America's First Military Professional: General George Washington at Valley Forge, 1777-1778

A Monograph

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Washington's behavior at Valley Forge can be analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of Samuel Huntington and Don Snider. In Huntington's *The Soldier and the State,* he introduces his theory of objective control, where military officers submit to the legitimate civilian government in exchange for warfighting autonomy. Don Snider builds on Huntington's theory, identifying trust as the bedrock of civilian-military relations. In other words, for Huntington's theory of objective control to work, there must be absolute trust between the civilian government and the military commander. Nearly two centuries prior to Huntington and Snider's writing, George Washington demonstrated how to build trust and earn warfighting autonomy from Congress. Though he used the entire Revolution to build trust with Congress, the Valley Forge winter can be seen as a microcosm for the entire war. Washington's behavioral patterns at Valley Forge generated trust with Congress, set the Continental Army on a path to ultimate success, and thus set the foundation for modern military professionalism.

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Abstract

America's First Military Professional: General George Washington at Valley Forge, 1777-1778, by Maj Matthew S. Lund, 43 Pages.

General George Washington served at a time inconceivable to the modern American military officer. Washington's civilian leadership, the Second Continental Congress, was highly skeptical if not completely distrustful of his regular Army. By the winter of 1777-1778, as his depleted soldiers marched into quarters at Valley Forge, Washington's already tense relationship with the Congress neared critical mass. His recent tactical defeats, a lousy supply system, and a few ambitious generals brought his leadership into question. Nevertheless, Washington persevered, deliberately choosing to trust Congress and to build their trust in him.

Washington's behavior at Valley Forge can be analyzed through the theoretical frameworks of Samuel Huntington and Don Snider. In Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, he introduces his theory of objective control, where military officers submit to the legitimate civilian government in exchange for warfighting autonomy. Don Snider builds on Huntington's theory, identifying trust as the bedrock of civilian-military relations. In other words, for Huntington's theory of objective control to work, there must be absolute trust between the civilian government and the military commander. Nearly two centuries prior to Huntington and Snider's writing, George Washington demonstrated how to build trust and earn warfighting autonomy from Congress. Though he used the entire Revolution to build trust with Congress, the Valley Forge winter can be seen as a microcosm for the entire war. Washington's behavioral patterns at Valley Forge generated trust with Congress, set the Continental Army on a path to ultimate success, and thus set the foundation for modern military professionalism.

Contents

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Figures

Introduction

> A standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People…Such a Power should be watched with a jealous Eye.
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> — Samuel Adams, 1776

General George Washington, the newly minted Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, strode into Cambridge on July 2, 1775. His ragtag militia just retreated from Bunker Hill, but not before inflicting heavy casualties on the British Army and gaining valuable confidence in the campaign.[1] Over the next year, Washington laid siege to Boston and forced the British Army out to sea. The Continental Army's confidence did not last long, though, as General William Howe and the British Army sailed south for New York Harbor and delivered a five-month series of crushing defeats to the Americans. As 1776 came to an end, so too seemed the American Revolution. In a letter to his brother Samuel, Washington lamented "No Man I believe ever had a greater choice of difficulties & less the means of extricating himself than I have."[2] Washington needed a victory, decisive or otherwise, and after Christmas he led his Army on two risky attacks against British outposts in Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey. The risks paid off. Washington earned his victories, but as expected, both ultimately proved more ideological than decisive. As his Army entered winter quarters in New Jersey, Washington had to devise a plan for the ensuing campaign season of 1777. Howe and his larger, more capable army were giving him all he could handle on the battlefield, though other troubles were looming. Washington's civilian authority, the Second Continental Congress, offered him even more concerns off the battlefield. Despite these obstacles, Washington's professionalism never wavered, and in time he would become our

[1] Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington* (New York: Random House, 2005), 105.

[2] From George Washington to Samuel Washington, 18 December 1776, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-07-02-0299. Throughout this monograph, I have chosen not to correct spelling errors from primary sources unless the error compromises readability.

nation's first true military professional.

General Washington served at a time inconceivable to a modern American military officer. His civilian authority was highly skeptical if not completely distrustful of standing armies. James Madison, future father of the US Constitution, expressed the consensus, "Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people."[3] Congress' point of reference was not limited to King George's eighteenth-century England, but dated back to Caesar's Rome. "Is not Britain to America what Caesar was to Rome?" asked Congressman Josiah Quincy.[4] Thus, Washington's enemies extended beyond the physical battlefield. In addition to fighting the British Army, he also fought for the trust of his own Congress, and up to the winter of 1777 he was only having mixed results. After the capital of Philadelphia fell in September, Washington retreated for the winter to Valley Forge, a dilapidated iron forge twenty miles northwest of Philadelphia. Over the next six months, his physically depleted Army, an already skeptical congress, a losing track record, and other ambitious generals put his military professionalism to the test.

