

Councils and Communication: Washington's Decision-Making Process at the Strategic Crossroads of 1777

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Councils and Communication: Washington's Decision-Making Process at the Strategic Crossroads of 1777, by MAJ Dustin L. Eggleston, US Army, 46 pages.

Following a significant setback during the Philadelphia Campaign in September of 1777, General George Washington and senior political leaders had to decide whether to pursue an offensive winter campaign or forego any immediate attempt to regain the initiative by encamping nearby. The British occupied the capital, and the army could not arrange a decisive battle as the winter season approached. Washington was at an operational crossroads which required political and military discourse to determine how to progress. As the political actors deliberated on options, Washington met with his council of war to develop contingency plans to support the political objectives. Washington and the Second Continental Congress decided to forego an offensive winter campaign in 1777 for the opportunity to reconsolidate and train at Valley Forge. The decision came after deliberately considering the interrelated ties of local and national politics with the capability of the Continental Army to carry out viable options as contingency plans.

Washington's decision-making process and civil-military exchanges in the fall of 1777 provides a framework for analyzing modern theories on civil-military relations. Overlaying Washington's interactions with political and military leaders reveals underlying roots to the contrasting viewpoints of contemporary theorists, Samuel Huntington and Peter Feaver.

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Introduction

Under these circumstances he [General Washington] had called a Council of War to consult and resolve on the most advisable measures to be pursued; but more especially to learn from them, whether with this force it was prudent to make a general and vigorous attack upon the enemy, or to wait further reinforcements, upon which he prayed their opinions.

—Nathanael Greene, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*

How do senior military leaders engage in productive dialog with the nation's civic leaders to make decisions in complex environments? History reveals a broad range of approaches with equally diverse outcomes. The civil-military relations before, during, and after the American Revolutionary War serve as a rich canvas to draw an understanding of how senior leaders have navigated through complicated decision-making processes. The notion of America's political body and military as a unified whole confronting the British crown for liberty is grossly oversimplistic and misleading. The United States more closely resembled a tenuous confederation of thirteen republics motivated by varying interests that the Second Continental Congress struggled to interpret and organize at the national level. As the colonies fought to gain independence from British rule, the political and military discourse was fraught with egos, biases, and varying interests influencing the war against the crown. At the center of the complex environment of 1777, General George Washington progressed through the decision-making process to either pursue a second offensive winter campaign or retire to winter quarters to refit and reorganize for a spring counter-attack.¹

Following significant setbacks during the Philadelphia Campaign in October of 1777, Washington and senior political leaders had to decide whether to pursue an offensive winter campaign or forego any immediate attempt to regain the initiative by regrouping nearby. The circumstances acting upon the momentous impasse were diverse and complicated, the decision

¹ Thomas Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory: How General George Washington Won the American Revolution* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2017), 108; David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21-28.

had as many political implications as it had military ramifications on the fragile state of the confederation.

Historians have spilled much ink covering America's failed Philadelphia Campaign and the events which transpired during the winter of 1777 in Valley Forge. Through the various perspectives, scholars have written extensively to uncover and understand the military, political, and social context of the era. Historian, Thomas Fleming, in his 2017 *Strategy of Victory: How General George Washington Won the American Revolution*, provides a comprehensive review of the environment weighing on the colonies as they deliberated on what to do in the fall of 1777. He recounts the political unrest with the displaced Continental Congress, the swaying of popular support by the local population, and the internal discontent among senior military leaders resting on the shoulders of Washington as he considered his next move.² To fully appreciate the relevant context and gravity of the situation weighing on Washington's mind, it is necessary to reflect on the recent course of events which brought him to Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania during one of the most trying times of the American Revolution.

On 23 July 1777, Washington received word that Admiral Lord Richard Howe's 270 ship fleet with 18,000 British and Hessian troops was departing Amboy, New Jersey for the open sea in preparation for an advance on Philadelphia. British General William Howe, Admiral Howe's brother, wanted to pull Washington and the Continental Army into a decisive battle in order to bring the war to a swift conclusion.³ Failing to end the war during the New York and New Jersey Campaigns in 1776, the Howe brothers were feeling increased pressure from Parliament and Lord

² Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory*, 60.

³ Secretary of State War Office, *A List of the General and Field Officers, As they Rank in the Army of the Officers in the Federal Regiments of Horse, Dragoon, and Foot, on the British and Irish Establishments* (London: Secretary of State War Office Library, 1777), 5, accessed 24 January 2019, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4431890>.

George Germain, British Secretary of State for America, to subdue the rebellious colonies.⁴ With the British forces repositioning, Washington wasted no time and dispatched the army to southeastern Pennsylvania. With the scars of engaging in large-scale battle from the New York Campaign still fresh in his mind, Washington did not desire to expose his forces to decisive battle; however, he understood the political ramifications, which would follow should he fail to make a stand in protecting America's largest city and capital, Philadelphia. In mid-August, the British forces came ashore at the northern end of Chesapeake Bay. General Howe quickly took to offensive operations in pursuit of Washington's forces. Britain's rapid advance northward caused Washington to abandon initial defensive position along Red Clay Creek and establish positions along Chadds Ford. The stage was set for Washington to defend America's capital and home to the Second Continental Congress.⁵

Positioned on the east side of the Brandywine Creek, Washington and eleven-thousand troops stood ready in hasty defensive positions to prevent the British advance along the direct route from Baltimore to Philadelphia. On 11 September 1777, under cover of dense morning fog, General Howe launched a full-scale attack on the American forces. With Congress located nearby in Philadelphia, the political leaders instructed Washington to keep them posted. Washington accounted of the moment, "eight o'clock A.M., the enemy are now advancing . . . I trust they will meet with a suitable reception, and such as will establish our liberties. They are now advanced near the Brandywine." Reminiscent of the successful Long Island offensive from the previous year, Howe split the eighteen-thousand strong British army to land a decisive victory against the static defensive positions of the Americans. With Hessian Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Knyphausen commanding the right division and serving as a fixing force to Washington's front,

⁴ Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory*, 60; Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 121-123.

⁵ Joseph B. Mitchell, *Decisive Battles of the American Revolution* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), 109; Joseph Townsend, *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution: The Battle of Brandywine* (New York: The New York Times and Arno Press, 1969), 2-6.

Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis maneuvered a broad left flank beyond the sight of the Continental Army's right wing.⁶ The sweeping British attack caught the American troops off guard. Washington fought to shift forces on the right and left flanks as the numerically superior British and Hessian troops attacked on both ends. Throughout eleven hours of fierce battle, Washington found his army facing the possibility of being surrounded and decisively defeated. Washington made the decision to withdraw while under heavy pressure. Major General Nathanael Greene's rearguard division held off British pursuit, allowing American forces to narrowly escape. The American defeat and withdrawal under pressure left Philadelphia vulnerable and the military in logistical disarray. Once again, Washington had to survey the military's shifting conditions to decide how to preserve the capital and, with it, the War for Independence. Washington and the Continental Army repositioned east of the Schuylkill River and prepared for the next move.⁷

Reeling from the defeat at Brandywine, Washington remained steadfast in his commitment to protecting Philadelphia from British capture. Adding insult to injury, the Continental Army left behind blankets and tents, and abandoned vital supply depots in the retreat from Brandywine. For Washington to make another stand to defend Philadelphia, he had to work with the congressional and local political leadership to procure essential supplies and munitions. A painstaking process, Washington had grown frustrated with the inaction of Congress and the states' governments to send essential resupplies. The necessary refit of supplies would not come before the army would be drawn into another engagement. After the Battle of the Clouds in mid-September failed due to inclement weather, Washington decided against crossing the Schuylkill

⁶ Mitchell, *Decisive Battles of the American Revolution*, 109; Rupert Hughes, *George Washington: The Savior of the States, 1777-1781* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1930), 158-159; Townsend, *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution: The Battle of Brandywine*, 8-10.

⁷ Hughes, *George Washington: The Savior of the States, 1777-1781*, 163; John F. Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge: July 1, 1777 – December 19, 1777* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 131-136.

River in future attacks. It was a race against time for Washington to refit and reorganize his efforts to defeat British progress against the capital.⁸ Washington decided to assign a single division of Continental troops under the command of Brigadier General Anthony Wayne to monitor, harass, and capture baggage trains from the advancing Redcoats. With fifteen-hundred troops, Wayne served as the linchpin in Washington's plan to build a renewed defense of Philadelphia.⁹

Due in large part to tactical incompetence in conducting harassing operations, Wayne failed to maintain a safe standoff distance and remain in the shadows of British forces. Unknown to Wayne, British Major General Charles Grey knew of the Continentals' operations trailing their movement north toward Philadelphia. At midnight on 20-21 September 1777, Grey achieved tactical surprise in an attack on American troops encamped near Paoli Tavern in Malvern, Pennsylvania. The ensuing battle was a complete rout of the American division. The British suffered only eleven casualties to the Continental Army's 300 casualties and seventy-one prisoners. The string of defeats from Brandywine to Paoli left Washington incapable of mounting any immediate defense of Philadelphia. With the linchpin to a second defense gone, Washington had to watch as British forces occupied the capital.¹⁰

Five days after the Paoli Massacre, on 26 September 1777, General Howe and the British troops marched into America's capital. The British occupation of Philadelphia meant the dislodgement of the Second Continental Congress. Congress moved from Philadelphia to York, Pennsylvania to continue managing the war effort. With Washington as the senior military commander and responsible for defending the capital, the dislodgement of Congress from the

⁸ Thomas J. McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 19; Nathanael Greene, Dennis M. Conrad, and Richard K. Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene, vol. 2, 1 January 1777 - 16 October 1778* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 156-169.

