initial military records.<sup>20</sup> His efforts were instrumental in establishing order out of the chaotic task of creating an army from scratch.

Washington considered the number of soldiers available to be critical information that was necessary before making decisions. He monitored the number of soldiers

available by demanding personnel reports referred to as returns. In his General Orders dated 8 January 1776, Washington stated, “Without those returns . . . it is impossible that the business of an Army can be conducted with a degree of regularity, or propriety.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout the war, before discussing strategy Washington’s first priority was always to determine the size of his army available. After getting that information, he would consider his strategy.

Immediately upon assuming command of the New England troops besieging Boston on 3 July 1775, Washington ordered, “the Colonels or commanding Officer of each Regt. are ordered forthwith, to make two Returns of the Number of men in their respective Regiments, distinguishing such as are sick, wounded or absent on furlough and also the quantity of ammunition each Regim. [*sic*] now has.”<sup>22</sup> Not only was Washington concerned about the number of soldiers present, his experience as commander of the Virginia Regiment during the French and Indian War also caused him to consider the status of the men present. The request concerning the amount of ammunition available was indicative of another limiting factor that was often present when Washington formulated strategy, which was the lack of ammunition.

Regardless of the size of the army, Congress wanted a Continental Army that was characterized by civilian control and a humanitarian military code. Initially, Congress outlined sixty-nine articles of war, which were highly moralistic and included the recommendation of attendance to a Divine service.<sup>23</sup>

The initial punishments authorized by Congress were quite moderate for the period. Although major crimes were punishable by a death sentence, the punishment received from a court-martial could not exceed thirty-nine lashes, a fine to include more

than two months pay, or imprisonment beyond one month. The Articles of War and corresponding punishment outlined by Congress reflected a citizen army which was the core of American society. However, as the realization of a long conflict started to become apparent, and longer enlistments were becoming obviously necessary, Congress realized patriotic appeals could not entice respectable land owning citizens into extended military service. Therefore, to increase recruitment, Congress sought to draw the poor, and unfree classes into military service. They also added bounties and promises of land once the war had ended. Congress realized the type of recruit it was now receiving required more stringent Articles of War. So, Congress increased the number of lashes to 100 and expanded the list of major crimes resulting in execution. Although the penalties were still much less than those of the British Army, these tougher articles reflected the concern that the delegates and their Commander in Chief had controlling non-landowners.<sup>24</sup>

Once Congress authorized long-term enlistments, the social composition of the Continental Army emerged. The soldiers consisted of farmers, tradesmen, enemy deserters and prisoners of war, loyalists, criminals, vagrants, indentured servants, apprentices, free black men and slaves. Most of the soldiers came from the bottom rung of the social ladder.<sup>25</sup> Washington's adherence to order and discipline became more important as the war continued.

Although some Continental soldiers served because they had little choice (it was better than hanging) most served willingly with patriotism and dedication. For landowners there were many methods for avoiding service making it unlikely many served against their will. A typical draft notice into the Continental Army gave men

options to avoid service. They could report as required, find an able bodied man to go in their place, or pay a twenty-dollar fine.<sup>26</sup>

Although poor and propertyless men found bounties and army pay attractive, there were other methods they could have chosen to make money and acquire land that were far less dangerous. Most Continental soldiers probably served for ideological reasons, but this primary motivation was reinforced by financial benefits.<sup>27</sup> A song from the war emphasized a soldier's ideological reason for service:

No Foreign Slaves shall give us Laws, No British Tyrant Reign  
Tis Independence made us Free and Freedom We'll Maintain<sup>28</sup>

Continental soldiers stayed in the ranks because they believed that winning the war would make their lives and their children's lives better. Some Continental soldiers could not tolerate their desperate situation and deserted. However, the rate of desertions declined as the war progressed.<sup>29</sup> Although the Continental Army developed more disciplined and trained soldiers, they never became regulars in the European sense. Continental soldiers always asserted their personal independence by wearing jaunty hats and long hair despite their officers' insistence on discipline in conforming to dress and appearance standards. More importantly, they never thought of themselves as professional soldiers as European soldiers did, but they knew they would fight until they achieved their goals and then return to civilian life.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the tumultuous conditions that soldiers endured, there was only one serious uprising in the Continental Army that resulted in bloodshed prior to 1781. In 1777, a New England brigade that had not been paid refused to march from the Hudson River to join the main army in Pennsylvania. In an attempt to restore order, a captain

killed one of the mutineers. In response, another rebellious soldier shot the captain. Fortunately, order was quickly restored and the soldiers received their pay.<sup>31</sup> However, after 1781 a series of mutinies threatened the Continental Army. Washington was always cognizant of the possibility of mutiny. A letter to George Clinton addressed his concern, “naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery, that they have not been ere [*sic*] this excited by their sufferings, to a general mutiny and dispersion.”<sup>32</sup> As the mutinies of 1781 started to occur, Washington watched closely and tried to let Congress rectify the situation. Most of the soldiers’ complaints had to do with pay and entitlements, which were administratively a concern for Congress. However, after taking the role of observer in the rebellion of the Pennsylvania Line, Washington quickly forestalled more revolts by severely punishing the mutineers of the next uprising, the New Jersey Line.

Although the most common grievances were pay, provisions, and clothes, the mutiny of the Pennsylvania Line, in January 1781, was a result of a conflict with the duration of enlistments. A majority of the Pennsylvanians argued that they had enlisted for three years, a term that would end on 31 December 1780. However, the command believed the soldiers enlisted for the duration of the war. Making matters worse, on 1 January 1781, a Pennsylvania recruiting agent entered the camp and offered \$25 to troops that had enlisted only for six months if they would agree to enlist for the duration of the war. The veterans of the unit wanted to be discharged and return home or have the opportunity to re-enlist for the duration of the war with the entitlement of the \$25 bounty. On 2 January, 1,000 soldiers marched out of their camp near Morristown, New Jersey to

place their grievances with civil authorities located in Philadelphia. Two officers were wounded and one was killed in an attempt to prevent the mutineers from leaving.

General Anthony Wayne ordered the officers to stand down and allowed the mutineers to leave. This was a unique experience because the soldiers did not want violence. However, they were good citizens that were conscious of their rights and liberties and demanded what they believed was their due justice. When Wayne caught up with the soldiers at Princeton, New Jersey, the mutineers assured the general that they had no desire to go to the enemy and would hang any man that would attempt it. They also informed Wayne that they would drop their grievances if the British Army attacked, but otherwise, would not take another order from an officer in the Continental Army until their rights were restored. Underestimating the patriotism of the mutineers, the British Commander in Chief of the American Colonies, General Henry Clinton, sent two spies to lure the men into the British ranks with the promises of personal freedoms and bounties. The mutineers turned the British spies over to Wayne. The *New Jersey Gazette* quoted a soldier as saying Clinton might, “bribe such a mean toadeater as Arnold,” but “it is not in his power to bribe an American soldier.”<sup>33</sup> After realizing the spies could have given them an advantage in their negotiations, the mutineers asked Wayne to return the British pair. However, Wayne did not return the spies and they were executed by hanging.

At the same time, Joseph Reed, President of the Executive Council of Pennsylvania, negotiated with the mutineers. Reed saw justice in the soldiers’ grievances and made concessions resulting in over 800 of the men receiving a discharge from the army. Washington monitored the situation closely but was located too far away to

intervene personally. Instead, he chose to stay aloof in the proceedings to enable civil leadership to resolve the conflict.<sup>34</sup>

Other Continental units were also monitoring closely the outcome of the Pennsylvania Line mutiny. On 20 January 1781, three New Jersey regiments located in Pompton, New Jersey chose to follow the example of the Pennsylvanian Line. This time Washington quickly stepped in. Washington realized that stern action was necessary to prevent the infection from spreading. Major General Robert Howe, under Washington's guidance, promptly surrounded the men. Washington reiterated his guidance to Howe in a letter to Congress.

I immediately ordered as large a detachment as could possibly be spared to be marched from West point [*sic*] and put it under the command of Major General Howe, with orders to bring the Mutineers to unconditional submission and, their principal leaders to instant and condign punishment. I have also taken measures to induce the Jersey militia to act in conjunction with him. It is difficult to say what part the Troops sent to quell the revolt will act; but I thought it indispensable to bring the matter to an Issue and risk all extremities. Unless this dangerous spirit can be suppressed by force there is an end to all subordination in the Army, and indeed to the Army itself. The infection will no doubt shortly pervade the whole Mass.<sup>35</sup>

Howe arrested the three most prominent leaders of the mutiny. Then he formed a firing squad with the next twelve most influential mutineers and compelled those individuals to execute their three leaders. By keeping protests and line mutinies within the bounds of moderation and not staging military coups, the Continental Army established that civil authority was superior to military might.<sup>36</sup> Washington understood the consequences of continued mutinous behavior and took action that prevented mutinies from destroying the Continental Army.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the threat of mutinies, training was another challenge the Continental Army faced. Throughout the war, training was essential to the success of the

Continental Army. When Congress agreed to long-term enlistments, it provided the Continental officers the opportunity to train their soldiers for periods beyond one year. In an era when it took two years to train a soldier properly this was a welcome advantage.

Starting in 1777 the Continental Army consisted of disciplined long-term soldiers who would serve for three years or in some cases for the duration of the war. Washington trained his new army to endure close order volleys and bayonet charges and made it proficient in eighteenth century tactics. In 1781, Washington's trained force would defeat Cornwallis and his 8,000 troops in Yorktown. Although the French Army was an integral piece of Washington's force during this battle, the Continentals performed as a well-trained and disciplined force, which was an accomplishment made possible by Washington's unyielding effort to maintain a well-trained and disciplined unit.

Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, a former captain in the Prussian Army, was instrumental in training the Continental Army. Steuben arrived at Valley Forge on 23 February 1778 and began training the soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Steuben's efforts were made easier because the army already had combat experience. However, prior to Steuben's arrival, Continental officers attempted to train their soldiers using their own preference of either the German, French, or British tactics.<sup>39</sup> This caused confusion among the soldiers. Steuben, with the help of Greene and Hamilton, eliminated the confusion by developing a standardized and simplified approach to drill and musketry.<sup>40</sup> The Continental Army thrived under Steuben's training techniques. The quick and efficient results of Steuben's training were successfully proven at the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse in June of 1778.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to recruiting and training deficiencies, the Continental Army struggled to develop a well-structured command system.<sup>42</sup> Span of control, the measures Congress used to limit the power of the Continental Army, and the fighting and distrust that existed among some general officers reduced the effectiveness of the Continental Army's command structure. The emergency powers Congress granted Washington in December 1776, the Conway Cabal of 1777, and the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse in June of 1778 illustrate many of the problems with the command structure.

