

**STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT**

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**GEORGE WASHINGTON  
AMERICA'S FIRST STRATEGIC LEADER**

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL SHEILA C. TONER  
United States Army

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Colonel Sheila C. Toner  
United States Army

Lieutenant Colonel James Kievit  
Project Advisor

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U.S. Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013

## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Sheila C. Toner (Col.), USA

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American military officers are educated via a formal professional military development program, for more than twenty years in pursuit of mastery of the strategic art. Much of that developmental program emphasizes the concepts of war and military genius advocated by Carl Von Clausewitz in his nineteenth century classic, *On War*. This study examines the strategic thought and actions of General George Washington in the American Revolution, which preceded Clausewitz's work by more than thirty years. It shows that, despite the lack of any formal military professional education, Washington made skillful use of the ways and means available to him to construct a strategy capable of achieving the desired ends. The author concludes that, whether judged against Clausewitz's concepts or modern definitions of the strategic art, Washington deserves to be recognized as a master of the strategic art and America's first strategic leader.

**George Washington**  
**America's First Strategic Leader**

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,  
Here once the embattled farmers stood,  
And fired the shot heard round the world.<sup>1</sup>

Clausewitz, in his classic On War, postulates that war is a trinity made up of the people, the commander and his army, and the government. He tells us, "The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people."<sup>2</sup> The armed resistance of the militia at Lexington, Concord and the immediate reaction to these events, shows there is passionate opposition to British rule among the people. Now the government must decide if it will follow the peoples' lead. If it does, the government will need to choose a commander to fill the nation's need for a strategic leader of character and vision and Clausewitz's role of military genius.

For Clausewitz, "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. ... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."<sup>3</sup> The Continental Congress that meets in May 1775 must decide if it wishes to use war to achieve the political ends thus far unachievable by peaceful means. Washington, as a delegate, conveys his feelings by attending every session of the 2nd Continental Congress in uniform. He thus visibly reminds all of his service in the French & Indian War and symbolizes his support for the New England colonist's actions. When the Congress decides to support military action and seeks a Commander in Chief, John Adams proposes Washington. He is not the most experienced colonial military officer but the delegates are not looking for a great tactician. They seek a trustworthy leader who will keep the military subordinate to the Congress. They want a commander who will focus on overall colonial strategy and who will set aside personal and sectarian interests for the good of the larger colonial effort, in other words, a strategic leader. They need someone to

unify the effort and symbolize that the forces arrayed against England represent all 13 colonies.

Washington, as a delegate, has won their confidence. As a Virginian, he meets their need for a leader who symbolizes this as a unified struggle. The next day, John Hancock informs Washington that he is their unanimous choice. Thus Washington suddenly finds himself in the strategic leadership position of Commander in Chief.

A modern definition of strategic art is, "The skillful formulation, coordination, and application of ends (objectives), ways (courses of action), and means (supporting resources) to promote and defend the national interests."<sup>4</sup> Today the U.S. Military trains officers over a twenty plus year career via a formal professional development system to be capable of accomplishing this demanding task. As we examine Washington's role in the American Revolution we will see that with little formal military training, he successfully employs the skills and demonstrates the characteristics necessary to succeed as a strategic leader. Washington's abilities are particularly impressive when you consider that he is the first American colonist to occupy a military strategic leadership position.

Washington's strategy is divided into four periods. In each period, his strategy is adaptive and flexible and he tailors it to meet the changing conditions while never forgetting his ultimate objective or end. Clausewitz concludes that, "in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from the *destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attacks.* Any one of these may be used to overcome the enemy's will: the choice depends on the circumstances."<sup>5</sup> During the American Revolution, Washington uses virtually all of these options at some time. He chooses based on the resources available while balancing the risk of each option against the potential reward. While not a great tactician, Washington clearly

demonstrates a sufficient mastery of strategy to not only ensure the colonist's success but also to be considered a master of the strategic art.