⁹ McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 306.

¹⁰ McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 316-318; Greene, Conrad, Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 169-171.

heart of the confederation further strained a tense relationship between members of Congress and Washington.¹¹ Reflecting on the moment, Massachusetts Congressman John Adams declared, “Oh heaven! Grant us one great soul! One leading mind would extricate the best cause.”¹² Struggling to procure the necessary supplies for his troops and managing an outspoken Congress lamenting over the loss of the capital, Washington decided to mount a counter-attack to regain Philadelphia.

In an aggressive attempt to surprise the British forces and retake Philadelphia, Washington prepared for an attack at Germantown, Pennsylvania. On 3 October, Washington learned through captured British letters that “General Howe had detached a part of his force for the purpose of reducing Billingsport [New Jersey] and the forts on the Delaware. I [Washington] communicated the accounts to my general officers, who were unanimously of opinion . . . to make attack . . . near Germantown.” Resembling Washington’s 1776 surprise attack on the Hessians in Trenton, New Jersey, the plan set in motion four separate columns to deliver a decisive blow on Howe and British troops. In the early hours of 4 October 1777, Washington and the Continental Army, with limited militia support, struggled to navigate through dense fog that plagued efforts for the separate columns to attack simultaneously.¹³

Nevertheless, the Americans achieved tactical surprise with an initial routing of the British light infantry. With the memory of the events at Paoli fresh on the mind of Continental soldiers, Washington and his men charged the main British line with vigor. Disoriented due to fog and exhausted after repeated assaults against the British line, Washington and the Continental Army were unable to deliver a decisive blow to the British. As Figure 1 illustrates, the

¹¹ John Adams, *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of John Adams*, vol. 1, *The Adams Papers*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Leonard C. Faber, and Wendell D. Garrett (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 264.

¹² Adams, *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of John Adams*, 265.

¹³ John F. Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge: July 1, 1777 – December 19, 1777* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), 214.

complicated synchronization of battle was too much for senior leaders to orchestrate as they struggled to mass and break British defenses.¹⁴ Forced to withdraw back to Whitemarsh, the defeat at Germantown was a bitter disappointment for Washington as he failed to displace Howe from Philadelphia and reinstall Congress back in its capital.

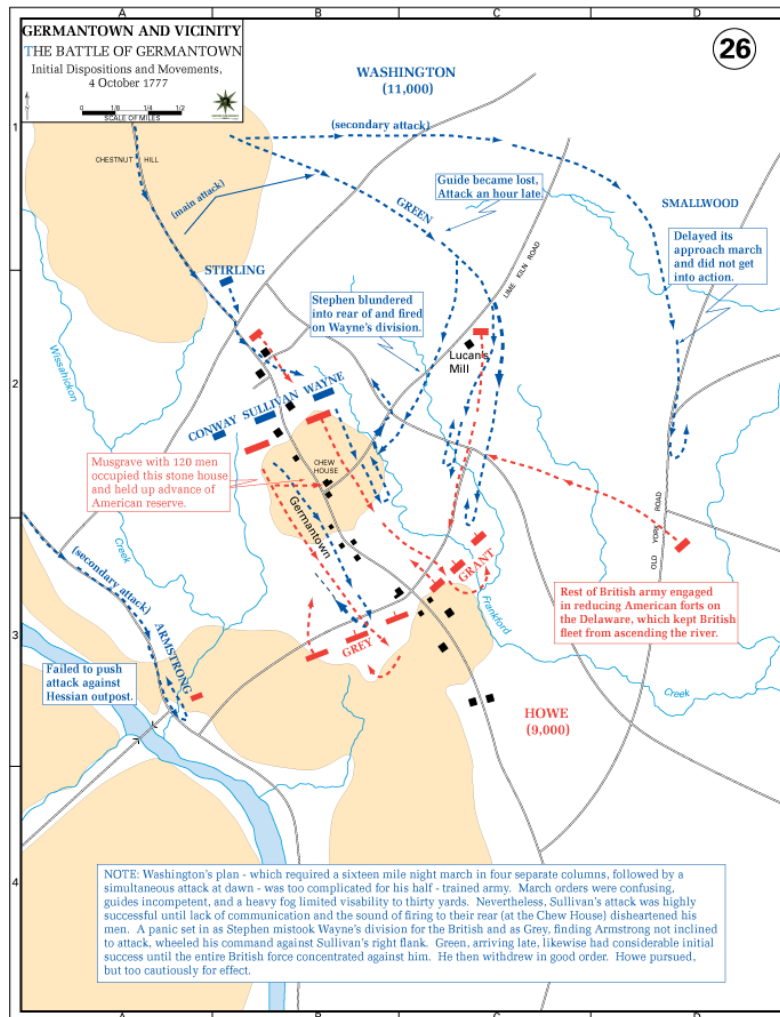


Figure 1. Battle of Germantown. "The Battle of Germantown, 4 October 1777," United States Military Academy: Department of History, accessed 12 October 2018, <https://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/American%20Revolution/26GermantownBattle.gif>.

¹⁴ Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 223; George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Philander D. Chase and Edward G. Lengel, vol. 11, *19 August 1777–25 October 1777* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2001), 410.

With Washington's tattered forces encamped near Whitemarsh, a shining moment for the war of independence came from the north on 7 October 1777, with a decisive victory for America at the Battle of Saratoga, New York. More significant than the tactical success of the battle, the victory at Saratoga, coupled with Washington's demonstrated aggressiveness at Germantown, reaffirmed French King Louis XVI's earlier decision to ally with America in its war against Britain. The alliance with France served as a momentous victory in diplomacy, but it would not be until July 1778 that a "considerable fleet of French men of war" would arrive in America. Washington had to deal with the immediate dire situation facing the country.¹⁵

The victory at Saratoga further enflamed a political and military rift hindering the unity of the senior military and political leaders. The commanding general at Saratoga, Major General Horatio Gates, leveraged his recent battlefield glory to openly set afoot an effort to supplant Washington as the American commander-in-chief. On 8 October 1777, Major General Thomas Mifflin resigned as the quartermaster general and began campaigning on behalf of Gates. In protest to the capability of Washington, Mifflin sought to incite senior leader resignations unless Gates assumed the reins from the top military leader.¹⁶ Compounding the situation, members of Congress continued to demonstrate concern over Washington's power and popular support across the colonies. John Adams, on 26 October 1777, wrote his wife concerning his fear of Washington's power "excessive as to endanger our liberties for what I know."¹⁷ The political and professional affairs were full of tension and envy as Washington sat in his quarters at Whitemarsh determining how to manage the vital relationships for the betterment of the cause.

¹⁵ Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory*, 68; Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 1, 1768-1778, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 524.

¹⁶ Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory*, 68-72.

¹⁷ John Adams, "Letters from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 26 October 1777," Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed 11 October 2018, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17771026ja>.

The British now occupied the capital, and the army struggled to procure the necessary supplies and recruits if they to pursue a winter campaign. Washington and the senior political leaders were at an operational and strategic crossroads. Over the next three months, from October to December 1777, Washington, the council of war, and politicians, at the local and national levels, would deliberate on how to progress as a confederation at war. The study of Washington in the winter of 1777 reveals how he sifted through imperfect information and tough resource conditions to distill the facts necessary in deciding whether to encamp at Valley Forge rather than conduct an offensive campaign. His decision-making process continues to provide value in understanding how senior leaders make choices in complex environments.¹⁸

Civil-military relationship theories offer a method for analyzing and assessing Washington's management of the decision-making process as he handled the political and military arenas from Whitemarsh. The study of civil-military relations benefits from wide-ranging research by political scientists and military sociologists. Civil-military relations refers to the interaction between civil authorities of a nation and the power of its armed forces. It began in the United States as a post-World War II research field focused on understanding the links between individual civilians and military leaders of its time. Subsequently, the focus of civil-military research transitioned to the relationships between a nation's government and the military in historical and contemporary settings. From a historical outlook, the underpinning of civil-military theories serves as an aid to analyze and synthesize relationships between the institutions with consideration to the influence of cultures, personalities, external threats, and other relevant factors.¹⁹

¹⁸ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 11, 546.