To help ease the span of control, the thirteen colonies were divided into three departments. Washington commanded the Middle Department, which included New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New York minus the Northern portion. The Southern Department consisted of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, while the Northern Department consisted of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and the upper portion of New York. Part of the span of control problem was that Washington always commanded a field army in addition to his Commander in Chief responsibilities. Command of his field army was a huge responsibility and demanded much of Washington's energy.<sup>43</sup> Fearing Washington could not provide effective control over the Northern and Southern Departments, Congress intervened in the operations of those departments much more than it did in the Middle Department.<sup>44</sup> This intervention included changing the disposition of troops and giving orders to the commanders in charge of the Northern and Southern Departments without Washington's knowledge as was the case in the Canadian campaign, which was previously discussed.<sup>45</sup> Congress recognized the obvious distraction of commanding a

field army while serving as the Commander in Chief, but its attempt to mitigate the challenge made span of control worse.

Problems in the command structure between the Continental Army and Congress were never more evident than they were in December 1776. Washington wrote a desperate letter to Congress asking for additional powers. The letter started, “I have with Impatience [*sic*] to know the determinations of Congress on the Propositions made some time in October last for augmenting our Corps Artillery, and establishing a Corps of Engineers; the time is now come, when the 1st cannot be delayed without the greatest injury to the safety of these states.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Washington asked for additional infantry battalions and improvements with the Army’s supply and pay systems. At the time, the British Army had successfully taken New York City and was dangerously close to the Second Continental Congress’s headquarters in Philadelphia. Washington had only a dwindling army to stop the British offensive due to enlistments expiring at the end of the year. Washington added to his plea that, “I rather think the design of Genl. Howe is to possess himself of Phila. This winter, if possible (and in truth I do not see what is to hinder [prevent] him, as 10 days more will put an end to the existence of our Army).”<sup>47</sup>

Washington was certain the indecision of Congress would prevent him from saving the Continental Army from defeat. Although Washington respected the authority of Congress, time prevented him from using the existing command structure between Congress and the Continental Army due to its inefficiency. Washington feared continuing with the same command structure would end the revolution. Washington knew most delegates still possessed much fear of a standing army. Therefore, his request shrewdly declared, “It may be said that this is an application for powers that are too dangerous to

be Intruded. [*sic*] I can only add, that desperate diseases require desperate Remedies; and with the truth declare, that I have no lust after power.”<sup>48</sup> Washington’s letter combined with the threat of the British Army reaching their location in a few days forced Congress to give Washington additional powers. On 27 December 1776, Congress granted a resolution, which expanded the Continental Army and extended emergency powers to Washington.

This Congress, having maturely considered the present crisis; and having perfect reliance on the wisdom, vigour, and uprightness of General Washington, do, hereby,

*Resolve*, That General Washington shall be, and he is hereby, vested with full, ample, and complete powers to raise and collect together, in the most speedy and effectual manner, from any or all of these United States, 16 battalions of infantry, in addition to those already voted by Congress; to appoint officers for the said battalions; to raise, officer, and equip three thousand light horse; three regiments of artillery, and a corps of engineers, and to establish their pay; to apply to any of the states for such aid of the militia as he shall judge necessary; to form such magazines of provisions, and in such places, as he shall think proper; to displace and appoint all officers under the rank of brigadier general, and to fill up all vacancies in every other department in the American armies; to take, wherever he may be, whatever he may want for the use of the army, if the inhabitants will not sell it, allowing a reasonable price for the same; to arrest and confine persons who refuse to take the continental currency, or are otherwise disaffected to the American cause; and return to the states of which they are citizens, their names, and the nature of their offences, together with the witnesses to prove them: That the foregoing powers be vested in General Washington, for and during the term of six months from the date hereof, unless sooner determined by Congress.<sup>49</sup>

These temporary powers lifted the control measures Congress maintained over the Commander in Chief and allowed Washington to start building a professional army.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of waiting for a Congressional decision that could take months, Washington could take decisive action. In addition to expanding the army, Washington could directly seek militia support without using Congress as an intermediary. Although some historians have criticized Washington for failing to use his full powers, Congress criticized him for

using his authority to make inhabitants surrender their papers offering British protection or move inside of British lines.<sup>51</sup>

The willingness of Congress to grant Washington emergency powers highlights the trust the delegates had in Washington. More importantly, the reason Washington was forced to request the extraordinary powers was that the command structure between Congress and the Continental Army was too inefficient. The Continental Army had to circumvent the current command structure to succeed.

The Conway Cabal is a legend that emerged in the fall and winter of 1777-1778 purporting a pre-planned effort to remove Washington as the Commander in Chief. Based on defeats at Brandywine and Germantown, members of Congress started to express reservations about Washington's leadership. They believed that General Horatio Gates who had just defeated General Burgoyne at Saratoga was a viable alternative. Although generals within the Continental Army including Thomas Mifflin, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Timothy Pickering, Charles Lee, and Thomas Conway made critical remarks about Washington and the general state of military affairs, there is no historical evidence of an actual cabal. Likewise, Congressmen including Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, John Adams, Samuel Adams, James Lovell, Elbridge Gerry, and William Duer were known to have dropped hints and suggestions among their influential friends questioning Washington's ability. However, there is insufficient evidence that a serious ouster of Washington was ever planned.<sup>52</sup> In May 1778, Washington declared that Congress never discussed his removal.<sup>53</sup>

Although history suggests the Conway Cabal was more an expression of concern for Washington and the general state of military affairs rather than a planned attempt to

oust the Commander in Chief, the perception of a cabal did exist. These perceptions are indicative of the command problems Washington faced throughout the war. At the same time complaints were being voiced about Washington's ability, Brigadier General Thomas Conway wrote a letter to Major General Horatio Gates that was critical of Washington. Washington was informed of the letter and immediately responded. Conway denied that he made the comments, but acknowledged he had made critical remarks of the general state of military affairs and the officers that provided advice to Washington. Washington did not want to publicize the event with Conway. Unfortunately, two days before Washington had received the information about Conway's disparaging remarks, Congress promoted Conway to major general. At the same time, Congress reorganized the Board of War in an attempt to fix lingering inefficiency.<sup>54</sup> For the first time Congress included military officers on the Board of War. They elected Gates to serve as president. Pickering and Mifflin were also selected to serve on the board. Both Pickering and Mifflin were known to have made critical remarks about Washington's abilities and Gates was rumored as Washington's successor.

The timing was too coincidental for many of Washington's supporters. Generals Nathanael Greene, Henry Knox, Philip Schuyler, Mari Joseph Marquis de Lafayette, William Alexander, John Calwalader, James Varmun, Alexander Hamilton, and Tench Tilghman quickly assumed that the confluence of Conway's letter, Conway's promotion, and the reorganization of the Board of War to include military officers with questionable loyalty to the Commander in Chief had to be part of a plan to oust Washington.<sup>55</sup> Gates, who had merely been the recipient of Conway's letter did not condemn the actions or defend Washington from the condemnation. The lack of sympathy toward Washington

made him a willing member of the purported cabal in the minds of Washington and his supporters.

Despite the fact no plan existed to replace Washington as Commander in Chief, the damage of the Conway Cabal lingered and negatively affected Washington's ability to command. Many of the results of the purported cabal will never be known, but it caused Continental officers to challenge one another to duels, forced some officers to resign, and further complicated the strained relationship between the Continental officers and the Congress. Shortly after Varmun voiced his opinion that a duel might stop the momentum of the Conway Cabal, Conway was shot in the mouth during a duel and subsequently resigned. Mifflin, who had hoped for advancement by supporting Gates for Commander in Chief, resigned from the Board of War after being falsely accused of wanting to replace Washington.<sup>56</sup> Dr. Rush, another critic of Washington, resigned his position of Physician General of the Continental Army in February 1778 so he could return to the practice of medicine.<sup>57</sup>

Not knowing how Washington received the information in Conway's letter, Gates thought that Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide, had secretly copied the letter during a recent visit to Gates's headquarters. Gates tried to use this to discredit Washington and Hamilton for stealing personal letters. Gates wrote a letter to both Washington and Congress asking them to help him discover who was betraying him, because he had no reason to suspect someone from his own headquarters. Gates claimed he was sending the request to both Congress and Washington because he did not know if Washington had obtained the knowledge of Conway's derogatory remarks from an army source or a Congressman. In a very embarrassing manner, Gates found out from

Congress that Washington received the letter from James Wilkinson, Gates's very own aide. When Gates confronted Wilkinson, Wilkinson challenged his accuser to a duel, but before the duel took place, the two men reconciled. Then, Wilkinson thinking Hamilton had betrayed him, challenged Washington's aide to a duel, which never occurred.<sup>58</sup>

Shortly after 29 March 1778, Wilkinson resigned his commission.

The alleged cabal further strained the relationship between Continental officers and Congressmen. Colonel Daniel Morgan accosted Richard Peters, the Secretary of the Board of War. Peters was visiting an army encampment on business matters when Morgan informed him that the camp talk indicated Peters was involved in the plot to oust Washington. A few days later, Peters, still visibly shaken by the event, claimed Morgan shook with anger and that the altercation nearly became violent. The incident illustrated the distrust and disdain Continental officers loyal to Washington had for anyone they thought was part of the alleged plot. It also indicates the negative effect the cabal had throughout the command of the Continental Army. The event caused many calls for sanity and many denials of conspiracy to occur in an effort to suppress the spirit of the cabal.

Despite the fact there was never a move in Congress to remove Washington the effects of a perceived cabal greatly affected trust among general officers. The Conway Cabal highlights the suspicion and jealousy that was rampant among the Continental officers. General officers concluded a conspiracy without proof, challenged duels among each other, submitted resignations, and threatened members of Congress for a threat that did not exist. This behavior shows the challenges Washington faced as he tried to build a command structure that his soldiers could trust. Robert Morris, a delegate from

Pennsylvania wrote, “The General is fully informed of all these Cabals, they prey on his constitution, sink his Spirits, and will in the end I fear prove fatal to him, if this should be the case excuse me for once more repeating it, America, will loose [*sic*] perhaps her only prop.”<sup>59</sup> Instead of enjoying a command structure supportive of his talents, Washington endured a command structure that was jealous, suspicious, and fractional.<sup>60</sup>

One of the best examples of problems with the command structure between the Continental officers themselves was during the battle of Monmouth Courthouse in June 1778. That month, General Henry Clinton, the Commander in Chief of the British Army in America had to evacuate Philadelphia because the French fleet was moving toward that city to block the mouth of the Delaware River. Washington learned of Clinton’s movement that would take the British Army along roads through New Jersey to New York City. Washington knew the long trains, which included 10,000 soldiers, 1,500 wagons, and artillery, would make a great target.

On 16 June, Washington held a War Council to determine what action the Continental Army should take. Washington’s generals wanted to take a less ambitious approach than their commander did. They believed the best course of action was to let the militia harass the long trains and avoid engagement with the Continental Army.