**Period 1. May 1775 -- July 1776. Maintain the initiative and attack.**

The colonists now try to accomplish by force what they have failed to obtain peacefully -- their rights as Englishmen. They still view themselves as loyal subjects of the Crown. Washington's aim is to create conditions that will pressure England to grant the colonists the rights and privileges they feel they deserve as Englishmen. His resources or means are limited and he knows there is little likelihood of significant increases in the near future. Washington recognizes that the British forces opposing him will increase but it will take England time to send reinforcements to the New World. He wants to strike before those reinforcements arrive. His goal is to maintain the initiative, attack and drive the British out of the colonies. By seizing the initiative now, he can maximize the impact of his limited resources.

Assuming command of the forces around Boston in July 1775, Washington immediately initiates steps to prepare for battle. Backed only by a weak central government and lacking a trained staff to execute his plans and vision, he begins the daunting task of creating an army out of minimally trained militia and volunteers. He must accomplish this while fighting the most powerful nation in the world.

Many visitors note the shocking lack of discipline and order in the troops assembled around Boston. Washington initiates corrective action. He is a strong disciplinarian and fines and floggings are common. He strongly believes that only a disciplined and trained army is capable of defeating British troops. "Discipline is the soul of the army, it makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak and esteem to all."<sup>6</sup> He establishes rules to standardize operations and sets about enforcing proper field sanitation. Within the powers granted him by Congress, he initiates his policy of selecting and promoting

competent officers and dismissing incompetent ones. This commitment to promotion based on merit is rare in his day but will do much, over time, to improve the caliber of his army.

Upon assuming command, Washington is acutely aware of his need for good intelligence in order to defeat a vastly superior enemy. "There is nothing more necessary than good intelligence to frustrate a designing enemy, & nothing that requires greater pains to obtain."<sup>7</sup> As early as 15 July 1775, Washington initiates an intelligence network, paying an agent to enter Boston to obtain and convey to him information on British movements and designs.<sup>8</sup>

While he wishes to strike the British in Boston quickly, the precarious low level of military equipment and supplies limits his options. Obtaining adequate gunpowder is a pressing need. Supply problems will bedevil him throughout the war. In September, on his own authority, he begins organizing a fleet to assist him in obtaining supplies while harassing the British Navy until Congress can create an American Navy. Thus early on, Washington demonstrates his grasp of the need for coordinated naval and land operations.<sup>9</sup>

While his forces are lacking in both training and material, Washington feels compelled to act before British strategy is set and reinforcements can arrive. If the colonists act quickly and demonstrate both their resolve and competent military capabilities, this may persuade England to recognize the colonists' "rights as Englishmen". Washington's strategy is to use the threat of a more costly and protracted military struggle to gain the colonist's political objectives. Determined to seize the initiative, he supports and authorizes an invasion of Canada that summer. In his zeal, he also considers a number of risky plans to attack Boston, including one to attack across the harbor if it freezes. While he is impatient, he heeds the valid objections of others. His officers persuade him to wait for a better opportunity. The idea of moving the captured artillery from Ticonderoga to Boston meets his immediate approval, since this would provide him the means to take offensive action. With his plans made, he emplaces the artillery immediately upon

its arrival. That he still lacks an adequate supply of gunpowder does not deter him from action. Once the artillery is in place, the British position in Boston is untenable. They sail out of the harbor in March 1776. With their departure, England has no forces or power left in the colonies. Washington has accomplished his initial military objective. However, the political objective he sought to achieve through military means eludes him. England still refuses to meet the Colonist's demands.

**Period 2. July 1776 -- June 1778. Conduct a war of posts and defend Independence against a superior force.**

Clausewitz tells us, "if policy is only directed towards minor objectives, the emotions of the masses will be little stirred and they will have to be stirred rather than held back."<sup>10</sup> For the colonists, it is becoming increasingly difficult to continue fighting British forces while maintaining they are loyal Englishmen. The Continental Army depends on volunteers. For recruitment to continue to be successful, the goal must be seen as worth the effort and risk. Washington's letters to Congress concerning new British peace offers show he favors independence, not accommodation. After suitable debate, Congress in July 1776 changes the goal for which the war is being waged to independence.