¹⁹ Thomas Owens Mackubin, "Civil-Military Relations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, March 2010, accessed 10 October 2018, <http://internationalstudies.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-123?print=pdf>.

Although numerous theorists offer a perspective to analyze Washington's decision-making process, the scope of this study narrows the viewpoints down to Samuel P. Huntington and Peter D. Feaver. These two theorists best represent the range of expert opinions and influences on US civil-military relations. Huntington's 1957 book, *The Soldier and the State*, serves as a foundational theory for the US and how the military interacts with its civilian society. Feaver, in his 2003 book, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations*, introduces an alternate perspective on civil-military relationships with his "principal-agent" framework. Both US civil-military theorists lend the necessary qualitative research to analyze Washington's decision-making process in the fall of 1777.²⁰

While the breadth of research and analysis on Washington's decision-making at Whitemarsh and civil-military relationships are thorough in and of themselves, none of the works focus on combining the two fields of study comprehensively. Going beyond what led to the seismic decisions at Whitemarsh, the conduct of civil-military relationships adds an overlay to analyze and glean a new appreciation for Washington's actions. Washington's interactions with political and military leaders reveal underlying roots to the contrasting viewpoints of contemporary theorists. His rationale and management of complex problems shed useful insight into how senior military leaders today might engage in meaningful discussions with their civilian counterparts.

Washington's Decision-Making Process from October – December 1777

The leaves were beginning to fall from trees as the weather transitioned in eastern Pennsylvania. The wilting leaves likely resembled the feelings of the Continental soldiers as the defeat at the Battle of Germantown caused panic and disorder amongst the ranks. Just days after the battle, Private Joseph Martin of the Eighth Connecticut Continental Regiment recalled "a spell of soft weather, there not being wind . . . the ground was soft and loamy . . . so dirty was it, any

²⁰ MacKubian, "Civil-Military Relations," 11.

hogsty was preferable to our tents . . . we had nothing to eat, nor scarcely anything to wear.”²¹

The repugnant smells still lingered as the amputated soldiers fought pain and disease with nothing more than whiskey as the anesthetic. From his headquarters in Perkiomy, Pennsylvania, Washington sought to brighten the spirits of the disheartened with a general order to thank the troops for the “bravery they manifested in driving the enemy from field to field.” Although the general order shed a positive light on the failures at Germantown, Washington knew all too well the impact the loss would have within the military, political, and social communities.

Washington’s next moves would strike a balance of addressing the concerns within each of those communities for the betterment of the cause.²²

In the weeks following the retreat from Germantown, Washington positioned and repositioned the army numerous times from Pawling’s Mill to Towamencin, Pennsylvania to gain stand-off from British forces, while monitoring Howe’s actions in Germantown. On 16 October, Washington decided to move closer to Philadelphia to place pressure on British troops and concentrate Howe’s attention away from American forces operating along the Delaware River. In a letter to Congress, Washington describes his intentions of the move “to divert the enemy’s attention and force from the forts [Fort Mifflin and chevaux de frise on the Delaware River].” Washington was working two contingency plans behind the scenes as he sat only twelve miles from the capital and Howe’s headquarters.²³

Prior to the Battle of Germantown, Washington and his senior leaders prepared a branch plan to fortify Red Bank, New Jersey along the Delaware River. By possessing the ground at Red Bank, “operations by land and water oblige the enemy to abandon Philadelphia.” The Continental

²¹ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle, Being a Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier*, ed. George F. Scheer (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 74-75.

²² Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 240-241; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 11, 390.

²³ David G. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1993), 151-152; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 11, 528.

Army and Navy would work in concert to segregate British forces in Philadelphia from essential supplies by controlling the Delaware River. Washington updated Congress on the plan in a letter to President John Hancock, "I have determined to maintain the post at Red Bank." Without delay, he dispatched Continental forces and militia to the river.²⁴ With joint operations commencing on the Delaware River, Washington juggled the need to find sufficient ground to encamp the troops in the vicinity of Philadelphia.

On 17 October, Washington ordered three regiments to conduct a probing expedition to Whitemarsh to gain intelligence on the suitability of the terrain for hosting the army. The bold move by the American regiments surprised Howe. The aggressiveness of Washington to maneuver closer to Philadelphia caused Howe to withdraw his headquarters from Germantown back to the capital. Washington's decisions created a two-pronged problem for Howe as he gained insight into the defenses along the Delaware River and an ever-encroaching American army came within ten miles of his primary defenses.²⁵

Reluctant to fall into one of Howe's traps, Washington chose to wait to reposition the army at Whitemarsh. Washington primed his senior military leaders with a survey letter in advance to a pending council of war.²⁶ On 29 October 1777, Washington and thirteen general officers held a council of war to deliberate significant decisions facing the war effort. Following a recap of recent events and an intelligence update, he described the current strength and condition of the army. "Our whole force at this time amounted by the last returns to 8,313 Continental troops and 2,717 militia . . . that this force was likely soon to suffer a diminution of 1,986 militia, by the expiration of the terms of service." With these circumstances under consideration,

²⁴ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 11, 421, 473; Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 251.

²⁵ Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 152-153.

²⁶ George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth, vol. 12, *October-December 1777* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2002), 2-5, 46.

Washington proceeded to hear the advice of his most trusted leaders. Of the eleven questions presented to the council, a principle recommendation came forth with a unanimous decision against an attack on British forces occupying Philadelphia. Washington decided to withhold his final decision on an attack, but it was clear where his senior council of war stood on the matter.²⁷

Furthermore, the council advised that the army encamp around Whitemarsh, and that any eligible soldiers should reinforce the garrisons of Red Bank and Fort Mifflin along the Delaware River. Whitemarsh offered the hills and terrain for security while maintaining proximity to Howe in Philadelphia, should an opportunity for an attack arise. The council deferred any decision on when and where to encamp the army for winter quarters. For now, the army needed to focus on moving to Whitemarsh, disrupting British sea lines of communication, and acquiring critical supplies.²⁸

American forces guarding access to the Delaware River came under fierce attack on 22 October 1777. Howe ordered the Hessian *jaeger* corps commander, Colonel Carl Emil Kurt von Donop, to lead an offense with twelve hundred soldiers against Fort Mercer (Red Bank) and Fort Mifflin. By order of Washington, Colonel Christopher Greene, First Rhode Island Regiment, took command of defending the post. Although delayed in their advance on the fortified bastions, the Hessian troops arrived at the walls of Fort Mercer by late afternoon. Under cover of cannon smoke, Colonel Donop and the Hessian troops stormed the breastworks in the Battle of Red Bank. In an honorable defense of the fort, Continental Army surgeon, James Thacher, recalled Greene and the army “poured on them [Hessian troops] such hot and well-directed fire . . . that they were completely overpowered and fled in every direction.”²⁹ The American victory over the

²⁷ Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 153.

²⁸ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 47-48.

²⁹ William S. Stryker, *The Forts on the Delaware in the Revolutionary War* (Trenton, NJ: Press of the John L. Murphy Publishing Company, 1901), 19-21; James Thacher, *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution, Military Journal of the American Revolution* (New York: The New York Times and Arno Press, 1969), 119.

Hessians was a glimmer of hope for Washington and Congress in their plan to strangle Howe's troops in Philadelphia. While victory in the Battle of Red Bank did give reason to delight in a successful defense, the moment evaporated rapidly in the political and social arenas as critics of Washington took flight.

The politics of the moment rightfully influenced the balance of power between Congress and Washington's decision-making authorities. Although Washington served as the "General and commander in chief of the army of the United Colonies and of all the forces raised or to be raised by them," the Second Continental Congress only broadened Washington's powers through congressional resolves for particular circumstances.³⁰ As the War for Independence progressed, Washington gained more freedom to make decisions on behalf of the military, but Washington still depended on healthy dialogue with Congress and state political leaders. Washington understood his powers came through Congress.³¹

The recent setbacks during the Philadelphia campaign resulted in a precarious political climate. Due in large part to General Horatio Gates's victory in the Battle of Saratoga, a small group of politicians began to promote dissent over Washington's recent setbacks surrounding Philadelphia. Pennsylvania politician and socialite, Dr. Benjamin Rush, wrote to Representative John Adams expressing his concern, "Our army is no better than it was two years ago. Officers who have served under General Gates compare his army to a well-regulated family. The same gentlemen have compared General Washington's imitation of an army to a uniformed mob." While the discontent began to gradually rumble louder, President John Hancock and the majority of delegates in Congress continued to show steadfast support toward Washington as commander-

³⁰ "Commission to George Washington as Commander in Chief, June 19, 1775," Library of Virginia: Education and Outreach Division, accessed 24 January 2019, <http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/docs/GWCommission.pdf>.