After gaining more intelligence about Clinton’s route, Washington convened another War Council to determine whether the Continental Army would take a passive or aggressive strategy. General Lee argued against attacking because he believed the Continental Army should not take any undue risk because the new French alliance would mean certain victory. Therefore, Lee’s opinion was to practice patience and not to engage Clinton. Generals Alexander and Knox agreed with Lee. Generals Greene, Wayne,

Steuben, Louis DuPortail, and Lafayette favored varying degrees of limited offensive action. The council's final recommendation was to avoid a general engagement while sending a force of 1,500 Continental soldiers to attack the enemy's rear and left flank. Wayne did not sign the recommendation. Wayne, Lafayette, and Greene wrote letters protesting the War Council's recommendation. Washington decided to follow the recommendation with an addition of his own. He directed Colonel Charles Scott to lead a 1,500-man force to work against the enemy's rear and left flank, but also ordered Daniel Morgan to use his 600-man militia to attack Clinton's right flank.

However, new intelligence concerning Clinton's movement changed Washington's plan. Washington was emboldened by the additional intelligence, and increased the size of the attacking force to 4,000 Continentals. Because of the increase in size, Washington wanted to put Lafayette in charge of the force. However, Lee out-ranked Lafayette and Washington knew it should be Lee's command if he desired it. Washington asked Lee to let Lafayette command the force. Not knowing the size of the force had increased to 4,000 soldiers, Lee acquiesced to Washington's request. However, once Lee learned that the attacking force would consist of 4,000 Continental soldiers he changed his mind. Washington had no choice but to let Lee command the force. Lee was given an additional 1,000 soldiers and was ordered to attack as soon as the British left Monmouth Courthouse.

Despite his orders, on 27 June 1778 Lee informed the officers in his unit that he lacked the information necessary to conduct a successful attack. He told them he intended to move forward with caution and see what would transpire. No plans for an attack were developed. As Lee's unit moved toward Clinton's rear guard, he ordered Lafayette to

lead the attack with three regiments and some artillery against the enemy's left flank. Lafayette thought the post was unsuitable and maneuvered to gain a better position. Not having an attack plan, the other commanders thought Lafayette was withdrawing and ordered a withdrawal. By this time, the actions of Lee's force had alerted Clinton to his position. Clinton's rear guard of 6,000 soldiers reversed direction and attacked Lee's force. Lee's men were given confusing orders, which resulted in a series of advances and withdraws. Finally, Lee's force started to withdrawal. While withdrawing Lee ran into Washington. Washington was hurrying to Lee's position in disbelief, because he had been informed Lee had failed to attack as ordered and was retreating.

Washington sharply criticized Lee for retreating. Washington took command and drew a line of battle. A general engagement with Clinton's troops lasted the rest of the afternoon. Clinton probed the American left, right, and center but the Americans held their own fighting the British in the European style. Clinton withdrew to higher ground and the Americans pursued but halted due to darkness. In the evening, Clinton escaped by retreating to the harbor at Sandy Hook where the British fleet picked the British force up and moved it to New York. Although the battle was a tactical draw, it proved the Continental Army could stand volley to volley with the British Army, partly due to the leadership of Washington, but largely due the training the soldiers received from Steuben at Valley Forge.<sup>61</sup>

Washington did not want to pursue the matter but Lee wrote a series of intemperate letters to the Commander in Chief in an attempt to defend his honor. Not getting the satisfaction he desired, Lee demanded a court-martial. In his trial, Lee was found guilty of disobeying orders by not attacking, making an unnecessary retreat, and

showing disrespect toward the Commander in Chief. He received a one-year suspension. Lee rejected the findings and wrote a disrespectful letter to Congress, which prompted the delegates to dismiss Lee from the army. Subsequently, he made additional derogatory remarks toward Washington, which resulted in a duel with Colonel John Laurens. Lee was slightly injured in the duel.<sup>62</sup>

The battle at Monmouth Courthouse demonstrated how indecision within the command structure reduced the effectiveness of the Continental Army and hindered Washington's ability to conduct strategy. The Continental Army lost its element of surprise due to indecision within the command. Although Washington was successful in taking command and leading his forces to a tactical draw, the results could have been much better had the command structure fought the plan of its Commander in Chief.

Washington always recognized that the Continental Army was essential in winning the revolution. Although the army never reached its authorized strength and recruiting was always problematic, after the second collapse of the army due to the expiration of enlistments, Congress agreed to long-term enlistments. The long-term enlistments changed the composition of the army forcing the leaders to allow the bottom strata of society to volunteer. However, Congress tightened the Articles of War and Washington was able to ensure discipline and order. After the winter of 1777, Washington used long-term enlistments to start forming a professional army. With the assistance of Steuben, the Continental Army improved its training and by the summer of 1778, Washington's Continental Army was capable of fighting volley for volley with the British Army. In addition to problems with the size of the army, Washington faced problems with the command structure throughout the war. The size of the army, ability to

train the soldiers, and complications with the command structure hindered Washington's ability to plan strategy and employ the Continental Army in his desired fashion throughout the Revolutionary War.

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<sup>1</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 81.

<sup>2</sup>Morris J. MacGregor, Jr and Robert K. Wright, Jr., eds., *Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 176.

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Lesser, *The Sinews of Independence* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), xii.

<sup>4</sup>Higginbotham, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Washington's General Orders, 1 January 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>6</sup>Higginbotham, 94.

<sup>7</sup>Huber, *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot*, 62.

<sup>8</sup>Samuel Adams to James Warren on 7 January 1776, Letters of Delegates to Congress at the Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup>Higginbotham, 93.

<sup>10</sup>Washington to John Washington, 18 December 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>11</sup>Huber, 63.

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

<sup>13</sup>Higginbotham, 389.

<sup>14</sup>John Adams in his Autobiography, 16 May 1776, Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789 [document online]; available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:/temp/~ammem\\_TZxW](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:1:/temp/~ammem_TZxW); Internet; accessed 11 February 2005.

<sup>15</sup>Mark M. Boatner III, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 265.

<sup>16</sup>Higginbotham, 390.

<sup>17</sup>Lesser, xxxi; and Boatner, 263.

<sup>18</sup>Lesser, xii.

<sup>19</sup>George Athan Billias, ed., *George Washington's Generals* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1980), 79.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>21</sup>Washington's General Orders, 8 January 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup>Washington's General Orders, 3 July 1775, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>23</sup>Higginbotham, 92.

<sup>24</sup>John Ferling, ed., *The World Turned Upside Down: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1998), 25.

<sup>25</sup>Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Higginbotham, 393.

<sup>27</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 56.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>Higginbotham, 403.

<sup>32</sup>Washington to George Clinton, 16 February 1778, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>33</sup>*New Jersey Gazette*, 17 January 1781.

<sup>34</sup>Higginbotham, 405.

<sup>35</sup>Washington to Congress. 23 January 1781, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup>Ferling, 33.

<sup>37</sup>Boatner, 759-765; Higginbotham, 403-405; and Ferling, 30-33. These sources discuss the mutinies of the Continental Army.

<sup>38</sup>Boatner, 1,056.

<sup>39</sup>Higginbotham, 247.

<sup>40</sup>Boatner, 1,057.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 1058

<sup>42</sup>Higginbotham, 92.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Boatner, 268.

<sup>46</sup>Washington to Congress, 20 December 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Resolution of the Continental Congress Expanding the Continental Army and Extending Emergency Powers to Washington, 27 December 1776, in *Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987), 176.

<sup>50</sup>Boatner, 1,171.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Higginbotham, 216.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>54</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 56. Congress initially relied on an ad hoc committee to administer the army and address military issues as they arose. To improve efficiency, in June 1776 Congress formed a five-member Board of War to address army administration. However, board members concentrated on regular congressional duties and devoted little effort to army matters. Rapid changes in congressional membership prevented board members from ever comprehending the needs of the army. Despite the addition of army officers to serve on the board in December 1778, it remained an inefficient mechanism to administer army concerns throughout the war.

<sup>55</sup>Higginbotham, 218.

<sup>56</sup>Boatner, 705.

<sup>57</sup>Washington to Benjamin Rush, 16 May 1777, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>58</sup>Boatner, 1,206.

<sup>59</sup>Robert Morris to Benjamin Harrison, 19 February 1778, Letters of Delegates to Congress.

<sup>60</sup>Boatner, 278-281; Higginbotham, 216-222; and Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress. (These sources discuss the Conway Cabal.)

<sup>61</sup>Benson Bobrick. *Fight for Freedom: The American Revolutionary War* (New York, New York: Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc., 2004), 58.

<sup>62</sup>Boatner, 612, 716-726; Bobrick, 58; and Higginbotham, 245-249 (These sources discuss the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse.)

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MILITIA: CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

I will not say much in praise of the militia but the list of British officers and soldiers killed and wounded by them . . . proves but too fatally they are not wholly contemptible.<sup>1</sup>

General Charles Cornwallis

During the American Revolution, the militia conducted many military functions that, when combined with the military functions performed by the Continental Army, ultimately led to the defeat of the British. Unfortunately, instead of being known for its significant contributions, some people remember the militia for a series of failures: failure to arrive on time, failure to stand and fight when required, and failure to rally when its ranks were broken.<sup>2</sup> At times, Washington enhanced this poor image of the militia by opining the militia as more detrimental than good. Certainly, the limited capabilities of the militia affected the strategy of Washington and his subordinate commanders throughout the war. Only after recognizing the political, economic, and social factors that influenced Washington's ability to employ the militia is it possible to understand the Commander in Chief's disparaging comments concerning the militia. Despite the disapproving remarks, Washington cunningly used the militia to conduct small-scale warfare to harass and confuse British forces. In addition to harassing the British Army, the militia effectively maintained internal security through patrolling against slave insurrections, fighting Indians, repelling seaborne raiding parties, guarding garrisons, collecting intelligence, transporting supplies, and maintaining enthusiasm for the patriot cause.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that the militia successfully performed many military functions, the militia could not stand alone against a large number of British soldiers. Furthermore, lack of discipline among the militia soldiers prevented Washington and his subordinate commanders from fully integrating the soldiers of the militia with the soldiers of the Continental Army. Political, social, and economic factors prevented soldiers within the militia from developing good order and discipline. The lack of discipline within the militia presented Washington and his officers with two problems that the Continental Army could not overcome. First, ill-disciplined soldiers of the militia threatened to decrease the discipline of soldiers in the Continental Army throughout the war. Second, Washington and the Continental Congress knew they must maintain a well-disciplined professional army to secure legitimacy in the minds of the international community.