Washington realizes the British will return with reinforcements. Since he will be outnumbered and lack naval forces to match Britain's, he will shift to a war of posts and a defensive strategy.<sup>11</sup> Given the circumstances, this is prudent. Clausewitz notes that the defense is a stronger form of warfare than the offense and better suited to the weaker opponent. Washington's defensive strategy illustrates Clausewitz's idea that, "a defensive campaign can be fought with offensive battles, and in a defensive battle, we can employ our divisions offensively. ... So the defensive form of war is not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well directed blows."<sup>12</sup>

After Boston Washington, as strategist, assesses the situation to determine where the British will strike next. He knows he can not counter the mobility England's navy gives her. He will not be able to defend all the widely scattered coastal towns. Despite pleas for assistance, the local militia will have to respond to any such attacks since "the numerous detachments necessary to remedy the evil would amount to the dissolution of the army."<sup>13</sup> He correctly concludes that the British will try to seize New York. This is the logical British move since the port "and Hudson's river are the most important objects they can have in view, as the latter secures the communications with Canada, at the same time that it separates the northern and southern colonies, and the former is thought to abound in disaffected persons who only wait a favorable opportunity and support to declare themselves openly."<sup>14</sup> Considering this analysis, he shifts his forces there. In keeping with his view of naval importance, while en route, he sets an early example of jointness by lending the newly formed US Navy 200 soldiers to replace sick sailors.<sup>15</sup> Arriving in New York, he begins establishing a series of fortified posts to protect the city and deny the British free use of the Hudson River.<sup>16</sup>

Even as he begins these preparations, the challenge of defending New York City with a small army against a combined naval and land attack becomes apparent. Its location on the tip of Manhattan Island favors England with her impressive sea power. Recognizing the great difficulty of defending New York, he considers abandoning it without a fight. However as one of the three largest cities in the colonies, he soon recognizes its abandonment would be a strategic mistake due to the negative impact of such an action on American will and morale. Washington's forces face the largest invasion force England has ever dispatched. While outnumbered, he splits his forces, placing a large number on Long Island where they can be cut off by English sea power. By August, his forces in Brooklyn are defeated and in danger of entrapment. This places the army in severe jeopardy. His earlier actions to secure his lines of communication across the East River and his quick actions upon recognizing the extent of the danger prevents an even greater and potentially fatal defeat.<sup>17</sup> This campaign is unquestionably his worst

tactically. However, one positive strategic result is that Congress finally abandons its earlier objections to long term enlistments. Washington sought this change as a necessary step towards creating a trained and professional army.

Washington understands that preserving his army is essential to his cause. After his defeat on Long Island, he informs Congress that, "on our side the war should be defensive. It has even been called a war of posts."<sup>18</sup> Washington chooses to revert to fighting an 18th century war of posts as the best method, given his limited resources, to convince England that the cost of winning is too high. Washington's actions will illustrate the validity of Clausewitz's principles for dealing with a superior force. Clausewitz tells us that, "If a negative aim - that is, the use of every means available for pure resistance - gives an advantage in war, the advantage need only be enough to *balance* any superiority the opponent may possess: in the end his political object will not seem worth the effort it costs. He must then renounce his policy. It is evident that this method, wearing down the enemy, applies to the great number of cases where the weak endeavor to resist the strong."<sup>19</sup>