³¹ George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Philander D. Chase, vol. 7, *21 October 1776–5 January 1777* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), 320; Fischer, 143-144.

in-chief. President Hancock expressed congratulations to Washington “on the success of our arms in the Northern Department [Battle of Saratoga].” At the same time, the Board of War, a congressional oversight committee empowered to issue orders for the war, continued to support Washington in his struggle to procure vital supplies from across the states. Throughout the remainder of October 1777, Washington and the congressional delegates would work together to refit the troops and recharge the nearly exhausted military chest.³²

As October 1777 ended, Washington stood resolute amidst a month of significant setbacks including tactical defeats, growing frustration in Congress, an inability to garner necessary provisions for the troops, and the budding dissent by Gates. The tide of political support further shifted on 29 October 1777, as President John Hancock, a staunch supporter of Washington, took leave from Congress due to failing health. The vacancy required Washington’s redoubled efforts to maintain a meaningful dialogue with congressional delegates. As Washington prepared to reposition his headquarters to Whitemarsh, his decision-making process brought him back to his council of war and the need to prepare contingency operations. A man of opportunity, Washington set his efforts to reequipping his troops in hopes of an opportunity to defeat British troops resting in the capital.³³

As October passed to November, the weather grew damp and harsh for the hungry and cold troops. Marching across the Schuylkill River, Private Martin recalls, “The water which spattered onto our clothes froze. We lay there freezing.” On 2 November 1777, Washington repositioned the army in the hills above Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania only twelve miles from Howe’s troops in Philadelphia. While erecting defensive works there, Lieutenant James McMichael, of the Pennsylvania line, observed “the weather now began to cover with snow the

³² John Buchanan, *The Road to Valley Forge: How Washington Built the Army That Won the Revolution* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2004), 292; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 473, 505 and 536.

³³ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 71.

earth . . . wind [from the] northwest did blow...to attack the enemy was our sole relief.” As the junior soldiers and officers sought action against British troops, the very topic of offensive maneuvers against the enemy in Philadelphia would be the focus of Washington and national level political leaders.³⁴

In a letter to the newly appointed President of the Congress, Henry Laurens, Washington addressed Congress’s growing desires for a plan heading into the winter season. Washington shared, “We have not yet come to any determination respecting the disposition of our troops for the winter, supposing it a matter of great importance, and that for the present we should be silent upon it. By continuing the campaign, perhaps many salutary if not decisive advantages may be derived.”³⁵ Washington expressed his optimism for continuing the campaign for a chance to defeat the British forces occupying Philadelphia, but he maintained the patience and maturity of sound reasoning to decide what to do next based on multiple variables.

Not the least of variables was the abysmal condition of the army’s clothing, blankets, munitions, and food as the unforgiving winter weather began to set-in. Washington portrayed the severity of the resupply issue to President Laurens. To conduct a winter campaign “depends upon the supplies of clothing which the men receive. If they cannot be accommodated in this instance, it will be difficult, if not impossible to do it without effecting their destruction.” For the past two years, Washington had worked relentlessly with Congress to adequately supply the army. He was not going to miss the opportunity to impress upon Laurens the seriousness of the matter now with the new President, particularly when the confederation faced a monumental decision. While Washington maintained a dialogue with Congress on its desire for a plan of action, he turned his

³⁴ Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 75-76; James McMichael, “Diary of Lieutenant James, of the Pennsylvania Line, 1776-1778,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 16, no. 2 (July 1892): 155, accessed 31 October 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20083473>.

³⁵ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 81.

attention back to his senior officers to gain insights into the prospect of a contingency plan to wage an offensive against Howe.³⁶

Only ten days after his last council of war, Washington called his senior military leaders to another meeting to discuss the contingency plan of advancing “with our present force to fall down [travel south] and attack the enemy in their lines near Philadelphia.” The same question, only slightly altered, was the point of conversation in the 29 October 1777 council of war. Washington, never quick to disclose his option for fear of altering honest feedback from his subordinates, was looking to take advantage of a potential opportunity in Howe’s defenses around the capital. Intelligence reports indicated Howe planned to attack Fort Mifflin out of necessity to reopen the sea lines of communication to the army in Philadelphia. The senior military leaders unanimously agreed to withhold any attack. With his leaders’ best military advice rendered, Washington honored their opinions and decided to focus his efforts on defending the forts along the Delaware River and refitting his army at Whitemarsh.³⁷

The intelligence reports concerning a renewed British attack on American redoubts proved accurate. Desperate to reopen the vital Delaware River as a supply route, Admiral Howe and General Howe organized a joint siege to rout American forces from Mud Island and Fort Mifflin. Washington gave orders to Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum and his brigade to “aid and give greater security to the garrisons [defense works].”³⁸ Only a few days later, on 10 November 1777, under cold and heavy rain, the British unleashed a barrage of artillery from Providence Island, a short distance from Fort Mifflin, and reduced much of the breastworks within the opening hours. Private Martin recalls the hail of artillery directed toward the forts, “the enemy’s shot cut us up . . . [men] split like fish to be broiled.” Over the next five days, British

³⁶ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 81.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁸ Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 313; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 43; Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 92.

artillery destroyed protective works and central blockhouses within the redoubts. On 15 November 1777, in a well-orchestrated joint offensive, the British naval and army forces brought unprecedented firepower against the shell of the fort. The Adjutant-General of New Jersey, William Stryker, recalls the American situation, “by one o’clock ammunition was entirely exhausted . . . all that the patriots now had to do was to hide somewhere.” America’s army and naval operations were no match against the British attacks. Washington lost Fort Mifflin and Mud Island later that evening. By 19 November 1777, Washington decided, based on feedback from senior generals, to abandon the remaining defensive works along the Jersey shore. In a letter to President John Laurens, Washington informed Congress, “the enemy are now in possession of all the water defenses.” Howe had established his lifeline along the Delaware River. Yet again, the tide had turned for Washington and Congress. This time the loss drew concern toward Washington’s abilities as commander-in-chief while fueling the desire to move against Howe in Philadelphia.³⁹

With each passing day, Congressional delegates and state politicians grew more impatient with Washington’s seeming inaction against Howe in Philadelphia. Still forced to congregate outside the capital, the attorney general of Pennsylvania, Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant, wrote to Congressman James Lovell of Connecticut, “Thousands of lives and millions of properties are yearly sacrificed to the insufficiency of our commander-in-chief [Washington]. We are so attached to this man that I fear we shall sink...under his management.” Sharing in Sergeant’s frustration, Lovell, a persistent critic of Washington, expressed his feeling, “the spirit of enterprise is a stranger in the main army.” The armchair general grew all the more impatient. The newly elected delegate from North Carolina, Cornelius Harnett, wasted little time in expressing his restlessness on the matter in a letter to Representative Thomas Burke, “If you was here you

³⁹ Stryker, *The Forts on the Delaware in the Revolutionary War*, 33-40; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 363.

would think a general attack should be made on the City [Philadelphia] immediately. A Defeat of Howe's army must I think be attempted." The inflamed sense of urgency by state and national political officials did not go unrecognized by Washington. He knew all too well the political distain for inaction, and the political arena gave Washington inclination to consider an offensive attack before Pennsylvania's harsh winter made it untenable.⁴⁰

Anxious tension filled the raw, cold air as Washington seriously debated a plan of action. By 24 November, Greene and Wayne had their troops ready to march on short notice. To strike a balance in his deliberation of whether to mount a winter campaign, Washington turned to his senior generals to gain their perspective on the matter. Brigadier General John Cadwalader, whose house Howe used as his headquarters, proposed a plan to Washington for attacking Philadelphia. In turn, Washington hastily organized a council of general officers to consider the plan. While the available general officers near Whitemarsh attended the council, Washington's most trusted leader, Greene, was in New Jersey opposing Cornwallis. Washington waited to receive written feedback from Greene before taking count of the council's opinion. In a letter to Washington, Greene provided his candid opinion on the situation, "your excellency has the choice of but two things, to fight the enemy without the least prospect of success . . . or remain inactive and be subject to the censure of an ignorant and impatient populace." Greene observed Cadwalader's plan for attacking Howe's defensive works as a move against any sound military judgment; instead, to remain inactive was logic "approved by reason and justified by every military principle."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to James Lovell, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, *September 18, 1777-January 31, 1778*, ed. Paul H. Smith and Ronald Gephart (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1981), 297; James Lovell to Joseph Whipple, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, 303; Cornelius Harnett to Thomas Burke, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, 290.

⁴¹ Adams, *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of John Adams*, 267. Charles Stille, *Major General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line in the Continental Army* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968), 110; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 371; Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign, June 1777-July 1778*, 156. Greene, Conrad, Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 208.

