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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON; EXEMPLAR-IN-CHIEF:

**A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S INFLUENCE ON THE
EARLY CONTINENTAL ARMY AND CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS**

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Executive Summary

Title: General George Washington; Exemplar-in-Chief: A Historical Analysis of George Washington's Influence on the Early Continental Army and Civil Military Relations

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Thesis: George Washington was an "Exemplar-in-Chief" who had an indelible influence on the nature and character of the early Continental Army, an influence that set the precedence and affected how the United States military would interact with civil authority under the new institution of a democratic republic.

Discussion: Through an analysis of the historical record there are multiple examples of George Washington's early influence in shaping the nature and character of the United States military. Today's American military is a direct descendant of the early Continental Army which fought the War for Independence, and was shaped by Washington's influence. In analyzing Washington's motives, actions, to include correspondence and court martial rulings, this study will attempt to open a window into understanding Washington's influence on the Continental Army and, therefore, the American military tradition among the officer corps to the present day.

Conclusion: Washington was not just a Command-in-Chief, but an Exemplar-in-Chief who left a lasting impression on the American military structure, that has held strong for over two hundred years. Through his actions during the creation of the army and leading that army during the Revolution, he forever set the framework for the civil-military tradition which has never seen a credible or serious military coup. The character and nature of today's military will not permit an environment that would allow a military coup to begin. This character and nature is a direct result of the profound significance of George Washington's motives in joining the cause and his actions during the struggle. Washington's influence is not only significant.... it cemented the military subordination to civilian authority which has lasted till today.

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Preface

There has been significant scholarly research, study, and, publication regarding George Washington's influence on the early foundations of the United States. Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 and ultimately set the standard for the office of President of the United States. There is, however; a key point to be developed regarding the true understanding of how profound Washington's influence was on the early foundations of the United States military.

Certain historians agree that Washington had an indelible influence as the first Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. This research begins at the official formation of the Continental Army and focuses exclusively on Washington's influence as the Commander-in-Chief of that army. I envision this work to be a single chapter in a larger body which attempts to answer the question: Is the U.S. military exceptional among military organizations? The nature and scope of that question cannot be answered within these pages. Through sifting through the historical record I will attempt to capture Washington's influence on the character and nature of the Continental Army during the early days of its creation.

The conclusions are a result of numerous trips to the Mount Vernon special collections library, interviews with noted historians, authors, researchers and an exhaustive search through literary works on the early Continental Army and the American military tradition. After an exhaustive analysis, I have come to the conclusion that Washington's influence is without question deep and strong and that the professionalism of the United States military today is a direct reflection of that influence. But how exactly, and to what extent, did he exert influence on the early foundations of the United States military? This study will show that his influence was profound and long lasting, down to the present day.

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“There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.”

George Washington

Introduction

In the history of the United States, there has never been a credible attempt by the U.S. military to overthrow or subvert civil authority. George Washington's actions at the inception of the Continental Army, 1775 – 1776, dictated the nature of civil military interaction and has forever cemented the subordination of the military to civilian authority. The nature and character of the U.S. military, a character that stems largely from Washington's example, has never allowed a credible coup to form. Throughout the war that won America its independence Washington in both word and deed conveyed to Congress and the Army that he would personally remain obedient to civil authority regardless of events. Furthermore, Washington insisted that his officers do the same and not counter lawful orders from Congress. When pressures mounted for forced conscription or the commandeering of material, Washington held firm to the original principles of the American Revolution, and resisted these temptations.

Washington was uniquely qualified to bridge himself between the Continental Army and Congress due to his experience as both a military leader and a politician. He found a way to have a military force that would be competent on the battlefield, yet subservient to civil authority. To achieve this goal took moral courage, determination, political savvy and military skill. Washington's leadership and personal example to both military and civilian leaders enabled the Army to defeat the British while enabling civil authority to maintain civil order. At critical moments during the war, Washington courageously subverted defeat through methods which were militarily more difficult, but did not subvert civil authority. The United States

military has remained both competent and subordinate to civil authority since its creation. This is a direct result of Washington's influence on the nature and character of the Continental Army. In order to understand how and why the United States military has evolved in this manner, an analysis of George Washington's motives in accepting command of the Continental Army and his actions during the early years of its formation is needed.