Even though the militia was an integral part of the military effort that defeated the British, characteristics of the militia precluded Washington and his subordinate commanders from developing a strategy that completely integrated the militia with the conventional efforts of the Continental Army. The men of colonial America had a reputation of being rugged frontiersmen. Many people believed the men possessed inherent soldier skills based solely on the need to defend their family from Indian threats. Thomas Jefferson boasted to his friends in Europe that, “every soldier in our army” had “been intimate with his gun from his infancy.”<sup>4</sup> However, by 1775, the fear of armed invasion receded in the coastal towns. Even though the threat had shifted toward the frontier by this time, a weapon was still considered a requirement for a man living in the colonies to obtain food and protect his property.<sup>5</sup>

In order to ensure security, the militia became an important piece of provincialism during the colonial period. Each colony had microcosms consisting of a county court, a town meeting, a church congregation, and a militia unit. These organizations were comprised of local people who worked under local leadership to meet the local needs of the community.<sup>6</sup> The local militia allowed communities within each colony to protect their interests militarily. Because every individual possessed his own weapon and protected his own interests, the problems that occur when forced to recruit, equip, and financially support a military entity did not exist. By relying on local militia, each colony avoided the fear of vulnerability that existed when a community sent all of its men to protect another geographical area. The concept of localized militia went far to alleviate the suspicion that one community would be sacrificed for the good of another, which was an underlying concern during this period. The localized militia concept also allowed the men within the organization to perform the mission every militia did best which was to defend their immediate liberty and property against a threat.<sup>7</sup>

Because the militia was maintained at the provincial level, its capabilities were limited. The militia was more than willing to bear arms to protect its local area while fighting under its own leadership but was reluctant to travel to protect another community or fight under unfamiliar leadership. The men in each militia organization wanted to conduct battle in their own method, which was counter to the eighteenth century tactics armies of the time were using. The militia and other colonial leaders, such as General Charles Lee, believed the militia's proficiency with firearms and knowledge of the terrain would counterbalance any lack of formal military training. This understanding was

reinforced by the initial successes of militia forces against surprised British forces at the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill.

Part of the reason the militia was successful in surprising and confusing the British Army was that in 1775 the colonial governments began revitalizing the militia system because colonists had grown apathetic due to diminishing threats. The colonial governments increased the number of training days, stiffened the punishment for missing a muster formation, tightened the exemption lists, and ordered the stockpiling of powder and shot.<sup>8</sup> The actions of the colonial governments, especially the stockpiling of ammunition and gun powder led to the battles at Lexington and Concord. Since the French and Indian War, the laws which required periodic training had become very relaxed. One example of the return to increased militia training was in Virginia. In the spring of 1775, the patriot committee of Frederick County resolved that every member of the county between the ages of sixteen and sixty must appear under arms at least once a month. The resolution further recommended the men muster weekly for their own improvement.<sup>9</sup> In preparation for anticipated conflict, similar acts appeared throughout the colonies.

The militia units also purged Tory officers and ensured that only men who were sympathetic to the patriot cause held commissions. This purging was instrumental in bringing the militia of every colony under rebel control, which meant the British Army encountered unfriendly receptions wherever they went.<sup>10</sup> The purging also put loyalists on the defensive. Because colonial leaders saw the importance of the militia and purged loyalists, the loyalists were never able to gain an initiative and stayed on the defensive as rebel militia successfully deterred the counter revolutionary uprisings. In December 1775,

the Virginia Militia reinforced by 200 Continentals, defeated Lord Dunmore, Virginia's royal governor, at the Battle of Great Bridge.<sup>11</sup> On 27 February 1776, the North Carolina Militia defeated Josiah Martin, the royal governor of North Carolina, at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge.<sup>12</sup> Both battles highlight how the militia helped extinguish loyalist power and expelled royal authority.

In addition to preventing loyalist uprisings and promoting enthusiasm for the patriot cause, the militia prevented British foraging efforts. During the French and Indian War, the colonists helped feed the British Army alleviating a major logistical problem. This phenomenon changed during the American Revolution. The militia attacked British foraging parties throughout the war, which forced the British to depend on food from the United Kingdom.<sup>13</sup> The militia's ability to control the countryside caused enormous logistical problems for the British as they tried to maintain nearly 30,000 soldiers throughout the war. The reliance on supplies from across the Atlantic Ocean meant that the British Army could not operate for any extended period beyond fifteen miles from a navigable waterway.<sup>14</sup> The militia's ability to prevent loyalist uprisings and to control the countryside provided an incalculable advantage that greatly improved the chances for success of the American war effort. The militia successfully prevented the British forces from controlling and influencing any territory it did not physically occupy with a significant number of British soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the militias' success in conducting small-scale guerilla warfare and maintaining internal security, the militia could not stand volley to volley with British forces. A major factor that prevented the militia from being capable of fighting the British Army was a lack of discipline. Unlike the Continental Army that was comprised

more from the lower rung of the social ladder, the militia was comprised more from society's middle class. While the social elite often opted out of service by hiring substitutes and the lowest level of society served in the Continental Army, the middle class formed the militia.<sup>16</sup> Although some men did avoid militia duty by paying commutation fees, hiring substitutes or simply running away, a large percentage of adult males performed service in the militia. Although it is impossible to determine the actual percentage, few colonial locations escaped mobilizing their militia at some point during the war.<sup>17</sup> The officers within the militia also came from the middle class. The lack of social cleavage that existed in the militia meant that most officers and their men were very familiar with one another. The militia never developed a hierarchal rank structure similar to the British and Continental armies. Instead, soldiers of the unit often selected their own junior officers while the leaders of each colonial government selected senior officers. The familiarity of officers and their men occasionally led to poor discipline and disobedience within the militia.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the revolution, militia soldiers portrayed a type of independence and stubbornness that is indicative of a freeman who owned property and was not as pronounced in a military hireling who was accustomed to obeying commands.<sup>19</sup> Washington voiced his frustration concerning the discipline of the militia compared to that of the Continental soldier in several letters. "Men [Militia] accustomed to unbounded freedom, and no controul [*sic*], cannot not brook the Restraint which is indispensably necessary to the good order and Government of an Army; without which, licentiousness, and every kind of disorder triumphantly reign."<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Continental officers also found the militia more difficult to control. A fact Washington reinforced in another

letter to Congress. “All the General Officers agree, that no Dependance [*sic*] can be put on the Militia for a continuance in Camp, or Regularity and Discipline during the short time they must stay.”<sup>21</sup>

It was the lack of good order and discipline within the militia that resulted in Washington writing to Congress on 24 September 1776 that, “If I was called upon to declare upon Oath, whether the Militia have been most serviceable or hurtful upon the whole; I should subscribe to the latter.”<sup>22</sup> Washington described the militia as more “hurtful” than “serviceable” shortly after thirteen Connecticut militia units, serving under his command, had deserted in the heat of the battle. In August of 1776, at the Battle of Long Island, 6,000 out of 8,000 Connecticut Militia ran from the battlefield when forced to face the British Army volley for volley.<sup>23</sup> The results were disastrous and Washington quickly had to withdraw his remaining forces.

To place any dependence [*sic*] upon Militia, is, assuredly, resting upon a broken staff. Men just dragged from the tender Scenes of domestick [*sic*] life; unaccustomed to the din of Arms; totally unacquainted with every kind of Military skill, which being followed by a want of confidence in themselves, when opposed to Troops regularly train'd, disciplined, and appointed, superior in knowledge, and superior in Arms, makes them timid, and ready to fly from their own shadows. Besides, the sudden change in their manner of living, (particularly in the lodging) brings on sickness in many; impatience in all, and such an unconquerable desire of returning to their respective homes that it not only produces shameful, and scandalous Desertions among themselves, but infuses the like spirit in others.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to instilling the spirit to desert in the Continental soldiers, the militia also instilled a spirit of ill discipline within Washington’s army. Washington could not afford to subject his nascent army to the militia’s high desertion rates or their lack of discipline. Washington understood the importance of maintaining the ability to field a respectable Continental Army. He could not afford to jeopardize this goal with the

unreliable soldiers of the militia. Likewise, he could not allow the spirit of the ill-disciplined militia soldier to pervade his Continental forces. According to Washington:

To bring Men to a proper degree of Subordination, is not the work of a day, a Month or even a year; and unhappily for us, and the cause we are Engaged in, the little discipline I have been labouring to establish in the Army under my immediate Command, is in a manner done away by having such a mixture of Troops as have been called together within these few Months.<sup>25</sup>

The problems of discipline were exacerbated because militia soldiers fighting alongside continentals were subject to a different set of regulations. Although the Continental soldiers were punished under the Articles of War as outlined by the Continental Congress, militia soldiers fell under the rules and regulations of their colonies. These differences led to jealousy between soldiers of the militia and the Continental Army. Washington addressed the jealousy in a letter to Congress.

Relaxed, and unfit, as our Rules and Regulations of War are, for the Government of an Army, the Militia . . . do not think themselves subject to 'em, and therefore take liberties, which the Soldier is punished for; this creates jealousy; jealousy begets dissatisfaction, and these by degrees ripen into Mutiny; keeping the whole Army in a confused, and disordered State; rendering the time of those who wish to see regularity and good Order prevail more unhappy than Words can describe. Besides this, such repeated changes take place, that all arrangement is set at nought, and the constant fluctuation of things, deranges every plan, as fast as adopted.<sup>26</sup>

As the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, Washington recognized the different standards that existed between soldiers of the Continental Army and the militia. He used this knowledge to formulate his strategy. The political, social, and economic factors that governed the militia prevented Washington from using them in close proximity to his main Continental forces. This was prudent strategy considering Washington's need to maintain his Continental Army to retain legitimacy in the minds of possible international supporters.

On occasion, Washington did make disparaging remarks about the militia, but the comments were always well founded when put in context with the situation. Some historians take these few comments out of context and conclude that Washington despised the militia and considered them less than useless. Although prior to 1777 this assessment of Washington had some validity, over time Washington learned to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the militia. Washington always included the militia when developing his strategy, but his experience caused him to give the militia limited roles. As the Commander in Chief, Washington had to have a dependable force to formulate his strategy, and the militia proved it was not that force. Washington could not accept the militia's habit of coming and going as they pleased and his implementation of the militia organization reflected this fact. After 1776, Washington generally considered strategies that used the militia to guard garrisons and harass the flank and rear areas of British soldiers. Furthermore, Washington's opinion of the importance of the militia is confirmed when he wrote his *Sentiments on a Peace Establishment*.

A Peace Establishment for the United States of America may in my opinion be classed under four different heads:

First. A regular and standing force . . .

Secondly. A well organized Militia; upon a Plan that will pervade all the States, and introduce similarity in their establishment Manoeuvres [*sic*], Exercise and Arms.<sup>27</sup>

As Washington considered in 1783 what the future composition of the Army should be, he opined how important the militia was to the United States. However, he also made it clear the militia could not resemble the one he witnessed during the Revolutionary War. The militia must be well organized and possess a national uniformity that did not exist during the war when each state's militia had its own rules, regulations,

and level of training. Regardless of a few disparaging remarks, just as he had as the Commander of the Virginia Regiment in 1758 when he often compared his militia unit to be the equal to any British force, Washington appreciated and understood the value of the militia.

Problems with the command structure also caused Washington to question the reliability of using militia forces when formulating strategy. Washington and his subordinate commanders needed to synchronize the efforts of the Continental Army with those of the militia, but recognized cooperation between the Continental Army and the militia was not without friction.<sup>28</sup> During the Saratoga campaign of 1777, New Hampshire Colonel John Stark refused to work with the Continental Army's Major General Horatio Gates who was overall in command of the Northern Department. Stark and his 2,000 men refused to serve in the same ranks with the Continental Army.<sup>29</sup> Despite Stark's refusal to work with Gates, in one of the decisive successes of the revolution, Stark, working independently, led his militia during the battle at Bennington, to successfully defeat Colonel Frederick Baum of the British Army.