Military professionalism, like operational art and many other military theories, is bereft of firm origins. Nearly two centuries after the American Revolution, political scientist Samuel Huntington codified the modern American standard for military professionalism. In his theory of objective control, military officers submit to the legitimate civilian government in exchange for warfighting autonomy. The military's degree of warfighting autonomy is causally related to its degree of military professionalism, or how well it employs military expertise, responsibility, and corporateness.[5] Don Snider, a modern scholar of military professionalism, builds on Huntington's

[3] James Madison, *The Writings of James Madison* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), 3:317.

[4] Charles F. Mullett, "Classical Influences on the American Revolution," *The Classical Journal* 35, no.2 (November 1939): 97, September 18, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3291341.

[5] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*: *The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Random House, 1957), 260-263.

theory. He defines trust as the bedrock of civilian-military relations.[6] In other words, for Huntington's theory of objective control to work, there must be absolute trust between the civilian government and the military commander.

According to Huntington, military professionalism emerged during the nineteenth century as European nations responded to the Industrial Revolution and Napoleon's operational domination. To keep up, nations required division of labor and functional expertise, and the result was a highly specialized officer corps that politicians trusted to win the nation's wars.[7] Despite Huntington's assertion that Prussia developed the first professional officer corps, General Washington's was the first American military professional. Washington's military and political experience, enduring character, and devotion to the revolutionary cause drove trust with Congress and ultimately warmed them to a standing army. To truly reveal how Washington built trust with Congress, one must study his entire life in the context of revolutionary America, focusing deeply on his relationships with his subordinate officers, elected congressmen, and other prominent political elites. Nevertheless, all of those ingredients were on display leading up to and throughout the Valley Forge winter, where Washington built trust with the Continental Congress, set the Continental Army on a path to success, and ultimately laid the foundation for modern military professionalism.

There is seemingly endless biographical literature on George Washington. Studies were first published shortly after his death in 1799 and show no signs of stopping. Early studies showcased Washington's military accomplishments, often comparing his tactics to classical heroes Fabius and Cincinnatus, or Napoleon.[8] As the twentieth century emerged, though, authors shifted their focus to his broader political achievements. Douglas Southall Freeman's seven-

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[6] US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, *Dissent and Strategic Leadership of the Military Professions*, Don M. Snider. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 11.

[7] Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 19-37.

[8] Lengel, *General George Washington*, x.

volume biography, published after World War II, helps transcend Washington's legacy from military commander to heroic leader.[9] In 1968, the University of Virginia started the first comprehensive edition of Washington's papers, resulting in a host of contemporary biographies.[10] Notable among these new studies, and those relied on for this monograph, include Edward Lengel's *General George Washington*, Robert Middlekauff's *Washington's Revolution*, and Edmund Morgan's *The Genius of George Washington.* Aside from biographical studies, professors Wayne Bodle and Don Higginbotham have intricately linked Washington's actions to our civilian-led government and diverse society.

Wayne Bodle's *The Valley Forge Winter* is likely the most exhaustive academic study on Valley Forge. Bodle's analysis starts a year prior to the Continental Army's arrival at Valley Forge and describes the civilian lifestyle and their reaction to an impending British invasion. This is a major theme of the book, as Bodle links the societal culture to the Army's occupation of southeastern Pennsylvania. The bulk of the volume considers the Continental Army's morale, health, and readiness throughout the winter, and how Washington kept his men both alive and prepared for the next campaign season. Finally, Bodle discusses the political-military environment throughout the Valley Forge winter. He pays particular attention to the impacts of state-level leaders, especially their impact on Washington's decision to winter at Valley Forge and measures to reform his Army. It is from these interactions where Washington's professionalism can begin to be assessed.[11]

Don Higginbotham, in *The War of American Independence*, helps connect Bodle's study on Valley Forge with the greater concept of civilian-military relations. Chapter nine, titled "Civil-

[9] Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington*, vol. 1-7, *Leader of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951).

[10] "The Washington Papers," The University of Virginia, February 2, 2021. https://washingtonpapers.org/.

[11] Wayne Bodle, *The Valley Forge Winter: Civilians and Soldiers in War (*University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 1-265.

Military Tensions, 1777-1778", starts with a description of early America's underlying tension with standing armies. Dr. Higginbotham argues that Congress was willing to give the Army just enough leash to fight off the British, however they feared any additional inches could spiral toward military dictatorship. Congress and the Continental Army spent most of the war failing to support each other, but the winter of '77-'78 provided the ripest conditions for a true civ-mil crisis. By the end of fall, the Army was reeling from hunger, cold, infection, and defeat. Combined with their close physical proximity (roughly 80 miles) to Congress, the tension was "sufficient to conjure up devils in the mind."[12] These "devils in the mind" were uniquely apparent to General Washington, making the winter at Valley Forge a fertile ground for evaluating his professionalism and Congress' trust in him.