Washington's Motives

In the Journals of the Continental Congress of 15 June 1775, the following statement appears: "The Congress then proceeded to the choice of a general, - by ballot, - when George Washington, Esq. was unanimously elected."¹ As a member of the delegation from the Commonwealth of Virginia, Washington was nominated and unanimously elected as General of the "yet to be formed" Army of the United Provinces of North America. As noted in Washington's address to the Continental Congress the following day, 16 June 1775, he stated, "But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every Gent (sic) in the room, that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think my self equal to the Command I [am] honoured (sic) with."² Washington is making it publicly known to those that elected him that he is humbly accepting the commission and that he has no false pretences in carrying out his orders from Congress. What were Washington's motives in accepting the commission?

First: Was Washington motivated by monetary gain?

Washington was 43 years old when he accepted command of the army. At this point in his life he had vast land holdings and was among the wealthiest men in the colonies. By

accepting the commission, Washington monetarily had everything to lose and very little to gain. When selected to command the army, he did so under the condition that he would not be paid a salary: "I do not wish to make any profit from it..."³ He wanted it understood that his purposes were beyond monetary gain. Finances were a contributing factor to the resentment for which many Americans, to include Washington, had boiled over into action. But there was more to it than just that. The Stamp Act, passed by Britain's Parliament in 1765, contributed significantly to the long list of grievances many Americans had with the mother country. In his book, *George Washington's War*, historian Bruce Chadwick outlines some of the underlying reasons Washington was angered at not only the British Parliament but also the businessmen in England with whom he bought and sold goods:

Washington's anger was not just directed at Parliament, but at the businessmen he had dealt with in England as a farmer and a consumer. He complained that taxes on tools and plows sent to him in Virginia for farming were too high and that equipment substandard. He, like so many other Americans, believed that they would always be nothing more than second-class citizens in the British Empire.⁴

This treatment of subordination and lack of respect perceived by many Americans was a significant motive to rebel against Britain. The oppressive taxes and price for doing business were personally crippling for Washington, but to focus exclusively on finances as a motive is to ignore what was happening across the colonies and in the hearts and minds of Americans of every social class. Chadwick explains that "This belief was held not only by elitist planters and prominent businessmen but by the growing American middle class and its farmers, merchants, and shopkeepers. By 1775, when he rode to the Continental Congress, Americans had developed a wholly new life, free and independent from England."⁵ For Washington, it was more the principle that Americans in the colonies were being treated as second class citizens, and oppressive taxes were just one example of the mistreatment by British elitism.

Second: Was Washington motivated by ideology and service to others?

In a letter Washington wrote to his wife Martha, on 18 June 1775, just a few days after Congress had selected him to command the army, he stated, "...as it has been a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this Service (sic), I shall hope that my undertaking of it, is designed to answer some good purpose."⁶ Through one of the few private letters to his wife, which have been preserved, we can see into Washington's thoughts regarding the forces behind this cause to which he was committing himself. In essence, Washington was explaining that his motives were for a cause greater than himself.

As a well respected member of Virginia's House of Burgesses, the oldest representative body in America, he was familiar with the ideological arguments for revolution against Britain. His closest friends and political associates, such as Patrick Henry and George Mason, were fervent believers in the American cause and favored fighting what they believed was a conspiracy by the British Government against the colonies. Washington would always weigh arguments and viewpoints very carefully before making his decisions or views on matters known. He was also very well studied, as Richard Brookhiser points out in his book *George Washington on Leadership*. "[T]hanks to his reading, Washington had a good grasp of the problems that caused it, [the Revolution,] and when it came he not only did what was needful for a patriotic American to do but also understood why he was doing it."⁷

Ideologically and philosophically, Washington understood the motives behind the cause and was basing what he believed to be the right thing to do on these principles. In the years leading up to 15 June 1775, he formed his opinion and ultimately believed that to submit to Parliament's laws, such as the Stamp Act, was equivalent to bondage and slavery. Washington wrote to his friend Burwell Bassett on 19 June 1775, "I can answer but for three things, a firm

belief of the justice of our Cause – close attention in the prosecution of it – and the strictest Integrity.”⁸ In the book *General George Washington: A Military Life*, Edward Lengel describes Washington’s motives: “More important was his passionate and even ideological devotion to the American cause. He would not shirk an opportunity to serve it. Washington considered his time, wealth, life, and even his reputation to be expendable.”⁹