In the late summer of 1777, General Burgoyne was marching his army south from Canada to link up with General Howe, Commander in Chief of the British forces in North America. Thinking the populace was supportive to the crown, Burgoyne expected the citizens of Vermont and New York to welcome his army. Instead, he met hostility throughout the movement. The hostility hindered his ability to forage and the army was soon in need of supplies. Burgoyne was told of a large quantity of rebel supplies at Bennington and sent 800 men under the command of Baum to obtain the supplies. Stark learned of the attempt to resupply and quickly moved to spoil the logistical effort. During

the battle, Stark's men killed 207 British and captured 700 prisoners while only suffering 14 killed in action and 40 wounded.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, the independent action prevented Burgoyne from obtaining the desperately needed resupply and was instrumental in Burgoyne's subsequent surrender to Gates two months later at Saratoga. Immediately after Burgoyne's surrender to Gates, Stark marched his men back to Connecticut so he would not have to take orders from a Continental officer.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of command structure problems occurred in June of 1781. Major General Nathanael Greene who was in charge of the Southern Department also was unable to get the militia commanders to follow his orders. During their Southern Campaign, the British had seized Ninety-Six, an important interior post. Greene formed a plan to retake Ninety-Six. Greene received intelligence that the British learned of Greene's plan and were sending reinforcements from Charleston. To protect his siege of Ninety-Six, Greene ordered Brigadier General Thomas Sumter who was in charge of the South Carolina militia to delay the reinforcing British unit. Despite clear orders, Sumter did nothing to delay the British force. The British forces marched unimpeded and quickly arrived causing Greene's attempt to secure Ninety-Six to fail. Greene had to withdraw his forces.<sup>32</sup>

Adding to Greene's command struggles, in August, Sumter temporarily disbanded his militia forces without Greene's authority. Greene wrote of the incident, "If he [supposes] himself at liberty to employ those troops independent of the Continental Army, it is time he should be convinced to the contrary. . . . The country will be left open to the enemy to ravage and the Continental Army exposed to any attack which the enemy may think proper to attempt while the troops are at home on furlough."<sup>33</sup> Throughout the

war, Continental officers could not rely on militia officers to support their command decisions. The problems with the command structure between Continental and militia officers prevented Washington and his subordinate commanders from formulating strategy that integrated the Continental Army with militia forces.

Immediately after the New York campaign, Washington was desperately trying to rebuild the Continental Army for the second time in less than a year. He had witnessed more than 6,000 militia soldiers run in fear when forced to trade volleys with the British forces. The circumstances led the Commander in Chief to make disparaging remarks concerning the militia. He recognized that the militia in its current state was poorly organized, and dissimilar in both regulations and training. As the Commander in Chief trying to create and maintain the Continental Army as a professional and legitimate force, Washington could ill afford to rely on this type of militia or even allow them to interact with his Continentals. Washington also acknowledged problems with the command structure between the militia and Continental officers. Although Washington continued to use the militia for many military functions throughout the Revolution, he recognized the militia's lack of discipline, inconsistent regulations and training, and problems with the command structure and cleverly used the militia in limited roles.

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<sup>1</sup>Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, 54.

<sup>2</sup>John D. Waghelstein. "Regulars, Irregulars and Militia: The American Revolution." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 6 no. 2 (autumn 1995): 153.

<sup>3</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 54.

<sup>4</sup>Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., 7.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 53.
- <sup>9</sup>Higginbotham, 10.
- <sup>10</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 53.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup>Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 731.
- <sup>13</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 52.
- <sup>14</sup>Huber, *Compound Warfare: That Fatal Knot*, 68.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., 53.
- <sup>16</sup>Higginbotham, 11.
- <sup>17</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 54.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., 12.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 24 September 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>21</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 10 July 1775, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>22</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 24 September 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>23</sup>Boatner, 706.
- <sup>24</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 24 September 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup>Morris J. MacGregor, Jr and Robert K. Wright, Jr., eds., *Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 193.

<sup>28</sup>Waghelstein, 137.

<sup>29</sup>John K. Mahon, *History of the Militia and the National Guard* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 43.

<sup>30</sup>Boatner, 67-77; Benson Bobrick. *Fight for Freedom: The American Revolutionary War*, 40, 46; and Mahon, 42-43. These sources discuss the Battle of Bennington.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Boatner, 804-808, 1,007; and Waghelstein, 147-149. These sources discuss the Battle of Nintey-Six.

<sup>33</sup>Greene to Colonel William Henderson, 16 August 1781, Rhode Island Historical Society, Greene Papers, No.5696, LCo, No.DLC5965.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE EVOLVING STRATEGY

In deliberating on this Question it was impossible to forget, that History, our own experience, the advice of our ablest Friends in Europe, the fears of the Enemy, and even the Declarations of Congress demonstrate, that on our Side the War should be defensive. It has even been called a War of Posts. That we should on all Occasions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risque [*sic*], unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn.<sup>1</sup>

George Washington

As the American Revolution began, Washington and his subordinate commanders lacked the experience required to successfully build, maintain, and employ large units on the battlefield. Although Washington and many of his general officers benefited from combat experience in the French and Indian War, it was at a much smaller scale. However, over time the officers of the Continental Army, especially Washington, learned how to combine their past experiences with their current environment to achieve success. Arguably, Washington made tactical mistakes, especially early in the war. In addition, Washington did not initially understand how the weaknesses of the Continental Army and the militia would limit his effectiveness as the Commander in Chief. Diplomatic, economic, and social factors prevented Washington and his subordinate commanders from developing a strategy that employed the Continental Army and the militia as a synchronized force. However, as the individual most responsible for planning the rebellious colonies military actions, Washington was a flexible strategist. He applied the lessons he learned fighting the enemy to adjust his strategy in a manner that would allow the rebellious colonies to win the American Revolution.

Washington started the war with an aggressive offensive strategy, combining his ambitious nature with his experiences as a regimental commander during the French and Indian War. Washington was certain his forces could defeat the British Army in a single decisive action. During the New York Campaign of 1776, this aggressive strategy allowed the British to devastate the Continental Army. Despite his nature, Washington learned from the experience and switched the strategy of the Continental Army, adopting a limited offensive strategy only attacking when his forces had an advantage over the British Army and he was sure of success. Because Washington understood the inherent risks of a primarily defensive approach to the war, he kept his forces busy by ordering constant harassing action against the British Army from both Continental and militia forces. Washington developed a strategy of attrition intended to protect his forces while eroding the enemy's strengths with hit and run tactics mainly against British outposts.<sup>2</sup> Washington's strategy was meant to disrupt the actions of the British Army while wearing down the resolve of the British government and keeping his soldiers active enough to maintain their discipline and preserve their states' support. In 1778, three events occurred that again altered Washington's strategy. First, the French agreed to provide both soldiers and naval support to the Americans. Second, the Continental Army capitalized on Congressional approval of long-term enlistments. Third General von Steuben arrived to form a professional and disciplined army. The combination of these events allowed Washington to once again think offensively in the development of his strategy. Although Washington maintained a defensive approach, he started to look for the opportunity to defeat the British with a decisive action that would knock the British Army out of the war. Although he envisioned the decisive action to take place around

New York City, events occurred that would cause Washington, who learned to be flexible in his strategy, to refocus on the British forces in the southern theater. Although no one knew it at the time, Washington's flexible strategy worked and Yorktown would be the last campaign of the American Revolution. Washington's defensive efforts combined with limited offensive actions had worn London down to the point where the Americans' decisive victory at Yorktown broke the will of the Parliament.

Washington's flexible strategy was quite an accomplishment. Nearly a century later, Helmut von Moltke, the renowned Chief of the Prussian General Staff and one of Europe's greatest soldiers, characterized Washington's actions of taking a beaten army and leading it to victory as unrivaled making the American Commander in Chief, in Moltke's opinion, "one of the greatest strategists of the world."<sup>3</sup> Moltke's praise is especially complimentary because he despised American warfare.

When Washington arrived in Boston on 3 July 1775, he assumed command of the same Continental soldiers who had fought as New England Militia on 19 April 1775 during the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and then successfully besieged the Commander in Chief of the British Army in North America, General Thomas Gage, and his entire army in the city of Boston.<sup>4</sup> On 17 June, the militia soldiers earned a superb reputation for their military efforts at Bunker Hill. Although the militia mistakenly emplaced their defensive fortifications on the much less defensible Breed's Hill, their overall actions were commendable as they inflicted heavy casualties on the British Army before running out of ammunition. Bolstered by General Richard's Howe's ill conceived frontal attacks, the American militia repulsed two British attacks before lack of ammunition forced a withdrawal as the British conducted their third frontal attack.

During the battle, 3,000 American militia suffered only 140 deaths and 301 wounded while inflicting over 1,150 casualties against 2,500 British soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The actions of the New England Militia were not planned events. No one planned a siege of Boston. The Battle of Lexington, often referred to as “the shot heard ‘round the world,” started a series of events resulting in the serendipitous siege of the British Army in Boston.<sup>6</sup>

Washington had not formulated a strategy when he took command. Before Congress or Washington could consider any long range strategy or military plan, the militia had besieged the British at Boston. At the time, few Congressional delegates, including Washington, believed there was a need for a long-term strategy. The leaders of the rebellion hoped the events at Boston would shock the British Parliament into seeking efforts of conciliation and that no military action beyond the Boston campaign would be required.<sup>7</sup> After the British government failed to acquiesce to the demands of the colonists, Washington needed to form a plan. Washington formed his initial military strategy based on his aggressive nature, military background, and the success the militia experienced against the British at Bunker Hill. The initial American philosophy was an aggressive offensive strategy that included seizing Canada.<sup>8</sup> The Continental Congress believed that for the revolution to succeed in North America it would have to succeed everywhere in North America. Washington concurred with the Congressional notion that a British governmental influence in Canada would leave an independent America very insecure.<sup>9</sup>

Although the initial efforts of Washington and Congress were not synchronized, the Continental Army started the Canada invasion in August 1775. The Canada invasion ended in failure in October 1776 and proved to be an overextension of the Continental

Army's very scarce resources. Politically, the invasion failed to precipitate a Canadian rebellion against England. Militarily, in addition to the failure to gain any territory or earn additional patriotic support, the invasion cost the life of the Army's most experienced general, Richard Montgomery. Montgomery had been educated in England and served on numerous campaigns abroad as a British officer before resigning his commission in April 1772 to come to the colonies.<sup>10</sup> It is not possible to calculate the effect the loss of Montgomery had on the Continental Army during the rest of the war. The failed invasion also was an essential factor in causing Washington to discard the offensive attitude and adopt a defensive approach with limited offensive actions as his strategy. He explained this in a letter to his commander in New York, Philip Schuyler.