On the contrary, Major General Johann Kalb voted “to attempt an attack on the lines and city.” Brigadier General William Woodford penned an equally supportive cry for action. Echoing similar sentiment, Wayne laid out “the immediate necessity of giving the enemy battle.” Eleven officers, including Greene, opposed an attack, and four officers favored aggressive action against Howe’s position. Washington honored the council’s decision, but the matter was far from being settled. As Washington reflected on the council’s recommendation not to act, he undoubtedly pondered Wayne’s closing comments, “the eyes of all the world are fixed on you . . . the country and Congress [have] some expectations that vigorous effort will be made to dislodge the enemy.”⁴²

As Congress waited on Washington to decide whether to pursue an offensive campaign against Howe, the impatience and disgruntlement of some politicians found favor with a group of disloyal military officers. A group of disaffected senior military officers aimed to denounce Washington as commander-in-chief. Through a courtship with congressional delegates, Brigadier General Thomas Conway, along with generals Gates and Mifflin, fueled by egos and self-righteous ambitions, wrote letters and met covertly to criticize Washington. The correspondence later became known as the Conway Cabal.⁴³

Washington, already irritated by Gates’s lethargic efforts to send reinforcements to Whitemarsh following the Battle of Saratoga, soon became aware of the scheme. General Gates’s aide-de-camp, Major James Wilkinson, exposed the harsh contents of Conway’s letters to Major General William Alexander’s aide-de-camp, Major William McWilliams. A loyal subordinate to the commander-in-chief, Alexander, known as Lord Stirling, wasted no time in reporting the matter to Washington. Shortly after receiving the letter from Stirling, Washington fired off a terse

⁴² Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 392; Stille, *Major General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line in the Continental Army*, 111.

⁴³ Buchanan, *The Road to Valley Forge: How Washington Built the Army That Won the Revolution*, 293-294.

letter to Conway exposing his knowledge of the criticism. Conway admitted too much of the contents in the letter, but he refuted as his own any portion of the letter condemning Washington. The clandestine lobbying by Conway and other senior military officers continued into 1778, but what mattered in November 1777 was the exposure of the Conway Cabal to Washington. Now, among all the competing variables weighing on Washington's mind for what to do next. He had to contend with a group of conspiring generals judging every decision and failure.⁴⁴

Beyond the deceitful senior military and political leaders, Washington directed his real efforts in procuring supplies for the poorly clad and famished troops. The principal issue holding Washington back from pursuing an offensive campaign concerned the dire condition of the troops. Wayne described the condition of his troops to Washington as, "distressed and naked." The soldier's bed was often the exposed sky and ground due to a lack of shelters or blankets, hardly suitable as the winter snow painted a white blanket over the fields. After working tirelessly with Congress and state politicians to address shortcomings in rations for the army, Washington decided to convene a Board of General Officers to determine a remedy to the issue. The recommendation of the board concluded with the need to further reduce rations on an already meek diet for the soldiers. In agreeance with the board's findings, Washington informed President Laurens of the humbling results. Washington went on to explain "the condition of the army for want of cloaths and blankets, and the little prospect we have of obtaining relief according to...the Board of War, occasion me to trouble you at this time." The crisis reached a tipping point, and it required a whole of government and society to address the issue.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Buchanan, *The Road to Valley Forge: How Washington Built the Army That Won the Revolution*, 293-294; John Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 226-227; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 110.

⁴⁵ Greene, Conrad, Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 193; Charles Knowles Bolton, *The Private Soldier Under Washington* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 74; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 208.

Earlier in the month, the first of November, Congress extended Washington's authority to seize necessary supplies from local citizens as he saw necessary. While the authorization was an attempt to address the prolonged issue, Congress' approach was poorly thought out and wholly inadequate to address the scale of the problem. Furthermore, it discounted the impact on society and the wavering support of the populace. Washington, however, understood this short sidedness by Congress. His ability to anticipate the second and third order effects led him to forgo the option, even at the expense of his troops. In his letter to President Laurens, Washington warned Congress that "the mode of seizing and forcing supplies from the inhabitants, I fear, would prove very inadequate to the demands, while it would certainly imbitter the minds of the people." The solution in getting supplies and rations to the soldiers would not be solved by impressing scarce supplies from local citizens. Congress's wholly inadequate plan to solve the issue tied Washington's hands from being able to pursue an immediate attack against Howe's troops.⁴⁶

Despite all the shortcomings and the council of war's recommendation to withhold an attack on Philadelphia, Washington departed Whitemarsh on 25 November 1777 to reconnoiter the British defense works from the west side of the Schuylkill River. Washington gave special trust to his council of war and their best military advice, but the decision of whether to attack rested on him. He alone knew the condition of troops, the political pressures swirling from every corner of the colonies, and the impact his decision would have on widespread support from the citizens. Washington needed to see the situation himself and assess the risks before deciding to attack. The reconnaissance proved most beneficial in helping Washington consider contingency operations. Washington informed Greene of his findings along the British defenses as "much stronger than I had reason to expect from the Accounts I had received." The commander-in-chief clearly understood what the army was up against should they dare attack. He ordered Greene to

⁴⁶ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 208.

depart New Jersey and rejoin him near Whitemarsh. The commanding general had decided against any attack to retake the capital.⁴⁷

News of Washington's declining to attack reached Congress quickly, but through rather unconventional means. Instead of Washington being the first to notify President Laurens, it was the president's son and a member of Washington's military family, Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, who desired to support Washington's decision in a letter to his father. John Laurens had joined Washington on the reconnaissance to review the British defenses. Attempting to explain Washington's decision, John Laurens told his father, "our commander-in-chief wishing ardently to gratify the public expectation by making an attack upon the enemy – yet preferring at the same time a loss of popularity to engaging in an enterprise which he could not justify, went to view the works [defenses] . . . we saw redoubts of a very respectable profit." Although the letter provided insight into the reinforced British defenses, it did little to dissuade President Laurens and Congress from continuing to push for an attack on the occupied city. Just days later Washington received word from Laurens that Congress had appointed Gates the new president of the Board of War. Gates thus presided over the congressional sub-committee overseeing the war in America. The separation between political and military arenas grew ever narrower and more complex.⁴⁸

The Board of War and its new president wasted no time in exercising its political muscle. On 28 November 1777, it appointed a committee of three delegates to meet with Washington with the intent "to repair to the army . . . to consider of the best and most practicable means for carrying on a winter's campaign with vigour and success, an object which Congress have much at heart." If Washington was not going to elect an offensive to retake the capital willingly, then Congress would exercise its powers to get its decisive battle.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 389; Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 367-368.

⁴⁸ Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 367-368.

⁴⁹ Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 9, *October 3-December 31, 1777* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 972.

As November drew to an end, Washington struggled with the prospect of taking the army into battle for the chance to achieve a decisive victory or to settle in for what was proving to be a long and cold winter. His own eyes told him of the formidable defenses surrounding Philadelphia, but the Board of War would soon be sending three delegates to help Washington “repair” the army for a winter campaign. During this time, Washington gained insight that the French were planning to declare war against Britain in America. The intelligence had a profound impression on Washington’s decision-making process as he reconsidered the option of withholding an offensive campaign until the United States gained open support from France. As small skirmishes broke out in the twelve-mile gap between Whitemarsh and Philadelphia, Washington fought off the temptation to be drawn into open battle with the British forces.⁵⁰

The weather was becoming insufferable for the exposed soldiers, so Washington knew the time had come to give serious thought about where the army should encamp if it did not advance on the capital. The decision of whether to settle for winter quarters was still undecided, but that notwithstanding, Washington decided to hold a council of war on 30 November 1777 to discuss potential locations should the army take refuge for the season. The proposals for a location included moving south to Wilmington, west to Reading and Lancaster, or closer to Philadelphia between the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. In a rare case for a council of war, Washington adjourned the meeting before hearing all the opinions of his advisors. The general officers submitted their opinions in writing the next day. At present, however, Washington had more urgent matters from the south pressing for his time.⁵¹

Rumors circulated throughout Whitemarsh about the British growing restless in Philadelphia. The skirmishes in no man’s land were growing in frequency and size, and they soon

⁵⁰ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 420.

⁵¹ McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign*, 233; Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 368; Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 156; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 455.

annoyed Howe to the point of action. Howe had grown frustrated with the war and desired relief from being the commander of the British troops. However, his intelligence reports and restless troops led him to decide on making a final attack to defeat Washington and the Continental Army before the winter brought the possibility to a close. On 1 December 1777, Major John Clarke, Jr., Washington's chief spy, reported, "orders were given to the [British] Troops to hold themselves in readiness to march . . . to surprize your Army, or to prevent you making an attack on them." Over the next two days, Clarke shared regular intelligence updates of British forces drawing provisions and horses in preparation for action. Washington responded by notifying his troops to stand ready for a short order to march against a British advance.⁵²

Finally, on 4 December 1777, Washington gained collaborating intelligence of Howe's detailed intentions from the most unlikely of sources. Lydia Darragh, a Quaker housewife living in the home where Howe held his meeting to finalize plans for marching against Washington, braved the harsh winter conditions and the risk of being captured to relay the details of the conference. In a letter to Washington, William Dewees, Jr., a local ironworker, shared Darragh's details, "they are Determind to Attack you where you Now Are [Whitemarsh]." Washington took the report seriously and set the order of battle for 4-5 December with a general order to his units to remain ready with "one day's provisions on hand . . . that if they are suddenly called to arms the men may not be distressed." It appeared Washington was about to get a chance to showcase the actual condition of the Continental Army to Board of War committee members.⁵³

The Board of War delegates, Robert Morris, Elbridge Gerry, and Joseph Jones, arrived at Whitemarsh around noon on 3 December and met with Washington in the evening. Washington presented the responses from his senior officers from the councils of war held 24 and 30 November 1777. Washington included Cadwalader's plan for attacking Philadelphia for the

⁵² Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 456; Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 158-160.