Charles Royster argues in *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775 – 1783* that the revolutionaries in the early stages of the war would use terms such as virtue to describe their state of mind and feelings for the cause. Royster explains that, “In fact, the appeals prevalent at the opening of the revolution put benevolence, disinterestedness, and virtue at the heart of American national character.”¹⁰ The term disinterestedness in its meaning in 17th century European and North American definitions would be what we would consider an “objective view” today. Washington would have been on the receiving end of such ideological appeals, and over the course of time, would have become one of the movement’s strongest supports.

Washington along with his contemporaries was a student of the Enlightenment and believed strongly in the ideals emanating from this movement. Washington was moved by “the cause” and believed in service to one’s neighbors and countrymen. Many Americans believed that the freedoms, for which they and their ancestors had fought for the last 150 years, were being stripped away by the British Parliament. For George Washington, his motives and actions in both word and deed were much more than personal monetary hardship, they were deeply ideological. Chadwick describes the nature and character of Americans that carried the firm belief that their cause was right and just. He explains:

The American ideal in 1777 was the man who believed in freedom, pledged his life and fortune to protect liberty, and was willing to give up everything for the cause. He was a

man, in or out of the army, who fervently believed that America could and should be independent and, once freed from England, would prosper. George Washington met all of those criteria. He embodied all the best qualities of the citizen/soldier.¹¹

In a private letter to his friend Joseph Reed, just a few months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Washington wrote:

We had borne much; we had long and ardently sought for reconciliation upon honourable terms, that it had been denied us, that all our attempts after peace had proved abortive, and had been grossly misrepresented, that we had done everything which could be expected from the best of subjects, that the spirit of freedom beat to high in us to submit to slavery, and that if nothing else could satisfy a tyrant and his diabolical ministry, we are determined to shake off all connections with a state so unjust and unnatural.¹²

What Washington risked

Why would Washington, who cherished his reputation above all else, risk it by accepting a commission from the Continental Congress? Dr. Edward Lengel describes in precise terms what Washington was risking, "Above all, Washington prized his public reputation. Risking it on victory against the greatest military power in the world was surely a poor bet, and at times in the years that followed he would regret taking the gamble."¹³ Washington was risking much more than financial ruin, he was risking the wellbeing of his family, his lively hood and for Washington, what he cherished most in the world...his reputation. Joseph Ellis explains in his book, *His Excellency George Washington*: "Washington fully recognized that by accepting the appointment as commander in chief he was making a personal pledge...and if he failed in the high-stakes gamble, his Mount Vernon estate would be confiscated, his name would become a slur throughout the land, and his own neck would almost surely be stretched."¹⁴ Washington was putting at risk both fame and fortune by making this "high-stakes gamble" which by all accounts was not a winning bet. Therefore, his motives were clearly above fame and fortune which compelled him to action.

Washington's motives in summary:

Despite the many personal reasons for not accepting the commission, it was a principled choice by Washington to do so. His public and private statements are not the actions of a blindly ambitious man seeking fame and fortune. They are actions of a man with strong moral character, virtue, and humble sentiments. Looking at the facts at face value, Washington truly believed in the cause, and was risking his life, property, family and what he prized most...his reputation. At this point in his life, he was a veteran combat commander of the French and Indian war. He understood the high cost of war and surely knew what to expect in the coming conflict. Yet despite his exposure to the brutalities of war, he believed this was a higher calling.

Washington firmly supported the American cause and the fight for liberty against what he believed was British tyranny. Washington's actions in accepting the commission were not the actions of a selfish, single-minded mercenary. These are the actions of a believer in a higher calling. Lengel addresses Washington's motives, "...his passionate and even ideological devotion to the American cause...Washington considered his time, wealth, life, and even his reputation to be expendable."¹⁵ Washington's public and private written documents, statements, and most historians' assessments, show a principled man driven by a higher calling. Washington believed in the cause, took his appointment with measured caution, and was risking everything, to include what he cherished most...his reputation.