By Reason of the Succession of Ills that has attended us there of late, and this last one, I fear we must give up all Hopes of possessing that Country [Canada] of such Importance in the present Controversy, and that our Views and utmost Exertions must be turned, to prevent the Incursions of the Enemy into our Colonies. To this End, I must pray your strictest Attention and request that you use all the Means in your Power, to fortify and secure every Post and Place of Importance on the Communication.<sup>11</sup>

Before Washington's offensive failed to yield results in Canada, he developed a plan to defeat the British Army in a decisive action at Boston. Although a shortage of ammunition and weapons prevented an immediate attack, Washington wanted to conduct offensive actions before British reinforcements arrived in the spring. Washington's plan was to seize Dorchester Heights, the only piece of high ground not held by either side. Washington wanted to reinforce the position and force the British into a frontal attack similar to their action at Bunker Hill.

To conduct his plan Washington needed the artillery that had been captured by the militia at Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point in May 1775. Washington ordered Henry

Knox to secure the artillery and transport it to Boston. Knox would need to transport the artillery a distance of over 300 miles in the middle of winter. On 16 November 1775, Knox started his movement. By 24 January 1776, the first of 59 artillery pieces (14 mortars, two howitzers and 43 cannons), 2,300 pounds of lead, and a barrel of flints reached Boston.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of the artillery, the Continental Army was ready to seize Dorchester Heights. The problem was that the frozen ground would make pick and shovel work impossible. Rufus Putnam suggested fortifying the position using prefabricated material.<sup>13</sup> On the night of 4 March 1776, 2,000 Continental soldiers moved 350 ox carts filled with fortification material onto Dorchester Heights. In the morning, when the fog had lifted, Howe saw what Washington's men had done and purportedly said, "The rebels have done more in one night than my whole army could do in months."<sup>14</sup> Having set the conditions to force an attack, the Continental Army waited. However, Howe was reluctant to conduct a frontal attack to remove the artillery atop Dorchester Heights. Instead, on 17 March 1776, Howe evacuated Boston and took his army to Halifax leaving no British force on American soil.<sup>15</sup>

From the time the British Army evacuated Boston, many patriots including Washington, believed their destination would be New York City. Although the British spent the rest of the winter in Halifax, they had already started making plans for their New York Campaign. New York City was a superb harbor for the conduct of naval operations.<sup>16</sup> By capturing the city, the British could isolate the resources and people of the New England colonies from the rest of the colonies. In addition, the British could use the city's infrastructure to garrison their army. Based on these strategic advantages, in the

summer of 1776 the British Ministry decided to begin its campaign by seizing New York City. The Ministry supported what would be its largest effort of the war by focusing 32,000 soldiers and almost half of the Royal Navy against New York City.<sup>17</sup>

Washington and the Continental Congress understood the strategic importance of New York City and dispatched General Charles Lee from Boston on 4 February 1776 to prepare the defense of the city.<sup>18</sup> After the British evacuated Boston, Washington established his headquarters in New York City arriving there on 13 April 1776. At the time, Washington and his subordinate commanders had not fully experienced the setback that would occur as the result of the Canada invasion. The American confidences were boosted by the successes at Bunker Hill, Fort Ticonderoga, and forcing the British out of Boston. With these successes in mind, Washington started to prepare the defense of New York City with the idea of defeating the British in one decisive action.

With the help of his subordinates, Washington developed the defense of the city. Washington's plan completely integrated the soldiers of the Continental Army with their militia counterparts. Before fighting started, the officers of the Continental Army discussed the untenable nature of the city against such a formidable opponent but believed their soldiers could overcome the mismatch as they had at Bunker Hill. Although Washington is criticized for the tactical decisions of splitting his forces between New York and Brooklyn and his failure to use cavalry for reconnaissance to protect his flanks during the New York Campaign, his strategy lost the campaign. Without a naval force to mitigate the effects of the Royal British Navy, Washington's plan to defend New York City was imprudent. Although tactical mistakes hastened the ability of the British Army to defeat the Americans, even better tactics could not have

prevented defeat. Without even considering the naval advantage, Washington was already outnumbered two to one. His relatively inexperienced soldiers were facing a professional force that not only had the freedom of maneuver, but also the flexibility to choose the time and place of attack.

On 27 August 1776, Howe landed on Washington's flank and forced the withdrawal of American forces from Long Island. The militia responded to the attack by heading home in large groups. The Connecticut Militia dwindled from 8,000 to 2,000 soldiers. In his first major combat battle, Washington witnessed the loss of nearly one third of his forces due to desertion. In addition, some of the soldiers who remained were weaponless because they abandoned their weapons and gear during their retreat. Reports indicated that Washington was filled with rage and despondence as he watched the soldiers flee without a fight.<sup>19</sup>

The disastrous events on Long Island forced a quick change in strategy. After conferring with Congress, Washington agreed to withdraw the Continental Army from New York City. Washington wrote Congress of the situation on 8 September:

That the Enemy mean to winter in New York there can be no doubt; that with such an Armament they can drive us out is equally clear. The Congress having resolved, that it should not be destroyed, nothing seems to remain but to determine the time of their taking Possession It is our Interest and wish to prolong it, as much as possible, provided the delay does not affect our further measures. The Militia of Connecticut is reduced from 8000 to less than 2000 and in a few days will be merely nominal; the arrival of some Maryland Troops from the flying Camp, has in a great degree supplied the loss of Men, but the Ammunition they have carried away will be a loss sensibly felt. The impulse for going home was so irrisistable [*sic*], it answered no purpose to oppose it, tho' I could not discharge, I have been obliged to acquiesce; and it affords one more melancholy Proof how delusive such dependences are.<sup>20</sup>

However, Washington's belligerent nature got the best of him, and he was convinced that a small contingent could use what was considered a nearly impenetrable

garrison at Fort Washington to inflict numerous casualties upon the enemy before being able to withdraw from the back of the fortification. So as Washington fled with his army to the Delaware River to try to stay between the advancing enemy and the capital of Philadelphia, Howe's army encircled Fort Washington and quickly captured the 3,000 soldiers Washington had left to harass and delay the enemy.<sup>21</sup> The end of 1776 was the lowest point the Continental Army experienced. The Canada invasion had failed, the British easily defeated the Continental Army at New York City, and the year long enlistments of the soldiers were once again expiring. Washington had less than 2,500 soldiers at his disposal to employ. He fully understood that the desperate situation required action in order to keep the cause of the revolution alive.<sup>22</sup> Washington discussed his strategy in a letter to Joseph Spencer.

We are all of Opinion my dear General that something must be attempted to revive our expiring Credit give our Cause some degree of Reputation and prevent a total Depreciation of the Continental Money which is coming on very fast. That even a Failure cannot be more fatal than to remain in our present Situation in short some Enterprize [*sic*] must be undertaken in our present Circumstances or we must give up the Cause. . . . Will it not be possible My dear Genl. for your Troops or such Part of them as can Act with Advantage to make a Diversion or something more at or about Trenton. The greater the Alarm the more likely Success will attend the Attacks. If we could possess ourselves again of New Jersey or any considerable Part of it the Effect would be greater than if we had never left it.<sup>23</sup>

Washington planned an unorthodox campaign to take advantage of Howe's forces that were scattered throughout New Jersey in their winter quarters. On Christmas night, Washington attacked Trenton. His force of 2,500 Continentals captured or killed 1,000 enemy Hessians before retreating to safety behind the Delaware River.<sup>24</sup>

Washington then called upon the militia to build additional reinforcements to attack another British garrison at Princeton. In reaction to Washington's attack on

Trenton, British General Charles Cornwallis led 6,000 soldiers to conduct a counter-attack. Washington maneuvered around Cornwallis' advancing force and attacked at Princeton inflicting nearly 400 casualties. The strategy to attack Trenton and Princeton revived the revolutionary cause and forced the British to evacuate two thirds of New Jersey.<sup>25</sup> Washington understood the desperate situation needed to be reversed and developed a strategy to change the momentum. Washington's willingness and audacity kept the revolution alive.

At the end of 1776, the Americans used their experiences to reevaluate their strategy. Washington was flexible enough to consider the diplomatic, social, and economic factors that affected him and changed his strategy accordingly. Washington realized that he must adopt a defensive attitude to succeed. He understood this type of strategy would protract the war and present great risks to the patriotic cause.<sup>26</sup> The lack of American resources reduced the rebels' chances for success if the war dragged on. Recruiting soldiers for a limited time proved too difficult. A protracted war would require recruits to serve long term enlistments which would make recruiting even more difficult. However, Washington recognized the war did not depend on a geographical location on the battlefield but on his ability to ensure the Continental Army remained a viable force.<sup>27</sup> Washington informed the Continental Congress, "The dissolution of the Army is an event that cannot be regarded with indifference. It would bring accumulated distress upon us. It would throw the people of America into a general consternation. It would discredit our cause throughout the World."<sup>28</sup> Washington correctly considered the Continental Army to be the backbone of the revolution. He knew the army in its current state was inferior to the professional British force and it should not be risked except

under extreme circumstances.<sup>29</sup> Washington wrote, “They will know it is our Arms, not defenceless Towns, they have to Subdue, before they can arrive at the haven of their Wishes, and that, till this end is accomplished.”<sup>30</sup>

As a result of the disasters in 1776, Washington started to recognize that diplomatic, social, and economic factors would limit his strategic options. He adopted a defensive approach and was determined to win the American Revolution by keeping the Continental Army alive. He wanted to avoid the risks of protracted war that can develop from a lack of action. Therefore, he included limited offensive actions whenever possible. He continually frustrated the British with small raids and removed supplies from the grasp of the British while remaining just outside the reach of the enemy. An example of this strategy is witnessed in Washington’s letter to General Israel Putnam, “Such skirmishes as may be effected in this manner, will be agreeable to the rules of propriety, and may be attended with salutary effects, inasmuch as it will inure the Troops to Fatigue and danger; will harass the Enemy, may make prisoners and prevent their parties from getting the Horses and Cattle . . . which are objects of infinite importance to us.”<sup>31</sup> Washington was convinced a limited offensive would mitigate the risk of the protracted war. Washington believed a limited offensive could prevent the Americans from being interpreted as cowards or suffer a loss to the momentum of the patriotic cause. The hope of American leadership was that a protracted war would incite opposition among the British populace and strengthen America’s diplomatic position in Europe. At this time, Washington did not believe foreign aid would appear but by keeping the Continental Army alive and credible, he was setting the conditions for possible help from European

nations.<sup>32</sup> This strategy, combined with the future success at Saratoga, would earn the Americans much needed French support.

In addition to understanding the need to switch his offensive strategy to a defensive attitude, Washington also understood the need to change his strategy regarding the use of militia forces. The potential threat of desertion of the militia prevented Washington from forming a plan that employed the militia as an integrated unit with the Continental Army. This limitation was reinforced when Washington realized the poor discipline of the militia had the same ability to destroy the Continental Army as the military might of the British forces. These factors forced Washington to use the militia as an auxiliary force and he tried to employ the militia with the Continental Army only in extraordinary circumstances. Washington explained his strategy to the Continental Congress.