By the end of 1776, the Continental Army is driven from New York City and the surrounding area. The morale of the Continental Army is so poor, Washington fears his army will melt away with the loss of the many soldiers whose terms of enlistment expire at the end of the year. The enthusiasm and confidence of the people are waning. Washington must find a way to rekindle morale and belief in the revolutionary cause. He must convince both the colonists and England that the Continental Army is capable of achieving victory. It is a time to take risks. In December, Washington makes a bold strike across the Delaware. This is a daring move but not a reckless one. There is little likelihood the British will expect a winter attack from his supposedly dispirited and broken army. His intelligence network has alerted him to the over extension of the British forces. To further ensure safety, he takes the precaution of ensuring that his army controls all the available boats. He follows up his initial victory at Trenton

at Princeton. Here is a demonstration of what Clausewitz later describes as an essential characteristic of the strategic defense. "A sudden powerful transition to the offensive - the flashing sword of vengeance."<sup>20</sup> Washington's weighing of both the risks of action and inaction and his steps to minimize the risks inherent in his bold plan, show he possesses the reflective mind needed by senior commanders to ensure that boldness does not degenerate into blind passion.<sup>21</sup> His end of the year victories at Trenton and Princeton bolster recruitment and prove that the war is far from over. "In Europe,...Frederick the Great concluded that Washington had engineered one of the most astonishing campaign turnabouts of the century."<sup>22</sup>

As he enters winter quarters, Washington has managed to hold the British at bay. His experiences have taught him the need to temper his desire for swift action to match his limited and finite resources. He must keep an army in the field to continue to drain British resources and resolve. He will continue fighting a defensive war, while seizing every opportunity to inflict damage.

In 1777, the British are determined to crush the colonial rebellion. They devise a campaign to split the colonies into two by seizing control of the Hudson River and New York State. This British campaign will force Washington to face three British armies simultaneously. St. Leger and Burgoyne both advance from Canada. St. Leger moves west along the Mohawk Valley. Burgoyne moves south down the Hudson Valley. Howe remains in New York City. Washington must remain where he can block any movement of the British out of New York City. He must prevent Howe from linking up with the British forces advancing southward from Canada.

Washington recognizes the importance of thwarting the British advance from Canada by St. Leger and Burgoyne. He offers sage advice to his northern commanders, which they follow, on how to use the forest to slow the British advance.<sup>23</sup> Due to the threat from the North, he dispatches Daniel Morgan's corps and some of his best officers, to include Benedict Arnold, to bolster Gates and the northern colonial forces. Benedict Arnold, and the forces under him, compel St. Leger to return to Canada.

When Howe sails from New York for Philadelphia, Washington is without the forces he sent North to aid Gates. He would like to have those additional troops available to assist him in his battles against Howe. However, he will not order their return if Gates still needs them. As a strategic leader, he recognizes it is more important to prevent Burgoyne from gaining control of the Hudson and New York for the British than it is to increase his strength. On 24 September, he writes to Gates.

"This Army has not been able to oppose Genl. Howe's with the success that was wished and needs a Reinforcement. I therefore request, ...(if) circumstances will admit, that you will order Colo. Morgan to join me again with his Corps. I sent him up, when I thought you materially wanted him, and if his services can be dispensed with now, you will direct his immediate return. ... I do not mention this by way of command, but leave you to determine upon it according to your situation."<sup>24</sup>

Since Burgoyne will not surrender until 17 October, Washington fights the battles of Brandywine and Germantown without these forces. Washington's willingness to accept the risk of opposing Howe with reduced strength, rather than weaken Gates, shows him placing strategic considerations over personal glory. Germantown also shows Washington's willingness to attack when he believes the odds are at least even. He almost achieves another surprise victory. While he is defeated in his battles against Howe, his wise allocation of resources helps bring America a great victory at Saratoga. Washington's decisions, first to send forces to assist Gates and then to not prematurely order their return to ensure his own success, are instrumental in securing the more strategic victory. Benedict Arnold, Daniel Morgan and the forces dispatched by Washington play key roles in the decisive defeat and surrender of Burgoyne to Gates at Saratoga in October 1777. Washington, wishing to maximize the benefits of this victory, persuades Congress not to adhere to Gates' arrangement to permit Burgoyne's army to return to England, since this would free up other troops for shipment to America.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this campaign, we see the beneficial results of Washington's ability to prioritize and view events strategically. As he enters winter quarters at Valley Forge in December, he has turned the British campaign plan of 1777 into a strategic disaster for them.