Washington was the perfect choice. He had both military experience and the trust and confidence of the Congressional leaders. The capability for Washington to easily move between both military and political circles can't be overstated. Washington could speak both languages and translate between the two establishments. In the early stages of the War, Chadwick noted the importance of Washington's ability to address both military and political matters:

As a veteran state legislator and member of both Continental Congresses he [Washington] understood how to work with an assembly of political figures. They knew now, after eighteen months as the head of the army, that Washington would always treat Congress with respect. He understood that to be successful he had to work with Congress and not against it, despite all of their frequent failures to aid the army. There was never a time that they worried that he would use the army to take over the government of the struggling new nation.¹⁶

Building a Professional Army

The 18th Century ushered in the new organizational structure of state militaries. Europe would oversee the building of what is known today as the “professional” army. These were full-time professional soldiers trained more than longer local militias, part-time fighters or hired mercenaries. Throughout Europe, new model armies were being established with uniformed men, being paid and trained under a single banner. The leadership and organizational structure of these armies would answer to the governing body of the state. These armies were lethal and states throughout Europe were compelled to build their own armies due to the looming threat they posed. Colonial America was no exception to this new dynamic. Washington clearly understood the importance of a professional army to counter the imperial might and global reach of the British Army.

Washington had to build and train the Continental Army while simultaneously prosecuting the war. Washington realized he had to go against his natural urge to maintain the offensive, because he realized that by adopting a more defensive posture, he could prolong the survival of the army. If the army survived, the revolution survived. But for the army to survive, Washington had to start from the ground up. What must be understood, and has never been truly appreciated, are the insurmountable difficulties Washington faced in building the army. He had to encourage enlistment, correct preconceived and inflated notions of the capabilities of the

militias, instill discipline, obtain funding and material, prevent commandeering of goods from the general public and train the army to fight as a military organization.

Encourage Enlistment:

As the early tide of enthusiasm for the cause began to wane, enlistments were ending and the flow of new recruits stopped. Washington's pleas to congress, governors, and state legislators for more military resources began right away and continued throughout the duration of the war. In the winter of 1777, with desertions rampant, enlistments ending, and low to no turnout in new recruits, many Congressional leaders proposed a national conscription in order to fill the ranks. Washington, however, understood that to build a professional army required individual soldiers who were driven more by their own motivations, rather than being forced by the state. Chadwick explains Washington's concerns: "George Washington however feared that a draft would be unpopular and might, in fact, bring about "convulsions in the people." Without long-term enlistees, which he hoped would come from the working class, he could not win the war, and securing those men did not seem possible."¹⁷

Many Americans at the time feared standing armies and dubbed the term "Rage Militaire" which they believed was sweeping the colonies. Lengel addresses how many Americans felt about a standing army during the years leading up to the revolution, "Americans feared standing armies, believing that they crushed the individuality of free citizens and reduced them to tools of oppression."¹⁸ The problem many Americans had with the British Crown was the simple fact that there "was" a standing army within the colonies. Many Americans believed that if the army is removed, the disputes between the Crown and the Colonies would be removed. In James Martin and Mark Lender's book, *A Respectable Army, The Military Origins of the*

Republic 1763-1789, they address how many Americans believed that this “Rage Militaire” was enveloping the colonies. Under the section titled “The Tyranny of Standing Armies,” Martin and Lender quote an American writer who stated it was “the MONSTER (sic) of a standing ARMY (sic)” in America that symbolized what was wrong.¹⁹

Washington was assigned Commander-in-Chief of the American forces before there was even agreement among Congress that there “should be” a “united” American army. This was, in fact, before the creation of the Constitution and the formation of what was to become the United States. At this early stage there was not agreement that these loosely organized “colonies” should have anything more than state militias, operating in a common cause. Washington’s experience firmly told him that in order to defeat the British Army, he would need a united, “professional” army.