My first wish is, that Congress may be convinced from experience of the indispensable necessity propriety of relying as little as possible upon Militia, and of the necessity of raising a larger standing Army than they have voted, the saving in the Article of Stores, Provisions and in a thousand other things by having nothing to do with Militia, unless in cases of extraordinary emergency and such as could not be expected in the common course of events, would amply support a large Army which would daily be improving instead of allways [*sic*]continuing a destructive, expensive and disorderly Mob [militia].<sup>33</sup>

By assuming a defensive attitude, the Americans were forced to react to British action instead of initiating their own. In 1777, the British focused on the rebel capital of Philadelphia. The British strategy was to have General Burgoyne cooperate with General Howe and move his Army southward from Canada to linkup with Howe's forces. Howe left a garrison in New York City and moved toward Philadelphia to capture the city. Washington, who stressed the importance of intelligence throughout the war, was aware of these movements. Some historians have concluded that no general has surpassed or

even matched Washington's diligent efforts to acquire intelligence.<sup>34</sup> He always sought out information using a vast network of spies. One example of such an effort is the following excerpt from a letter to Elias Dayton.

As you are not inconveniently situated to keep a look out upon what may be passing about King's Bridge, in New York and on Staten Island, I wish you to take every method to collect the best intelligence you can of the situation of the Enemy, their Strength and Motions at those several places, and communicate the same to me. With respect to their Strength, I would not have you pay any attention to the vague calculations, that may be made by those of whom you inquire, as to the whole number at either place. If you can only ascertain, with certainty, the particular Regiments and Corps; we shall be able to estimate their numbers better by that, than by any conjectures they can form. The point to be attended to, is to find out how many and what particular corps there are at the different places.<sup>35</sup>

Acting as his own intelligence chief, Washington was able to personally evaluate and react to intelligence reports as they reached his headquarters.<sup>36</sup> This effort served Washington well as the British started the Campaign of 1777. Washington applied the intelligence he had on the movements of Howe and Burgoyne with the lessons he learned in previous actions to develop the American strategy for that year.

Washington recognized that Burgoyne, Howe, and the garrison at New York City were not capable of mutual assistance. Using his intelligence network, Washington accurately surmised the strength of Burgoyne and determined that, with reinforcements, the Continental force in New York could stop Burgoyne's advance. Washington encouraged militia to fight at Saratoga, but based on his experience during the New York Campaign he encouraged the militia to fight in its own style. He sent Israel Putnam, the Northern Department Commander at the time a letter. "The people in the Northern Army seem so intimidated by the Indians that I have determined to send up Colonel Morgan's Corps of Rifle Men who will fight them in their own way."<sup>37</sup> In a postscript Washington

added, “500 is the true strength of Morgan’s Corps, but it will answer a good purpose if you give out they are double that number.”<sup>38</sup> Despite his reluctance to employ militia soldiers alongside Continental soldiers, Washington understood the importance of the militia and employed them in accordance with their capabilities.

In addition to encouraging militia involvement, Washington’s strategy helped the Saratoga campaign in other ways. Washington sent Benedict Arnold, considered his best field commander at the time, and two Continental brigades to support the fight against Burgoyne. Washington also sent the Polish engineer Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko to build field fortifications on Bemis Heights, which became instrumental in the success of the American forces at Saratoga. Benefiting from the expertise of the Commander in Chief, the Northern Department, under the command of Horatio Gates, forced Burgoyne and his 7,000 soldiers to surrender on 17 October 1777.<sup>39</sup>

For physical and psychological reasons, just prior to the surrender at Saratoga, Washington was compelled to use his forces to defend the capital of Philadelphia. Washington formed a defensive plan around Brandywine Creek. On 11 September 1777, the Battle of Brandywine, the largest battle of the war, pitted 16,000 American soldiers against 18,000 British. It was the only time after adopting the defensive strategy that Washington was forced to fight a large scale battle that would put the Continental Army at risk.<sup>40</sup> Again, Washington made the error of neglecting to protect his flanks and Howe’s army conducted a successful flank attack.<sup>41</sup> Howe quickly defeated Washington’s force and secured Philadelphia.

After successfully seizing the rebel capital, Howe dispersed garrisons along the route in order to secure his lines of communications. Washington noted this dispersion

and in the spirit of the limited offensive attacked the garrison at Germantown on 4 October 1777.<sup>42</sup> Washington's force of 11,000 soldiers was successful and sent the 9,000 British soldiers into a retreat.<sup>43</sup> The British were able to regroup and after a counter attack, the Americans were forced to withdraw. The battle ended with approximately 670 dead and wounded Americans to nearly 540 British casualties.<sup>44</sup> Although not a clear victory, the Battle of Germantown exemplified Washington's strategy of limited offensive maneuvers. The actions of the Continental Army's soldiers were considered successful when compared to the previous Battle of Brandywine.

The end of 1777 brought a close to the second British campaign. The British held only enclaves at New York City, Newport, and Philadelphia. The Continental Army with the help of the militia controlled the rest of the country. In addition, the military success at Saratoga was enough to influence increased French support and again give Washington the opportunity to prove himself a flexible strategist. Up to this point, Washington and his subordinate commanders' defensive strategy with limited offensive actions was successful in keeping the Continental Army alive. Washington's efforts to mitigate the risks associated with protracted war were working.

In February 1778, France, convinced by the military success of Saratoga that America could win the war, signed a treaty of alliance that went beyond financial support by including troop and naval support. Washington envisioned the French alliance as a method of escaping the cautious defensive strategy with only limited offensive actions into an ambitious offensive that would compel the government in London to abandon the war effort.<sup>45</sup> Washington recognized the importance of naval support as witnessed in a letter to Marquis de Lafayette, "In any operation, and under all circumstances a decisive

Naval superiority is to be considered as a fundamental principle, and the basis upon which every hope of success must ultimately depend.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, for the first time since the start of the war Washington was not creating a new army in conjunction with the start of a new year. The Continental Army took advantage of its long term enlistments granted by Congress and developed a professional, well-trained army under the training oversight of von Steuben.

Although Washington was ready to abandon the defensive concept, French support would not arrive for some time making caution the key ingredient to any planned strategy. After General Henry Clinton replaced Howe as the Commander in Chief of the British Army of North American forces, he made a plan to evacuate Philadelphia and consolidate his forces in New York City. Washington’s intelligence network proved successful again and the Continental officers formed a plan to attrit the 10,000 British soldiers as they marched north to New York City.

Under Washington’s plan, the New Jersey Militia attacked Clinton’s soldiers as they moved through New Jersey. A Hessian officer characterized the movement as, “each step cost human blood.”<sup>47</sup> In addition, Washington attacked the rear of Clinton’s column near Monmouth Courthouse. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, Monmouth Courthouse would be the last major battle in the Northern Department. The Continental Army proved it was now trained and disciplined to the point it could exchange volleys with the British.

After 1778, England considered America a secondary theater and reevaluated its strategy to contend with worldwide challenges.<sup>48</sup> Making matters worse, Spain and the Netherlands declared war on England. Assuming there was more loyalist support in the southern states, England developed a southern strategy in December 1778. The British

Government's southern strategy was to capitalize on the perceived colonial support to establish the southern colonies as a British stronghold enabling their army to coordinate operations in the United States with actions in the Caribbean. Washington was still anticipating a decisive action against the main British forces at New York City using the advantage of French support. While waiting for French forces to arrive, Washington continued his limited offensive philosophy. Washington countered the British efforts in the Southern Department by sending Continental soldiers, supplies, and working with Congress to place his best commander, Nathanael Greene, in charge of the Southern Department. Eventually Congress agreed to Washington's request.<sup>49</sup> Washington worked closely with Greene in developing the military actions of American forces in the Southern Department.

I shall wish you to keep me as regularly and accurately informed of the state of your Department as possible, noting the strength, movements and position of your own Army, and that of the Enemy; it may also be essential for me to be made acquainted with the Resources of the Country and every thing of a Military or Political Nature, which may be interesting to our future plans and operations.<sup>50</sup>

Although Greene never won a battle during the Southern campaign, he used a strategy of attrition to successfully defeat the British attempt to gain control of the South. In the spring of 1781 Greene's constant maneuver and adroit combat forced General Cornwallis to retreat to Yorktown to rest and rearm his attrited army. At the time, Washington was planning his decisive action against the British main forces at New York City. Washington had received a 4,000 man French expeditionary force commanded by Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau.<sup>51</sup> Washington also awaited a thirty-four ship fleet under the command of Admiral François de Grasse.

Although Washington envisioned a decisive action against Clinton's main forces in New York City, on 14 August 1781 Washington received a message from de Grasse stating the admiral was sailing his fleet to Chesapeake Bay.<sup>52</sup> Washington showed his flexibility and ordered his army southward to trap Cornwallis at Yorktown. He directed the French naval squadron at Newport to bring the siege and artillery provisions to Chesapeake Bay. The Continental Army, in conjunction with its French allies, conducted the most synchronized campaign of the war. The movement of Washington's army toward the south went flawlessly. Both of the French naval fleets arrived on time and unscathed. Greene's army successfully kept Cornwallis from moving south into North Carolina prior to the arrival of Washington's forces. Although Cornwallis made efforts to fortify his position at Yorktown with the intention of receiving reinforcements or if necessary to retreat, he did not anticipate the French fleet isolating his army from the Royal Navy.

During the Yorktown campaign, which included not only the famous Battle of Yorktown but also the naval action at the Battle of Virginia Capes, two French naval squadrons, 5,700 Continental soldiers, 3,100 militia, and 7,000 French soldiers encircled Cornwallis and his force of 8,000. In a decisive land battle on 14 October 1781, Washington conducted a night assault on two key redoubts. On 17 October 1781, Cornwallis agreed to surrender. No one thought this was the war's last campaign, especially Washington who began preparing for the next year. "Being fully sensible that you are ever attentive to the health and convenience as well as the discipline and good Order of the Troops, I need not be more particular, than just to mention that the Army should be so disposed of, and accommodated, in their Winter Quarters, as to render them

fit for early, vigorous, and decisive action in the Spring.”<sup>53</sup> The British still held Savannah, Charleston, and New York City. However, for Britain the war was not just going poorly in America, but throughout the world. Although the British still had 20,000 soldiers in North America, many more than the Continental Army, Yorktown broke Parliament’s will to continue. Although the official peace agreement did not come until 3 September 1783, major fighting ended as a result of the action at Yorktown. Needing to preserve the rest of its empire, the British Ministry succumbed to the threat of the French and to the delaying tactics employed by Washington and his subordinates.<sup>54</sup>

When the American Revolution started, no one believed there was a need for a long term military strategy. Bolstered by the successes of Bunker Hill and forcing the British out of Boston, the Americans began an aggressive offensive plan that included the seizure of Canada. At the time, Washington did not understand how the political, social, and economic factors would combine to limit his strategy. But quickly after the defeats of the Canadian invasion and the New York Campaign of 1776, Washington adopted a less risky defensive philosophy with the additional dimension of always considering limited offensive actions. The defensive served Washington and the Continental Army well. However, as soon as Washington received word that the French would provide troop and naval support, the Commander in Chief started to lean toward the aggressive strategy that he preferred. As events throughout the world unfolded, Washington proved his flexibility by developing the plan that would force Cornwallis to surrender his Army at Yorktown, which in turn destroyed the will of the British Parliament and ended the war. By adjusting his military plans to meet the changing environment, Washington proved he understood

the limitations diplomatic, social, and economic factors placed on his ability to implement strategy.