⁵³ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 534-538.

delegates to review. In response to the committee's concerns and interests, Washington issued another circular to the general officers of the Continental Army on "adviseability of a Winters Campaign, & practicability of an attempt upon Philada." Only a few hours later, news arrived of Howe's intentions to attack. The committee postponed any further discussions temporarily as Howe's advance pulled Washington and his generals into the field. Over the next five days, the committee delegates would gain valuable insight into the condition and capability of the Continental Army as it engaged in open battle.⁵⁴

With Cornwallis leading the vanguard, the British forces sought to catch Washington's forces by surprise in a decisive battle. The British vanguard departed Philadelphia at midnight on 4 December 1777, along the Germantown Road. Howe was looking to pick a fight, and he brought all 10,000 British soldiers to the match. Continental forces knew to be on the lookout, and they spotted the advancing British forces with enough time to alert the main body at Whitemarsh. By dawn, the British forces arrived at their predetermined position in hopes of surprising Washington's troops in an overwhelming attack. To the dismay of Cornwallis, the Continental forces were in prepared positions waiting on his arrival. Washington ordered the soldiers to double the number of campfires, so Cornwallis gave pause to the astounding size of the force as he scanned the glowing hillsides. By all accounts, the British had lost its initiative.⁵⁵

After initial mid-morning skirmishes, Howe arrived at the front to inspect Washington's position. Taken aback by the size and situation of the American forces, Howe decided against engaging in battle and by the afternoon he withdrew his entire command to Chestnut Hill. Throughout the next two days, Howe maneuvered and re-engage his forces in the hope of drawing Washington into a battle. At the same time, Washington sent multiple brigade and smaller formations to venture south for limited attacks against the British troops. The British

⁵⁴ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 469, 506.

⁵⁵ Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 160-163.

forces never made it far enough north to contest the fortifications above Whitemarsh. At dawn on 8 December 1777, Washington and his men stood ready for further battle, but Howe and his army had exhausted their supply of provisions. The cold winter weather was taking a toll on the British soldiers who left tents and blankets behind in Philadelphia. Howe withdrew his forces back to the capital later in the afternoon. Howe had made his last large-scale attempt at defeating Washington for the year.⁵⁶

As the intelligence reports and the battles near Whitemarsh played out, the political waters began to churn just as violently. On 3 December 1777, Elbridge Gerry, Board of War appointed delegate, provided John Adams with initial feedback on his meeting with Washington. “Cloathing is much wanted, & the States are impressed with the Necessity of exerting themselves to send immediate Supplies . . . there seems to be an irresistible Desire of going into Winter Quarters . . . the Committee have large Powers, & should a Winters Campaign be determined on, will not be reserve in exercising them so far as shall appear necessary to accomplish something decisive . . . I think the Committee will most heartily propose the Measures.” The very next day, Robert Morris, another committee member, penned a starkly different tone on the matter in a note to Congress titled, “Objections to a Winters Campaigne.” Morris’ committee note outlined three reasons for objections to a winter offensive, which highlighted the dire circumstances from lack of provisions, the impact of harsh winter weather, and the enemy’s defenses surrounding the capital. While the Board of War committee members waited for the battle to subside, Gerry continued to criticize Washington for lacking the “enterprising spirit” necessary for taking an

⁵⁶ Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 163-164.

offensive campaign. As the committee watched the battle unfold, the armchair generals reviewed the military leaders' written responses to Washington's circular.⁵⁷

As the senior military leaders provided their best military advice to Washington, it became clear to the three committee members the reality of the situation. The letters came back to headquarters with overwhelming advice to withhold on pursuing a winter campaign. As Brigadier General Henry Knox put it, "I think a Winters Campaign, under the present circumstances, will be the inevitable destruction, if not of the Liberties of the Country, yet of the present Army." In a turn of opinion, Wayne, who recommended in previous councils of war for an offensive, rendered the same opinion as Knox. In a thorough letter on the subject, Greene knew his words were doing more than advising Washington. He wrote to inform the Board of War and the restless delegates on why a winter campaign would prove ruinous for the greater cause. Rather than providing his own opinion, Greene went beyond and referenced Frederick the Great's *Military Instructions* to "protest against attacking troops by storm in villages, much more in large regular brick cities...it often piques the ruin of the best part of an army."⁵⁸ The council of war had made it clear, it was not in the best interests of the country for the Continental Army to attack the British forces sitting in Philadelphia.

The "Continental Congress Camp Committee Report" went to Congress on 10 December 1777. Enclosed in it was a separate letter with the committee's recommendation for whether to pursue a winter campaign or support the Continental Army's movement to winter quarters. On 16 December, Congress reviewed the report and enclosed letter. The committee determined "that it would be most advisable to retire to Winter Quarters, to afford time for reforming the army,

⁵⁷ Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, 374-375; Robert Morris' Committee Notes, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 8, 378; *The Road to Valley Forge: How Washington Built the Army That Won the Revolution*, 292; Mark Edward Lender and Garry Wheeler Stone, *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 7.

⁵⁸ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 524-525; Stille, *Major General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line in the Continental Army*, 111-112; Greene, Conrad, Showman, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 235.

refreshing and disciplining the Troops, that they might take the Field early in the spring in health and vigor, and thereby prove more essentially useful to the American cause than by being exposed to a Winter's Campaign at the risque of a certain evil for an uncertain good.” Although dissent and contrasting views remained between various delegates and military leaders alike, the report settled the issue for Washington and the Board of War. Washington decided to set his focus on determining where to quarter the Continental Army for the winter.⁵⁹

Washington knew he had to find refuge for his soldiers in a new location beyond Whitemarsh. He gave orders to march the army west across the Schuylkill River on 11 December. Over the next week, Washington revisited the written opinions of his generals on the best location to encamp. The senior leaders offered mixed opinions on a location and whether to keep the troops consolidated or separated. Brigadier General William Smallwood suggested a set of criteria to support his assessment for determining where to quarter, “the Health & Security, the Discipline of the Army—& the Support and covering the Country.” Washington was in favor of a remote location to support such criteria, but the Pennsylvania Executive Council demanded “that the army must remain in close proximity to Philadelphia” to deny British forging in the area. The state-level politics grew teeth when it threatened to “withdraw its aid from the army” should Washington decide to move further away. As always, Washington was juggling the politics of the matter with the need to make sound military decisions.⁶⁰

Washington’s decision of where to quarter the troops lingered as he struggled to balance military considerations with the reality of the Pennsylvania Executive Council’s political and logistical powers. In “General Orders” dated 17 December 1777, Washington concluded the army would “take post in the neighborhood of this camp.”⁶¹ The Army rested the next day in

⁵⁹ Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 9, 1030.

⁶⁰ Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 165-166; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 482-483; Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 394.

⁶¹ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 620.

recognition of the congressionally appointed day of thanksgiving. The following day, 19 December, the Continental Army departed Gulph, Pennsylvania and trudged further westward. Private Martin reflected on the condition of hundreds of his fellow companions as they marched barefoot “till they might be tracked by their blood upon the rough frozen ground.” Washington made his decision to forgo any winter campaign for the opportunity to reconsolidate, refit, and train at Valley Forge.⁶²

Analysis

Washington’s decision-making process from 1 September to 19 December 1777 reveals the complex and turbulent environment senior military leaders find themselves managing on a daily basis. In the span of 110 days, Washington formally held six councils of war, exchanged hundreds of written correspondences with political leaders, oversaw seven engagements or battles against British troops, and wrestled with the dismal condition of the Continental troops as he contemplated the decision to retire to winter quarters.⁶³ The fine line senior military leaders walk to provide their best military advice within the military purview does not happen within a vacuum, removed from all other variables at play in the strategic context. The everchanging strategic context surrounding Washington and the Second Continental Congress illustrate that reality. As retired US Army Major General William Rapp described in 2015, “such an orderly, logical world simply does not exist at the top of the national security hierarchy.”⁶⁴ In the case of Washington, his military decision-making process was the product of executing a well-

⁶² Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 395; Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777-July 1778*, 169; Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 101.

⁶³ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 46-620. The seven named skirmishes or battles include the Battle of Brandywine, Battle of the Cloud, Paoli Massacre, Battle of Germantown, Battle of Fort Mifflin, Battle of Saratoga, and the Battle of Whitemarsh. Although Washington was not present on the battlefield for each operation, the effects from the operations influenced his decision-making process.