Inflated Capabilities of the Militias:

There is no doubt that without the militia’s efforts throughout the eight years of the war, the outcome would have been very different. But early in the war Washington had to contend with many influential leaders who held a common belief that the militia and the common American soldier was more capable than the British soldier. Many believed at the time that the sheer fact that Americans were fighting for and on their land, would make their spirit and abilities match or exceed the strength of the British Army in North America. Before repeated defeats, proved otherwise, there was a belief that this spirit of the “minute-men” would carry the cause to victory. There was a prevailing belief throughout the colonies that the militias with their very capable volunteers and minute-men, fighting for the noble cause of freedom, would be able to overcome British military superiority. Washington new this was a naïve belief.

Washington also faced extreme difficulty in just keeping the army together, which required constant effort throughout the war. In a letter to John Hancock, dated 2 September, 1776, Washington expressed his frustrations regarding the performance of the militias during the New York Campaign. "Great number of them have gone off, in some instances almost by whole regiments...an entire disregard of that order and subordination necessary to the well doing of an army."²⁰ Chadwick explains Washington's desperation, "Pleading for a professional army like the British, Washington agonized to his aides, hastily jotting down his remarks for a letter, that "our liberties must of necessity be greatly hazarded, if not entirely lost, if their defense is left to any but a permanent standing army."²¹ In January of 1777 Washington wrote to his stepson Jack and detailed the difficulties he was having with the militias:

[A] motley crew, here today gone tomorrow...I do not think that any officer since the Creation ever had such a variety of difficulties and perplexities to encounter as I have - How we shall be able to rub along till the new army is raised I know not. Providence has heretofore saved us in remarkable manner and on this we must principally rely.²²

Instilling Discipline:

After taking command and visiting the "Army" for the first time, he was appalled at what he saw. In the General Orders and letters dispatched from his desk as Commander-in-Chief of the American Army, he was shocked that he could not get a simple count from the units on numbers of soldiers, if they submitted reports at all. He did not consider it an army, but more of a mob. From June to September, 1775, Washington's focus was on increasing the training and discipline of the army. He addressed his difficulties in a letter to John Hancock dated 10-11 July 1775, "It requires no military skill to judge of the Difficulty of introducing proper Discipline &

Subordination into an Army while we have the Enemy in View, & are in daily Expectation of an Attack...”²³

One of the first actions of any commander when taking the helm of any military organization is to issue his initial guidance or “General Orders” to establish his authority, vision and expectations. By reviewing Washington’s first General Orders to the Continental Army it is clear what he had on his mind. He was frustrated that simple tasks to his officer corps could not be carried out in a timely fashion. Just getting a roll call report on the total number of men within the regiments took months. How was he to establish strong discipline, high standards and good order to this...Army...if he couldn’t even get a simple muster report on troop strength. Poor hygiene, disease, drunkenness, fraternization, unruliness and belligerence were common throughout the former militias turned regiments. These citizen soldiers and officer corps for that matter would need to be trained and formed into soldiers first, if this was to be a professional army. General Washington had to begin with training in the very basics and build from the ground up an army on the fly while simultaneously defending it against the most powerful military in the world.

When discussing the discipline, standards and professionalism of the early Continental Army, Major General Steuben should not be overlooked. Washington made him inspector general in May of 1778. Steuben understood that the character of the individual American soldier was quite different from that of the European soldier. American soldiers were more individualistic and ideological in character. Ellis explains the importance and impact of Steuben: “More than anyone else, Steuben was responsible for injecting a professional standard of performance into the Continental army, blending a European code of obedience to authority onto

an American army of inveterate individualists...”²⁴ Steuben was a significant factor in assisting Washington in achieving the professional army he desperately wanted.