During the winter of 1777-1778, Valley Forge is a place of suffering for the Continental Army. While the British winter comfortably in Philadelphia, the revolutionary cause and the Continental Army are perilously close to dissolution. Washington spends much of his time pleading for supplies. Yet despite the difficulties, he keeps his beleaguered army together. Washington knows the value of deception. Much of the voluminous correspondence he writes during these winter months is to create an elaborate hoax. He prepares fake documents in his own hand, full of references to nonexistent infantry and cavalry regiments. This correspondence is passed to the enemy by double agents. The British credit Washington with more than eight thousand troops he does not have and mistakenly conclude he is too strong to attack. Except for this successful deception, the Continental Army might not have survived the winter.<sup>26</sup> During this time, he continues to articulate his vision to bolster the determination and resolve of both his soldiers and the Continental Congress that fled from Philadelphia to York. With Von Steuben's assistance, he wisely uses this time to train his army.

In the Spring, the army that Washington leads and has kept intact emerges from Valley Forge as a disciplined and tenacious fighting force. While his capabilities are increasing and he wishes to take offensive action, he recognizes his limitations. A French volunteer at Valley Forge writes in his memoirs, "it was not in his plans to engage the enemy without due consideration. He expected everything from time and from the faults of those he had made it his business to fight, to nibble and to destroy."<sup>27</sup> He intends to strike whenever he has a chance of success. That summer, as the British rear guard is returning to New York from Philadelphia, they provide a tempting target for Washington and his newly trained army. He and his council of officers agree; they will attack. Initially the battle at Monmouth goes badly due to poor tactical leadership. Coming upon Lee and his retreating troops, Washington relieves and arrests him for cowardliness and by personal leadership turns this into an American victory.

**Period 3. July 1778 -- Dec. 1781. Lead a Coalition to Victory.**

In July 1778, France declares war against England. This offers new hope to the colonists. Washington's defensive strategy has been due to his limited resources and British naval superiority. As Clausewitz will later note, "If defense is the stronger form of war, yet has a negative object, it follows that it should be used only so long as weakness compels, and be abandoned as soon as we are strong enough to pursue a positive objective."<sup>28</sup> Washington now has a trained army. France's entry into the war, as an American ally, offers the possibility of conducting a joint land and sea campaign. Washington's experiences to date have increased his understanding of the need to counter England's mastery of the seas. Washington believes that naval superiority is essential for a successful offensive capable of achieving a decisive victory. In his opinion, "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>29</sup> Washington will seek, with French assistance, to nullify British control of the sea so he can transition to the offensive. He will continuously strive to coordinate a joint land and sea campaign with the French.

In the North, Washington seeks French support to launch a joint naval and land campaign against either New York City or Newport. His hopes are dashed several times due to the unavailability of the French fleet under d'Estaing or its early departure from northern waters. The British, while maintaining their presence in the North, initiate a Southern campaign in the hopes of splitting the colonies. Initially they do well. Finally, Congress defers to Washington's judgment and allows him to replace Gates, as Southern commander, with Nathaniel Greene. Greene's unorthodox methods soon turn the tide to the patriot's advantage. Greene will not win battles but the cost of each victory becomes too high for the British. Cornwallis retreats to Virginia.

Despite repeated disappointments with previous plans utilizing the French fleet, in 1781 when the opportunity appears to coordinate a combined land and naval attack on Cornwallis' forces in Virginia,

Washington seizes the opportunity. Washington's professionalism is clearly evident as he orchestrates this complex campaign consisting of both the French and Continental Armies and the French Navy. He uses a deception plan to mask the movement of forces over a large geographic area and then mounts an attack. In preparation for the Yorktown campaign, he skillfully uses intelligence and deception to keep Clinton's forces in New York City. In early 1781, captured documents alert Clinton to Washington's plan for a French and American attack on New York City. When the plans change to an attack on Cornwallis in Virginia, Washington "arranged for fake dispatches, indicating that his objective remained New York, to fall into the hands of British spies. ... Washington strengthened the deception by setting up a camp at Chatham, New Jersey, and assembling boats along the Jersey shore in apparent preparation for a crossing to Staten Island."<sup>30</sup> During the Yorktown campaign, Washington has a sufficient mastery of naval operations that a suggestion from him "on several occasions during the intricate operations within the Chesapeake was wisely deferred to by de Grasse and proved to be eminently sound."<sup>31</sup> Thwarted both on land and sea, Cornwallis, on October 19, 1781, surrenders. Washington's skill in coordinating the complex movements of the French Army under Rochambeau from Newport and half of the Continental Army from New York to Virginia and then synchronizing the joint and combined campaign against Cornwallis is masterful. No American Commander will face the challenges of simultaneously controlling joint forces while coordinating coalition operations until World War II.