⁶⁴ William E. Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 13.

orchestrated civil-military relationship with those elected delegates charged with determining the course of the Revolutionary War.

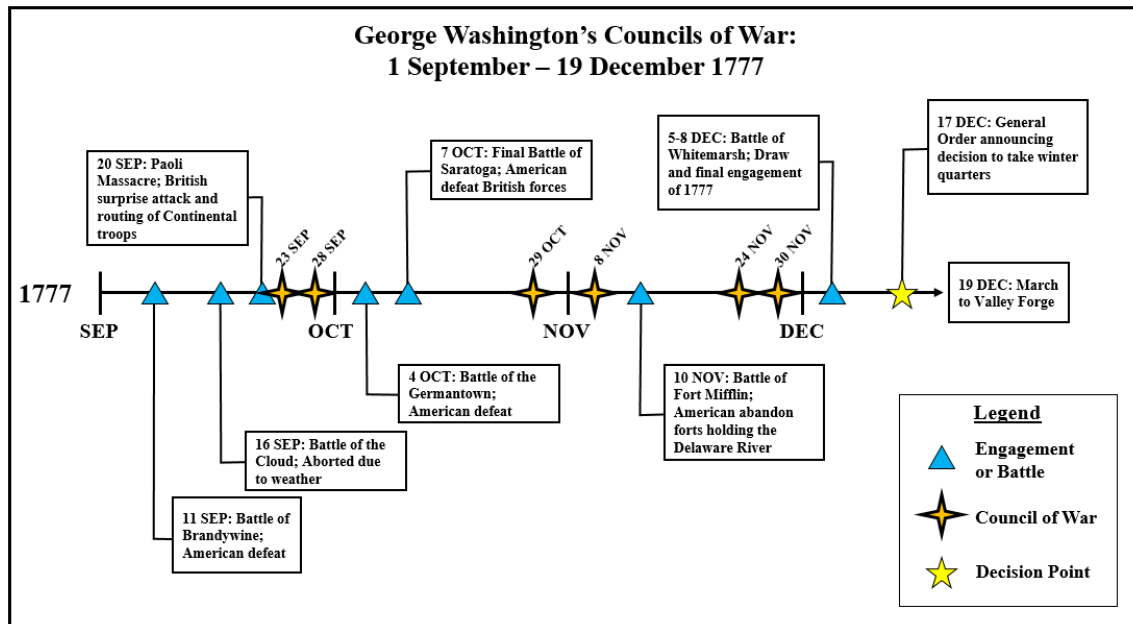


Figure 2. George Washington's Councils of War: 1 September – 19 December 1777. Image compiled using data from National Archives, *Founders Online*, accessed 10 December 2018, <https://founders.archives.gov/>.

To conduct a thorough analysis of Washington's decision-making process, it is beneficial to view his actions through two leading civil-military theorists: Samuel P. Huntington and Peter D. Feaver. Since the field of study opened sixty-five years ago, many civil-military theorists have used historical case studies to apply and analyze the conduct of civil and military leaders. Huntington and Feaver propose differing concepts for the proper structure of effective civil-military relationships. The extensive literature on civil-military relations provides a contemporary lens to analyze Washington's interactions with political and military leaders and the management of complex problems. It is through the qualitative analysis of Washington's practices that senior military leaders today can observe and inculcate the practice of meaningful discussions with their civilian counterparts.

Analysis through Samuel P. Huntington's Civil-Military Theory

Since his introduction of “objective control” in 1956, Samuel P. Huntington has stood as a formative US civil-military theorist. The following year, 1957, Huntington published *The Soldier and the State* to offer a theoretical framework for the effective and necessary balance of civil-military relations in the United States. At the time of his research and writing, Huntington had observed the United States' military transition from World War II from a small, professional force to a larger conscript force with small core of professionals by 1960. As concern grew over the looming Cold War, the military had swiftly increased its size through conscription and while experiencing a high transition rate of junior officers following the completion of initial service obligations. In light of the circumstance, Huntington perceived a need to address a growing concern of maintaining a professional relationship between the military and the civilian leadership. At the root of Huntington's theory is a reductionist approach that aims to “develop a system of civil-military relations which will maximize military security at the least sacrifice of other social values.” It is within this framework that Huntington offers a formula for civilian control over the military.⁶⁵

Huntington's mid-century civil-military theory provides a recipe for maintaining civilian control over the military by establishing a distinct separation of the military and civilian responsibilities. Starting with the need for a professional officer corps, Huntington uses historical case studies to examine his claim for the need of civilians to apply objective control over the military. According to Huntington, the officer corps seeks to develop expertise and technical competence in its military profession; however, the military ethic is “pessimistic, collectivist, historically inclined, [and] power-oriented.” Given the military's narrow field of expertise and its inclination for seeking power, Huntington determines the need for a framework to keep the

⁶⁵ Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, ed., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 1; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 2; Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, 5.

military in check while maintaining its professionalism. For Huntington, the solution is when the “military are servants of the statesman, and that civilian control is essential to military professionalism.” His theoretical structure requires the clear isolation of the military from meddling in the political arena.⁶⁶

The implication of isolating the military from politics introduces the segregation of policy and the development of a strategy. Huntington asserts there is a tendency for politicians “to invade the independent realm of the military.” Therefore, strategy needs to occur where politics ends. Huntington recalls a Command and General Staff College publication in 1936, in which the authors stated, “Politics and strategy are radically and fundamentally apart . . . once policy is settled, strategy and command shall be regarded as being in a sphere apart from politics...all sides must abstain from trespassing.”⁶⁷ The theory works well for Huntington as he defines the military profession’s criteria as concrete and isolable, but he describes politics as ambiguous and highly subjective. As “politics is an art, military science a profession,” the theoretical construct requires the political arena to settle on its objectives and transition the military tasks to senior officers to systematically fulfill those static objectives in a linear fashion. The objective control formula provides a guiding framework for politicians and military officers, but the civil-military theory does not suffice as an explanation for characterizing Washington’s action in the fall of 1777.⁶⁸

Huntington applied his construct of objective control theory to historical case studies in *The Soldier and the State*, including the review of the civil-military relations in eighteenth-century America. In Huntington’s opinion, Washington was “the antitheses of the professional

⁶⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), 227; Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 11-13, 79.

⁶⁷ The Command and General Staff School, *The Principles of Strategy for an Independent Corps or Army in a Theater of Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1936), 19-20.

⁶⁸ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 228, 76.

type, moving with ease from military to political office and back again.”⁶⁹ It is accurate that Washington would not understand or appreciate Huntington’s construct of objective control. Washington recognized the supremacy of the Continental Congress, but that did not mean the acceptance of rigid separation of the political and military arenas as dictated by objective control theory. As the country sought to govern its citizens and itself, the civil-military relationships formed in the midst of war and trying to create a country. The elected delegates of the Continental Congress and highest-ranking generals practiced a partnership-like approach to civil-military relations. Washington engaged with local, state, and nationally elected civilian leaders daily. The authority granted to Washington to procure necessary supplies and engage in discourse with elected officials were a direct result of the Continental Congress recognizing the cross-over of military and politics spheres during the war.⁷⁰

Influential in Washington’s decision-making process was the iterative dialog he shared with President John Hancock and the states’ governors. Huntington’s expectation of the political elites providing clear, static objectives for the military misses the strategic context grossly in October 1777. Under Huntington’s object control theory, President Hancock should have told Washington what objectives to accomplish given the state of the confederation. In turn, Washington should give his best military advice on how to accomplish those objectives and wait for the President’s decision. Should Washington disagree with the decision or find it impossible to execute, Huntington argues that Washington “must fall to and make the best of a bad situation.”⁷¹

The complex reality of the strategic environment in the fall of 1777 causes Huntington’s objective control theory to fall short of capturing Washington’s civil-military actions. President

⁶⁹ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 194.

⁷⁰ Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, 247-248; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 7, 320.

⁷¹ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 76-77.

Hancock, the Board of War, and other congressional delegates all weighed in on the direction of the war, but they did not plan or decide on those directions divorced of Washington's interactions with them. Washington remained respectful of the role and supremacy of the Continental Congress as the governing body for the confederation, but it was through open communication and professional discourse that Washington repeatedly approached civil-military relations. Huntington's civil-military theory fails to accurately capture Washington's civil-military interactions or the reality of the messy business of politics and the development of strategy during a time of crisis.

Analysis through Peter D. Feaver's Civil-Military Theory

Another prominent theoretical construct in US civil-military relations comes from Peter D. Feaver. Feaver offers a critical assessment of Huntington's objective control theory as too idealistic and devoid contextual realities. Feaver argues that Huntington's purpose "is to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do."⁷² Huntington's civil-military theory exposes a gap in structuring effective dialogs between politicians and senior military officers. Feaver provides a theory based on microeconomics to fill the void: principal-agent theory.