Washington knew that if he was going to build a professional army he needed to, in the words of First Person Interpreter and historian Ken Johnston, “Manage the American character of the common soldier.”²⁵ All of the patriotic motivation, high-mindedness of the cause and courage in the world, could not overcome the fact that this group of loosely formed and untrained militias would be crushed by the might of the British military. Early defeats in the war proved this to be true. Washington understood the limitations of militias and worked tirelessly to build a professional army. This militia system would need to be completely overhauled beginning with the individual soldier and how he viewed his effort in the cause and his relationship with the Army. Ken Johnston explained that Washington had to turn the “citizen first and soldier second” belief system on its head. Each soldier needed to understand he was a “professional” soldier first, and a carpenter, farmer, merchant, fishermen, and tradesmen second.²⁶

There is a common belief that the “citizen soldier” was behind the victory of Independence. But serious historians understand that the reason the British lost, was due to the continued survival of the continental army. The reason the army survived was due to the professional soldier. What held the army together was Washington’s ability to change the “citizen first, soldier second” belief system of the American army into “soldier first, citizen second.”²⁷

Prevent the commandeering of material:

There were numerous occasions throughout the war where Washington very desperately needed provisions which he could easily have "commandeered" from local citizens. Even during times of desperation with the army on the verge of total- defeat, he strictly resisted these actions, and strongly disciplined the army to do the same. Through eight years of bitter fighting and multiple occasions where events could have easily led to the erosion, defeat or break up of the army, Washington consistently held firm to the belief that he commanded a professional army, which would not resort to such measures. Chadwick addresses this by quoting a letter Washington wrote to William Livingston, "Nothing in nature can be more repugnant to my inclination than to be obliged to have recourse to military coercion for subsistence."²⁸ He feared that authorization to seize goods might induce starving soldiers to harass farmers and turn the local citizens against the army. He already had reports of fierce arguments between officers and farmers over goods impressed for credit.

Washington reluctantly allowed confiscation "only on credit" and only on a few occasions. Chadwick explains Washington's actions during this time, "...Washington refused all requests to simply seize whatever he wanted, without payment, at gunpoint. He understood the feelings of the people far better than any of the panicking civilian officials and knew that the seizure of supplies would be construed by the public as a first step toward brutish military dictatorship. The people were fighting a revolution to gain independence from tyranny abroad; they did not do so only to wind up with tyranny at home."²⁹ By commandeering goods for the army, Washington would be acting not only against the cause for which he was fighting; he would act against his core beliefs. He refused to allow necessity to force his contradiction of purpose. Chadwick goes on to explain the difficulty Washington had in keeping the army in line, "Local farmers complained bitterly to the general's aides that soldiers routinely stole fence posts

from their fields to make fires and, late at night, snuck into the unlocked stables or barnyards and took livestock, as well as equipment ranging from axes to kettles..."³⁰ Washington was swift and firm in his discipline against these types of acts. If his army was to be a professional army, even acts out of desperation and necessity would not be tolerated. This leads to the review of Washington's use of military justice.

Court Martial Rulings:

To understand expectations in standards and conduct within any military organization, a review of the court martial rulings can paint a good picture. Discipline and punishment during the time of the American Revolution are by today's standards, deplorable. But as outlined in Harry Ward's book, *George Washington's Enforcers: Policing the Continental Army*, "On the whole, punishment in the American army was slightly more humane than in the British military system."³¹ Washington had to achieve the highest impact when sentencing soldiers for serious crimes. He had to instill discipline in those that could only be motivated by fear of punishment. Chadwick describes how Washington would use flair of drama with respect to issuing sentences for serious crimes:

Washington would order ten men shot and then pardon nine, with the man whose crimes were most severe executed. He would often issue a reprieve at the last possible moment. It was more often than not that a courier would gallop into an execution scene yelling Reprieve! Reprieve! Not every soldier sentenced to death wound up in a coffin.³²

Washington used this method to insure the message "serious crimes would have serious ramifications" would be clearly heard and understood throughout the army. "Washington knew that he had to have men executed for serious crimes. The death penalty was required as just punishment and to maintain discipline. ... His steely resolve, but merciful nature, was evident in

a letter to General Israel Putnam regarding sentencing, "I should wish you to incline on the side of lenity."³³