#### **Period 4. October 1781 -- Sept. 1783. Win the Peace**

Immediately after the surrender at Yorktown, Washington proposes to Admiral de Grasse a swift, joint follow on campaign against Charleston or Wilmington to exploit their recent victory.<sup>32</sup> To his disappointment, the French fleet departs without acting on these plans. There is euphoria over the British surrender at Yorktown. Washington, however, is acutely aware that the war is not won. He moves his army back to Newburgh to block the British under Clinton who remain in New York City. He stops in

Philadelphia to meet with Congress. His "greatest fear is that Congress, viewing this stroke (Yorktown) in too important a point of light, may think our work too nearly closed and will fall into a state of languor and relaxation."<sup>33</sup> Yorktown is a great military victory but the political ends for which the nation is fighting are not yet achieved

Washington realizes that along with winning victory on the battlefield, to be truly successful a nation must also win the peace. A nation at war must simultaneously prepare for the post war world.

Washington does both. He keeps his army in the field, ready to resume hostilities if necessary, despite the temptation to disband during the long peace talks. By doing this and waging what he terms "conciliatory war,"<sup>34</sup> he helps ensure a favorable peace treaty. Despite the desire of the people and Congress for normalcy, Washington recognizes the need to keep pressure on the British to end the war on favorable terms. He believes, "there is nothing which will so soon produce a speedy and honorable peace as a state of preparation for war, and we must either do this or lay our account for a patched up, inglorious peace after all the toil, blood, and treasure we have spent."<sup>35</sup> He will not be responsible for such a failure.

Washington continues to plan and act as if the war is to continue. As the British remain in New York, Washington begins searching for other areas he can successfully attack. Without a fleet, his options are once again limited. His attention turns to the frontier and Canada. In 1782, he orders a road built linking Ft Pitt to Niagara to assist in clearing the Great Lakes of British forces. As a strategist, he sees the linkage between the military and diplomatic means which are both being used to achieve the political end or goal of independence. By keeping the Continental Army in existence and ready to renew the fighting if a treaty is not signed, he strengthens the hands of the American peace negotiators.

While at Newburgh, with dissension among his officers growing due to Congress's inability to pay them, Washington provides a remarkable demonstration of senior leadership. Learning of a pamphlet being circulated to foment rebellion and possible coup, he calls a meeting of his officers. He outlines the

disastrous consequences of a coup on the ideals for which they fought. He hints that the pamphlet and the actions being suggested may be a British plot to sow dissension. He reminds his officers that he has "been their constant companion & witness of their distress" during their long service. Agreeing that they have some legitimate grievances, he promises to pursue corrective action for them with the Congress. Finally, knowing their respect for him, he plays on their emotions. Trying to read a letter, he fumbles and puts on glasses which few knew he used. "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." Many leave the meeting close to tears. The plot is over.<sup>36</sup> In this incident, we see Washington's skill as a communicator, his commitment to the ideals for which he fought and the high regard his subordinates have for him.

After learning a peace agreement is reached, Washington waits a few days for an appropriate time to announce the good news. At noon, on 19 April 1783, eight years since the day those embattled farmers stood at Concord, he publicly proclaims the end of hostilities. Ever the prudent planner, he furloughs, rather than discharge or disband, most of his army. He will keep the army in existence until the British forces leave New York and the formal peace treaty is signed.