The principal-agent theory acknowledges the dynamic relationship between civilians and military officers in a hierarchical setting. In the most basic form, the theory provides a common model to discuss the relationship between the elected civilian-principals and the military-agents. The principal-agent theory addresses how elected civilian leaders monitor the military as it fulfills its obligation toward national security. In the relationship between the principal and agent, Feaver points out the information advantage and professional expertise the military-agent possesses over the civilian-principals. The information asymmetry of the agent necessitates the civilian-

⁷² Peter D. Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control," *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 149.

principals to employ monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance and follow-through by the military. Feaver argues that in a mature democracy, militaries decide whether to work or shirk based on the probability of detection by the civilian monitoring instruments.⁷³

In contrast to Huntington's isolation of the military and civilian spheres, Feaver strikes a different tone with the absolute requirement for the two spheres to converge. The relationship between a working or shirking military and the monitoring civilians requires a mutual respect and interaction between the two entities. Feaver's agency theory requires direct intervention in military affairs by the civilian leaders. The strategic interaction comes with tension as the government provides the monitoring means to control the military while the government recognizes its need for the military to achieve its political objectives.⁷⁴ As Feaver points out in developing a national security strategy, "military and civilian political leaders need each other in order to make policies, fulfill responsibilities, and to accomplish goals."⁷⁵ Although the observation was contemporary, it finds solid footing in describing the relationship between Washington and the Continental Congress at the end of November 1777.

Confronted with the devastating loss of Philadelphia, an inability to pay, feed, or clothe the troops, and undecided on what action to take next, Washington directly interacted with local, state, and national political leaders as he sought solutions. With the Continental Congress as the principal and Washington as head of the military agency, the principal-agent theory frames the balance of information asymmetry and monitoring mechanisms between the organizations. The

⁷³ Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 54; Gilbert E. Petrina, "An Agency Theory View of the Military Advisor" (Masters Monograph, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies US Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, 2005), 6; Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, 55-57. Feaver describes working as the military doing all that the civilian-principals assigns. The term shirking describes the military's degree of disregard for civilian-principal assigned objectives and tasks.

⁷⁴ Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," 18; Petrina, 10; Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, 56-61.

⁷⁵ Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 418.

relationship between the Board of War and Washington's council of war lends an example to analyze the tenuous relationship.

The Continental Congress commissioned the Board of War as an oversight committee to monitor and direct the war as necessary. The monitoring mechanism had limited effects on Washington's decision-making process; however, it served its purpose of allowing the civilian-principals with a mechanism to subdue the information asymmetry Washington and his senior military leaders shared. The Board of War's decision to dispatch three delegates to Whitemarsh to meet with Washington on the prospect of a winter campaign further reflects those mechanisms. The Continental Congress was exercising their ability to monitor and directly intervene into military matters at their discretion.⁷⁶

At the same time, Washington demonstrated his understanding of civil-military relationships by addressing the delegation through diverse and comprehensive methods. For the commander-in-chief, the understanding of civil-military relationships meant recognizing where power resided in every situation. As Edmund S. Morgan noted in *The Genius of George Washington*, "Washington's genius lay in his understanding of power, both military power and political power, an understanding unmatched by that of any of his contemporaries."⁷⁷ In addition to personally meeting with the delegates on multiple occasions, Washington shared the written advice of his senior military leaders on the topic. Furthermore, Washington leveraged the information asymmetry by having the delegation remain in the area as the Battle of Whitemarsh unfolded before their eyes. In Feaver's assessment, Washington proved "meticulous in consulting with the Continental Congress." Washington made it clear to the committee members and the Board of War that the army was not shirking in its responsibilities. On the contrary, Washington

⁷⁶ Lender and Stone, *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle*, 36; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 11, 505.

⁷⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1980), 6.

approached the civil-military dialog as an opportunity to demonstrate the work taking place amid significant shortfalls in men and material resources. The monitoring mechanisms leveled the information advantage and illuminated the harsh reality confronting Washington in his decision-making process.⁷⁸

The conflict with the principal-agent theory is the assumption that only the agent is capable of shirking from their responsibilities. History reveals that both parties are capable of working and shirking. It is insufficient to suggest the principal-agent theory excuses the civilian-principals from being held accountable for failing to work diligently toward the prescribed objectives. The Continental Congress shirked its duties when it failed to overcome its “localist world view and a deep distrust of the military.” The political culture of the time preferred authorities and powers remain decentralized at each level of governance; thus, there was no single governing body to administer the starving Continental troops adequately. Although the responsibility fell to the delegates to work across state lines with governors to support the army, the steeped political culture of adherence to republican ideology hindered its ability in fulfilling its obligations.⁷⁹

With the ease of quill and ink, the Continental Congress transferred the politically and militarily troubling problem further into the military’s duties by extending Washington’s authority to seize necessary supplies from the local population. Washington organized a board of general officers to determine a solution to the issue, and he provided the findings and recommendations back to the Congress. In essence, the military-agent was assisting the congressional-principals in overcoming a political culture causing blindness to a critical shortfall within their responsibilities. The political culture of fragmented authorities and distrust of the

⁷⁸ Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, 220; Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 469.

⁷⁹ E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 5-7.

military hindered the congressional-principles from understanding the seriousness of the resource shortfall. The power to determine and assign tasks remained the purview of the Continental Congress, but such purview does not exonerate the principal organization from upholding its obligations.⁸⁰

The relationship between the civilian-principal and the subordinate military-agent appropriately describes the relationship between the Continental Congress and Washington. Furthermore, the concept of the principal-civilians monitoring the agent's actions to ensure working over shirking explains the Board of War role over the military. However, the principal-agent theory struggles to frame Washington's need and ability to monitor the inadequacies of congressional efforts toward achieving national objectives. He remained respectful to the civil-military paradigm while cautiously extending beyond the agency theory to monitor and redirect the principal and agent parties alike in the pursuit of national independence.

Conclusion

Neither Huntington's nor Feaver's civil-military theory fully captures the approach Washington took with elected leaders. The confluence of Huntington and Feaver's theories explains portions of Washington's conduct with civil and military leaders alike, but the theories prove deficient in capturing the full framework of Washington's decision-making process. However, applying the theories to Washington's decision-making process at Whitemarsh does offer some insight into how senior military leaders today might engage in meaningful discussions with their civilian counterparts.

At the highest levels of national security, the reality is that military leaders must introduce themselves to the political arena. The general officers advising senior elected officials must be cognizant of the political systems and variables weighing in the strategic environment.

⁸⁰ Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 12, 208; Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 6.

To be sure, the nation does not need political generals; instead, the nation needs senior officers able to provide best military advice with awareness and consideration to the domestic and international politics influencing the world around them. As Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz described the responsibilities, “strategy and policy coalesce: the [senior military leader] is simultaneously a statesman . . . he is aware of the entire political situation.”⁸¹ The nation’s top military leaders become politically astute by building trust with their civilian counterparts. It is naïve to expect civilian and military leaders to trust one another blindly. Alternatively, through open, iterative dialogs leaders can build trust for candid and meaningful discourse to better translate political objectives into military strategies.⁸²

The world today is just as messy and complex as it was in the fall of 1777. Washington upheld and respected the separation between elected civilians and the subordinate military, but he knew blind disregard for the political realities would be a disservice to the troops, elected officials, and the confederation. Washington invested in continuous dialog and built relationships with elected delegates at all levels. The mutual level of trust and strength of relationships between Washington and majority of the Continental Congress set the conditions for developing the national strategy. The same consideration for building trust rang true for his approach with his military subordinates. Washington trusted his council of war officers and valued their opinions on a wide range of topics.

In December 1777, Washington, along with his senior military leaders, and congressional delegates communicated in constant dialog over the risks and opportunities tied to the decision of whether to pursue a winter offensive or reconsolidate and train the troops in winter quarters. Washington’s decision to forego a winter campaign and focus his efforts on refitting the army at

⁸¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 111-112.

⁸² Rapp, “Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” 17-19.

Valley Forge reflects his ability to build mutual trust with civilian and military leaders to make the best military decision for the united colonies.

Areas for Further Study

In analyzing Washington's decision-making process through only two theorists, the scope of this case study is narrow and simplifies the complex reality of understanding civil-military relations. Washington served as the military commander-in-chief through numerous other Revolutionary War campaigns to include New York, Trenton, Monmouth, and Yorktown. In each campaign, Washington dealt with a unique strategic context. The approach and maturity Washington took in his civil-military relations evolved throughout eight years. It is worth examining how Washington managed the civil-military relationships at different moments of the war, particularly as France continued to provide more support to the war effort. The integration of international interests in the realm of Washington's decision-making grows more complex as domestic and international civil-military dynamics convolute the idea of a clear principal-agent relationship.

Aside from examining different points along Washington's military career, there are other civil-military theories to overlay on the circumstances presented in this study. Theorists such as Morris Janowitz, Eliot Cohen, Richard Kohn, among others offer alternating theoretical constructs to analyze the decision-making process of Washington. Those differing theoretical constructs might reveal better credence than those conclusions formed in this historical case study.

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