Civil Authority

What cannot be overstated is the importance of Washington's influence in standing firm regarding civilian control of the military. Most historians praise Washington for his stubbornness virtue in demanding that the military remain subservient to the Continental Congress, its civilian superiors. Some go so far to say this was almost to a fault, in that it led to the detriment and almost total destruction of the army. But as Don Higginbotham stated in his book *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*. "Both civilian and military students of American wars have, to be sure, always praised Washington for his devotion to the concept of civil control of the military."³⁴ Higginbotham goes on to explain, "Civil control meant, among other things, that the central government could not always give first priority to the military's total needs as defined by the military, because of home-front requirements, or political considerations, or international factors. Time and again Washington endeavored to explain this truth to his discontented officers and men during the War of Independence."³⁵ Washington keenly understood the importance of civil authority and had to work against forces in both the military and the government to ensure the principle of civil authority is established. Higginbotham covers many topics which caused significant civil-military tensions on both sides in his work, *The War of American Independence*. There was, for example, the Conway Cabal, in which Congress caused significant rivalries among senior general officers. It also reflected the failure of both Congress and the military to understand each other's actions. In the middle of all

of this was the stoic, firm, level-headed Washington, who had to frequently quell the fear, anger, disappointment and bitterness of both politicians and officers even when Washington himself was the target of backroom whispers, complaints and rivalries.

Despite Actions of Congress:

Even when tempted by his superiors to subvert their authority, Washington resisted. There were certain members of Congress who were in favor of Washington exerting more authority than had been given the Command-in-Chief of the Army. Chadwick explains how it was actually Washington, who had to remind Congress that in a democracy, people had to obey the civilian authority:

The people at large are governed much by custom. To acts of legislation of civil authority they have been ever taught to yield a willing obedience without reasoning about their propriety. On those of military power, whether immediate or derived originally from another source, they have ever looked with a jealous and suspicious eye.³⁶

Washington set the precedent which is the standard that guides American military and civilian leaders to this day. As Brookhiser outlines in his book *George Washington on Leadership*, “Washington made the template for American military leaders and their civilian superiors.”³⁷

Resignations, desertion, disease, alcohol, crime and insubordination all crippled the army. Even when the army was in shambles, under strength, underfed, not paid and in want of just about every necessity a military organization needed, Washington never wavered from his belief in civilian control of the military. To say that he was patient with Congress would be a gross understatement. He firmly understood the political problems and difficulties the various representatives had with their specific states and the governors of those states. Having been a representative himself, and on both the military and civilian side during war and peace, made Washington among the few in the colonies who had a profound understanding of both worlds.

Washington had to balance both of these worlds in order to ensure not only the success of the army, but at many times, the very survival. Chadwick addresses Washington's balancing act between the two: "The general was privately furious about Congressional control of all military promotions. This system produced unqualified officers and unhappy troops. Instead of railing about it, he diplomatically wrote Hancock that Congress should "devise some other rule by which the officers, especially the field officers, should be appointed" and noted that his army was top-heavy with officers from the larger eastern states, which angered their men, who were from other states."³⁸ Chadwick goes on to explain, "Ordinarily, Washington held his anger whenever he spoke openly about Congress, but his patience was often tested by the delegates."³⁹

Washington understood that both the actions and conduct of the army were inexplicably linked to the political and international situations. This was the genius of Washington's military career. When he evacuated the young army from Manhattan in order to escape the approaching British, Washington was advised by his officers to burn New York to the ground. Keeping a windfall of war material out of enemy hands and preventing shelter and safe haven from falling into enemy hands, would have been militarily the practical thing to do. When it came to military matters, Washington understood that nonmilitary factors played an even greater part.

Washington understood the political role of Congress in gaining support for the Revolution would be more difficult if New York was destroyed. In turn the political difficulty of Congress would ultimately make Washington's task as the Commander in Chief of the Army not only more difficult, but potentially futile. Burning New York to the ground would have been tactically the right thing to do, but ultimately it would have been strategically detrimental to the entire American cause.

Despite Actions of Officers:

On 22 May 1782, Washington received a letter from Colonel Lewis Nicola, who commanded the Invalid Corps (injured veterans assigned to garrison duty). Nicola was rightfully upset over the conditions of the veterans and the lack of support they were receiving. He made suggestions to Washington about a “mixed government” in which Washington and Congress could share power. He made veiled suggestions about Washington stating that a “potential sovereign” who led us in war, would most likely lead us in peace. Brookhiser quotes Washington from the letter written in response back to Nicola, “The colonels ideas, he [Washington] wrote, filled him with “surprise,” “astonishment,” “painful sensations,” and “abhorrence.”⁴⁰ By the tone of Washington’s response, it is clear that the mere suggestion that he make political moves to subvert civil authority was repulsive to Washington. This response gets to the heart of a profound belief Washington has in the still unborn republic. “... if you have any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, banish these thoughts from your Mind.”⁴¹ Washington is equating putting himself on equal terms with Congress as one of the greatest wrongs that could happen to the country. “I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country.”⁴² The Commander-in-Chief had two separate aides witness that Washington penned the response. Nicola sent Washington three apologies over the next six days.