Throughout this period, Washington focuses on a facet of war fighting that is frequently neglected, creating the conditions for a lasting peace. His perception in recognizing that while waging war, a military commander should be concerned with shaping the peace is one that receives little formal attention in military training or doctrine till late in the 20th century.

Washington seeks to prepare for the post war world by articulating his vision for the future. In June of 1783, he writes a Circular letter to the Governor's of the States. In it he presents his views on the decisions and steps, he feels, are necessary to preserve the liberties they have just fought so long and hard to obtain. He warns them that, "according to the system of policy the states shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall and, by their confirmation or lapse, it is yet to be decided whether the Revolution

must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse - a blessing or a curse, not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn millions be involved."<sup>37</sup> He then enumerates the things he believes are essential to the well being and continued existence of the United States as an independent power. Many of his ideas and thoughts will later be found in the United States Constitution.

In September 1783 the formal peace treaty is signed. On 25 November, the British leave New York. With the crisis over, Washington on 23 December freely divests himself of power by resigning his commission and returning to Mt. Vernon.

#### **Conclusion:**

Clausewitz observes, "A prince or general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much nor too little. ... What we should admire is the accurate fulfillment of the unspoken assumptions, the smooth harmony of the whole activity, which only become evident in final success."<sup>38</sup> Today, the U.S. Army War College teaches that, "Strategic Art is the skillful formulation, coordination, and application of ends, ways, and means to promote and defend national interests."<sup>39</sup> Washington clearly meets either standard.

Washington, like Clausewitz, realizes that war is the means to achieve a political end. Clausewitz tells us, "War, therefore, is an act of policy."<sup>40</sup> Washington never lets the end for which he is fighting out of view. While severely limited by a lack of resources throughout the war, he matches his strategy to his resources to achieve the national goal. Due to a lack of trained staff officers, he functions as his own spy master and intelligence chief, taking care not become trapped in the minutia. Instead, he "poured over decrypted enemy dispatches and agency reports, personally sifting and collating the intelligence they contained, recognizing that the whole picture was usually more important than any single item of intelligence, however sensational."<sup>41</sup>

His genius is in molding an army and then husbanding it till it can be used to the best effect. His ability to shape and lead the Continental Army shows his leadership skills. Rochambeau's quartermaster writes that Washington's "personal qualities have done more to keep soldiers in the American army and to procure partisans to the cause of liberty than the decrees of the congress."<sup>42</sup> The Comte de Segur, the French Minister of War from 1780 to 1787, upon visiting Washington's headquarters notes with surprise the order, discipline and training he found. "Any other man but Washington would have failed in the undertaking; it will suffice it to say in order to appreciate his genius and wisdom that, in the midst of a stormy revolution, for seven years he was in command of the army of a free people without arousing fear in his country or distrust in Congress."<sup>43</sup>

In the process of creating and shaping that army, he bequeaths to it many of his values and ideals. Many of them, such as selfless service and advancement based on merit, remain a part of the American Army's beliefs and values. One of the key values he passes on is the belief that the Army exists to serve the Nation. The colonists took up arms because England would not listen to their elected representatives. Washington makes sure that he and the military remain subservient to the peoples' elected representatives. Throughout the struggle, Washington keeps Congress fully informed. He freely discusses his ideas and concerns with them. Often he influences their decisions, but he always remains subordinate to them. This agrees with Clausewitz who writes that, "No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political."<sup>44</sup> By his example and strong support for this principle, Washington bequeaths to the United States a military that supports civilian control as a core value.

American military officers today learn, "military strategy is the art and science of employing the Armed Forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, or the threat of force. The following three tests of such a strategy are recommended: Suitability -- Does it

produce the desired effect? Feasible -- Is it capable of being done? Acceptable -- Is the cost reasonable?"<sup>45</sup>

The answer for Washington's strategy is affirmative.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, considering the challenges Washington must overcome, his limited resources and the audacious goal of independence, he skillfully matches his strategy and campaigns to suit his objective and resources. Washington clearly is a skilled practitioner of the strategic art who fashions a campaign within the resources available to meet the political end for which the war is fought. By any measure, Washington is clearly America's first strategic leader.