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<sup>1</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 8 September 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup>Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Eberhard Kessel, *Moltke* (Stuttgart, GE: K.F. Koehler Verlag Stuttgart, 1957), 509.

<sup>4</sup>Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 95.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 120-130.

<sup>6</sup>Benson Bobrick, *Fight for Freedom: The American Revolutionary War*, 12.

<sup>7</sup>Weigley, 7.

<sup>8</sup>Higginbotham. *The War of American Independence*, 57.

<sup>9</sup>Weigley, 7.

<sup>10</sup>Boatner, 726.

<sup>11</sup>Washington to Philip J. Schuyler, 24 June 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>12</sup>Boatner, 588.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>15</sup>Millet and Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, 62.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>18</sup>Boatner, 797.

<sup>19</sup>Weigley, 10.

<sup>20</sup>Washington to Continental Congress, 8 September 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>21</sup>George Athan Billias, *George Washington's Generals*, 9.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker, ed., *The Readers Companion to Military History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 508.

<sup>23</sup>Washington to Joseph Spencer, 22 December 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 66.

<sup>25</sup>Cowley and Parker, 508.

<sup>26</sup>Weigley, 5.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>28</sup>Washington to Congress, 20 August 1780, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>29</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 66.

<sup>30</sup>Washington to Henry Laurens, 3 October 1778, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup>Washington to Israel Putnam, 25 October 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup>Weigley, 5.

<sup>33</sup>Washington to Congress, 5 December 1776, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Washington to Elias Dayton, 14 August 1777, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 67.

<sup>37</sup>Washington to Israel Putnam, 16 October 1777, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Boatner, 978.

<sup>40</sup>Weigley, 11.

<sup>41</sup>Billias, 10.

<sup>42</sup>Bobrick, 44.

<sup>43</sup>Boatner, 426.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 429.

<sup>45</sup>Weigley, 38.

<sup>46</sup>Washington to Marquis de Lafayette, 15 July 1780, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>47</sup>Millet and Maslowski, 69.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>50</sup>Washington to Nathanael Greene, 9 July 1782, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>51</sup>Cowley and Parker, 535.

<sup>52</sup>Boatner, 1,235.

<sup>53</sup>Washington to William Heath, 29 October 1781, Washington's Papers at the Library of Congress.

<sup>54</sup>Boatner, 1,230-1,250; Bobrick, 86-88; and Cowley and Parker, 535-536. These sources discuss the Yorktown Campaign.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE CONCLUSION

If Historiographers should be hardy enough to fill the page of History with the advantages that have been gained with unequal numbers (on the part of America) in the course of this contest, and attempt to relate the distressing circumstances under which they have been obtained, it is more than probable that Posterity will bestow on their labors the epithet and marks of fiction; for it will not be believed that such a force as Great Britain has employed for eight years in this Country could be baffled in their plan of Subjugating it by numbers infinitely less, composed of Men oftentimes half starved; always in Rags, without pay, and experiencing, at times, every species of distress which human nature is capable of undergoing.<sup>1</sup>

George Washington

During the American Revolution, George Washington, as the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, was responsible for determining the military strategy of the rebellious colonies. During the war, diplomatic, social, and economic factors prevented Washington from developing the type of strategy he preferred. Based on his background, military experiences during the French and Indian War, and challenges in establishing, maintaining, and equipping an adequate military force Washington wanted to defeat the British Army in one decisive action using linear tactics which characterized eighteenth century warfare. Initially, Washington developed a very aggressive strategy which included an invasion of Canada and a plan to lure the British Army into a frontal attack that would end the Boston Siege with the destruction of the British Army in North America. Initially, Washington's aggressive strategy did not account for how diplomatic, social, and economic factors would limit his success and affect his relationship with the Continental Congress as well as the capabilities of the Continental Army and the militia.

It was not until the after the British Army nearly annihilated Washington and his forces during the defense of New York City in 1776, that Washington learned to adopt a strategy that fit into the context of his surroundings and incorporated the authority of the Continental Congress as well as the strengths and weaknesses of his army and the militia. Washington assessed the situation and realized his strategy would have to change in order to win the war. Instead of trying to defeat the British in one decisive action, Washington recognized that the Continental Army was the backbone of the revolution. He correctly understood that by keeping his army intact he could keep the revolution alive. With this in mind, he adopted a defensive approach to the war with a limited offensive strategy. He did not initiate battles with the British unless he was in a position of advantage, and avoided battle when he was not. Washington understood the risks in such a strategy and ensured the Continental Army and militia kept pressure on the British Army by using limited offensive actions to harass and disrupt the enemy at every available opportunity.

As Washington tried to establish a professional army, the Continental Congress, always wary of the power of a standing army, adopted measures to ensure it maintained control of Washington and his army. Throughout the war, these measures limited Washington's ability to plan and execute military strategy. Congress appointed all general officers. Many of the appointments were based on political considerations and not military necessity. Because Congress never fully met its requirement to man and equip the army, Washington and his subordinate commanders struggled to maintain good order and discipline. The social and economic reasons that initially prevented Congress from agreeing to long term enlistments for Continental Army soldiers caused numerous problems. Washington and his subordinate Continental officers had to rebuild the army at

the end of 1775 and again at the end of 1776. This challenge prevented the officers from properly training the soldiers. Because it took two years to train a soldier, it was not until the Congress agreed to long term enlistments that the officers in the Continental Army were able to train a professional force. Throughout the war, the Continental Congress took measures to maintain control of the Continental Army, which always meant the military strategy Washington and his subordinates planned and executed was influenced by the Continental Congress.

Although the Continental Army was considered the backbone of the revolution, it was not without its problems. Recruiting shortfalls, training challenges, and complications with the command structure limited Washington's ability to formulate strategy and employ the Continental Army throughout the war. However by 1778, aided by Congressional approval of long term enlistments, the officers of the Continental Army developed their soldiers into a professional organization that was capable of standing force to force with the British Army. Although economics, strained living conditions, and jealousies of militia soldiers caused much consternation among the Continental soldiers, Washington's leadership was able to deter the threat of mutinies and keep the army focused on defeating the British. In addition to recruiting and training, Washington endured problems with the command structure throughout the war. Because officer appointments were often made for political reasons and not military reasons, some individuals believed they were treated unjustly. At times this caused jealousy and insubordination among Washington's officers. Throughout the Revolutionary War, the inability to recruit a sizeable army, the difficulties in training and maintaining the force,

and complications with the command structure limited Washington's ability to plan strategy and employ the Continental Army.

The use of militia was also affected by diplomatic, social and economic factors. Initially, the militia established an outstanding reputation based on the success of besieging the British Army at Boston and their actions at Bunker Hill. Their reputation quickly diminished as 6,000 Connecticut Militia deserted the battlefield during the first major battle of the war. Throughout the war, the Continental officers would experience problems with preventing the militia from leaving at inopportune times and with getting the militia officers to respect their orders. Because the militia followed the rules and regulations of their corresponding state and received their pay from their state, there were many inconsistencies between a militia soldier and a Continental soldier. The amount of money a militia soldier received as an enlistment bonus often exceeded the amount a Continental soldier would receive, even though the term of enlistment was shorter. Also, the militia soldier received less stringent punishment for committing similar offenses as a Continental soldier, because the state governments disciplined their militia organizations, whereas the much more harsh Articles of War governed the misconduct of a Continental soldier.

Despite the militia's lack of discipline, inconsistent regulations and limited training, over time Washington cleverly used the militia in limited roles to complement his strategy. The militia effectively maintained internal security through patrolling against slave insurrections, repelled seaborne raiding parties, guarded garrisons, collected intelligence, transported supplies, and maintained enthusiasm for the patriot cause. However, Washington could not risk employing the Continental Army alongside the

militia. Despite many strengths, the militia proved it could not fight alongside the Continental Army using eighteenth century tactics. In addition, Washington and other Continental officers lacked command and control over the militia because the militia answered to the leaders of their individual states. As Washington fought to keep the Continental Army alive, the British were not its only threat. Because militia soldiers experienced social and economic benefits greater than the Continental soldier, jealousy was rampant among the regular soldier. The lack of discipline within the militia was a constant threat to Continental officers that were trying to keep a well disciplined and professional Continental Army in existence. Once Washington understood how the factors affected his actions, he developed a flexible strategy that combined the military capabilities of the Continental Army, the strengths of the militia, and support from European allies to defeat the British and win independence for the nascent American government.

Examining the factors that influenced Washington's ability to deliberately and systematically plan for the deployment of the Continental Army in a unified effort with the militia serves three main purposes in relation to today's American military. The first purpose relates to how the United States plans to integrate its full time soldiers with United States Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers. The second purpose relates to how the United States helps allied countries like Iraq and Afghanistan build new armies. The third purpose relates to exploiting our adversaries' potential weaknesses by understanding to what extent their leadership understands how political, social, and economic factors can limit their strategy.

From a friendly perspective, even though 230 years have passed since Congress established the Army, leaders within the United States are still in disagreement on how best to combine the capabilities and functions of regular Army soldiers with the capabilities and functions of Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers. This is an important issue as the Army decides which military operational skills will be maintained in the regular Army and which operational skills will only be available in Army Reserve or National Guard units. As these decisions are made and as the Army conducts future operations it is imperative that our leaders, both political and military, understand that similar to the American Revolution, there are differences that will exist between full and part-time soldiers. It is important to recognize that those differences can affect one's ability to develop strategy.

Many of the challenges faced by the Continental Congress and the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War are similar to the challenges the nascent governments and armies are facing in Iraq and Afghanistan. As part of stability and support operations, the United States Army has a critical role in building a national defense system in both Iraq and Afghanistan that will enable each country to unilaterally protect itself from its adversaries. As each country builds its army, it must contend with many of the same issues that Washington faced. As a new government tries to build an army in a country that has been oppressed, there is always fear the army will be too powerful. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have financial challenges that make the prospect of a militia system appealing. Although each situation is not identical, by examining how political, social, and economic factors affected how Washington and his subordinates established, disciplined, trained, and employed the army and militia during the American

Revolution, it is possible to relate those challenges with the establishment, discipline, training, and employment of the armies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In any conflict, it is just as important to know the enemy as it is to know one's self. During the American Revolution, Washington could not employ the strategy he preferred due to social, political and economic factors. Similarly, there are always extenuating factors that will limit the strategy of an enemy army. By identifying the factors that will limit an adversary's ability to employ its preferred strategy, it is possible to better understand its strategy and exploit its weaknesses.

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