Up to this point, May of 1782, the war has been raging for seven years. There were numerous low points throughout those seven years, to name just a few: conspiracy, treason, lost battles, entire units surrendering, failure and loss of life on a massive scale. And Washington explains to Nicola that, “...no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful

sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed, and I must view with abhorrence...”⁴³ The fact that nothing else during the war had affected him so deeply is a profound statement, which underlines the corps belief Washington placed on the subordination of the army to civil authority.

In March of 1783 as the end of the war was approaching, there were whispers among the officer corps about taking action against Congress for lack of pay and other grievances. Washington’s response to this set the standard and sealed for future generations that the military will remain subordinate to civilian authority. Washington placed himself between the angered officers and their civilian superiors and masterfully pleaded his case. The scene at the large hall filled with about 500 officers on 16 March 1783 is eloquently described by Joseph Ellis:

Washington walks slowly to the podium and reaches inside his jacket to pull out his prepared remarks. Then he pauses and pulls from his waistcoat a pair of spectacles... No one has ever seen Washington wear spectacles before on public occasions. He looks out to his assembled officers while adjusting the new glasses and says: “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.” Several officers began to sob. All thoughts of a military coup die at that moment.⁴⁴

The passions and grievances among the army were inflamed, and Washington’s reputation was at an all time high...he could have easily taken the reins of power. He chose not to and set the precedent which is still held to this day.

Despite the absence of a model:

As mentioned previously, the “new model” professional army was beginning to take shape in Europe. There was, however, no tradition of civil military relations between a disciplined army and civil authority under self-government. The models from which Washington could draw were poor examples. All too often throughout history, there was

example after example where the military elite from the ancient world to Oliver Cromwell, acted out of self interest in the name of the state. By resigning his commission after winning the war, and retiring to Mount Vernon, Washington willfully surrendered his power and forged a precedent seldom (if ever) seen in history. This action alone changed not only the civil military relationship within the United States, but set a standard from which the world could now follow.

Conclusion

Washington left a lasting impression on the military that has held strong for over two hundred years. Through his personal example, actions and leadership during the creation and early years of the Continental Army, Washington forever set the framework for today's civil military tradition. This tradition has never seen a credible or serious military coup. Through Washington's virtues and "pure" motives in accepting command of the Army, he provided the perfect example for the early officer corps of the Continental Army. By ensuring the military remained within the bounds of its power, Washington provided the foundation that both civilian and military leaders would operate. Even during periods which were critical to the very survival of the army during the War for Independence, Washington acted boldly to ensure that the military remain subservient to Congressional authority. When pressures mounted for forced conscription or the commandeering of material, Washington held firm to the original principles for the Revolution, and resisted these temptations. These actions all occurred before this new form of government (representative government based on liberal democracy) was even created, at least in the form of the written United States Constitution of 1789. Washington had the

foresight to understand that in order for this new form of government to remain strong, a professional military under civilian control would be necessary to its survival.

Due to Washington's experience as a military professional and politician, he was uniquely qualified to understand the ramifications and pitfalls regarding civil military relations. After careful study and with pure motives, Washington decided not only to join the revolution against the mother country, but accepted command of the army charged with defeating the British. Washington's motives in commanding the Army, his actions during the creation of that army and his conduct while leading that army during the War for Independence, set the civil – military character of the United States military to what it is today. The character and nature of today's military would not permit an environment that would allow a military coup to begin. This character and nature is a direct result of the profound significance of George Washington's motives in joining the cause and his actions during the struggle. Washington's influence is not only significant... it cemented the military subordination to civilian authority which has lasted until today.

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