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Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Concord Hymn," in An Anthology of World Poetry, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1928), 1217.
- <sup>2</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 89.
- <sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, 87.
- <sup>4</sup> MG Richard A. Chilcoat, Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, 94.
- <sup>6</sup> James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789 (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1982), 45.
- <sup>7</sup> Washington to Robert Hunter Morris, Jan 5, 1766: John C. Fitzpatrick (ed.), The Writings of George Washington, quoted in Christopher Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Christopher Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 7.
- <sup>9</sup> Dudley W. Knox The Naval Genius of George Washington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1932), 8-9.
- <sup>10</sup> Clausewitz, 88.
- <sup>11</sup> Dave Richard Palmer, The Way of the Fox: American Strategy in the War for America, 1775-1783 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), Chapter 2 provides an in-depth discussion of 18th century warfare and the tactics and strategy of a war of posts.
- <sup>12</sup> Clausewitz, 357.
- <sup>13</sup> Knox, 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Knox, 14-15.
- <sup>15</sup> Knox, 16-17.
- <sup>16</sup> Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft America's First Battles, 1776-1965 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986) Chapter 1 provides a detailed discussion of a war of posts and Washington's defense of NYC. Palmer, The Way of the Fox, Chapter 2 also provides an in depth discussion of 18th century warfare.
- <sup>17</sup> Palmer, 122-123 and especially Heller and Stofft, chapter 1 both discuss the Battle of Long Island in greater detail. Both show that while Washington made mistakes, his tactics were not as ill-considered as frequently portrayed. Palmer considers his withdrawal, "one of the finest maneuvers of the entire war." 123.

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- <sup>18</sup> George Washington in a letter to Congress, 8 Sept., 1776 quoted by Palmer, 125.
- <sup>19</sup> Clausewitz, 94.
- <sup>20</sup> Clausewitz, 370.
- <sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, 190.
- <sup>22</sup> James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789 (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1982), 62.
- <sup>23</sup> Palmer, 137.
- <sup>24</sup> George Washington letter to Gates, September 24, 1777, quoted in Bernhard Knollenberg, Washington and the Revolution, A Reappraisal: Gates, Conway, and the Continental Congress (New York: Macmillan, 1940) 31.
- <sup>25</sup> Martin and Lender, 88.
- <sup>26</sup> Andrew, 9 - 10.
- <sup>27</sup> More de Pontgibaud memoirs in Chinard, 31.
- <sup>28</sup> Clausewitz, 358.
- <sup>29</sup> George Washington letter to Count de Rochambeau, 15 July 1780, in Knox, 64.
- <sup>30</sup> Andrew, 10.
- <sup>31</sup> Knox, 126. See the earlier chapters for an extensive discussion of the details that form the basis for this statement.
- <sup>32</sup> Knox, 117 - 118.
- <sup>33</sup> Palmer, 182.
- <sup>34</sup> Palmer, 186.
- <sup>35</sup> Palmer, 189.
- <sup>36</sup> Major David Curtis Skaggs, "The Generalship of George Washington," Military Review 54, no. 7 (July 1974): 10. This incident is described in several articles and books. A slightly different wording is found in H.I. Brock, "Washington in His Finest Hour," New York Times Magazine, February 17, 1952, 21, 28.
- <sup>37</sup> Frank Donovan ed., The George Washington Papers (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1964), 185-186.
- <sup>38</sup> Clausewitz, 177-178.
- <sup>39</sup> Chilcoat, 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Clausewitz, 87.

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew, 11.

<sup>42</sup> Claude Blanchard diary in Chinard, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Comte de Segur memoirs in Chinard, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz, 607.

<sup>45</sup> Colonel Arthur F. Lykke, Jr. (Ret.) "Strategic Thoughts" Lecture to U.S. Army War College class of 1996, September 29, 1995, Carlisle, Pa.



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