The final volume that generated the idea for this monograph is Eliot Cohen's 2002 *Supreme Command*. An esteemed political scientist and professor, Cohen assesses the wartime leadership of four statesmen, including Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, and the relationship with their respective military commander. He discovered that wartime presidents consistently violated Huntington's theory of objective control.[13] Instead of ceding complete warfighting autonomy, they routinely questioned, probed, coaxed, and even bullied their generals. Additionally, they expected genuine discourse in return from their generals, including blunt descriptions of the conflict, a plan for victory, and its connection to the political realities. Cohen labels this conversation the unequal dialogue, where despite the demand for candid discussion, the final authority rests with the statesman and the general remains unquestionably subservient.[14] This monograph will show that, unbeknownst to both Washington and the Continental Congress, their relationship fits Cohen's mold and starts the tradition of American military professionalism.

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[12] Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military attitudes, Policies, and Practice* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1971), 213.

[13] Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), XI.

[14] Ibid., 209.

This monograph fuses George Washington, Valley Forge, and civil-military relations into one study. Bodle's scholarship on Valley Forge dispels the oft-mythologized treatment of the Continental Army during the winter of 1777-1778. His work emphasizes the context surrounding Valley Forge and the implications of Washington's Army descending on Philadelphia's diverse population, but it is not centered directly on Washington and how he built trust with Congress. Additionally, Dr. Higginbotham masterfully describes the civilian-military atmosphere surrounding the Army at Valley Forge, but also chooses not to zero-in on Washington and how he personally dealt with the numerous crises facing his Army. Finally, recent civil-military studies like Cohen's examine the modern national security apparatus through the lens of Huntington's theory, but they do not view Valley Forge, or perhaps even the revolution, as the foundation of military professionalism. If Cohen added a fifth case study to his book, Washington's dialogue with the Continental Congress would have been a worthy choice. Uniquely for Washington, though, is that there was no established tradition for his subordination to Congress, yet he still deliberately chose to do so, and perhaps that is the true legacy of George Washington.

Background

It was early summer in 1777 when British General William Howe and his 18,000 soldiers emerged from their winter quarters in New Brunswick, NJ. Howe was looking for a decisive battle to take back the advantage they lost earlier in New Jersey. General Washington and the Continental Army spent the winter just thirty miles to the north in Morristown, NJ. Having been expelled from New York just six months earlier with an inferior army, Washington decided a general engagement to be "incompatible with our own interests," and thus remained in an operationally defensive posture on the high ground to the northwest of Howe.[15] Instead of a

[15] George Washington to John Hancock, 25 June 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0124; James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1982), 79.

general engagement, he relied on small-scale attacks against British foraging parties throughout the spring, proving somewhat successful for his Continentals and irritating to the British commander.[16]

General Howe needed a new strategy, one that forced a general engagement and provided a realistic opportunity to end the Revolution. Instead of maneuvering around New Jersey getting pecked to death by skirmishers, Howe took to the sea. On July 24, he set sail from New York to a location that forced Washington to fight. General Washington, in "a state of constant perplexity and the most anxious conjecture," could only watch and wonder where Howe turned up next.[17] There were two schools of thought; Howe would sail up the Hudson River to join British General John Burgoyne's army seeking to isolate New England, or he would use the Delaware or Chesapeake Bay to attack Philadelphia.[18] The latter proved to be correct. Washington first heard of the enemy off the capes of Delaware Bay at 0500 on July 31, and he responded that day with a general order to "cross the Delaware with all possible dispatch, and proceed for Philadelphia."[19]

More than a month passed before Howe fully offloaded his troops from the Chesapeake and started to move on Philadelphia. Washington, his headquarters now in Wilmington, continued pestering the British advanced guards along Brandywine Creek about twenty miles west of Philadelphia. On September 10, Washington decided to stop and give battle to Howe.[20] Washington again was out-generaled, as Howe's feint up the middle exposed Washington's right flank. The Continental's were forced to retreat further east toward Philadelphia, though all was

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[16] Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982) 372.

[17] George Washington to John Hancock, 25 July 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0402.

[18] Robert Middlekauff, *Washington's Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015), 150.

[19] To George Washington from John Hancock, 31 July 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0469; General Orders, 31 July 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0465.

[20] Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 393.

not lost for Washington's forces. In his report to John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress, Washington noted that he lost fewer men than Howe, that his troops were still in good spirits, and that he hoped to "compensate for the losses now sustained."[21] Washington got another chance, but not before the Brits captured Philadelphia and drove the Continental Congress one hundred miles west to York, PA. "Congress was chased like a covey of partridges from Philadelphia," remarked John Adams on this emergency flight.[22]

In addition to Congress fleeing for safety, local civilians started shifting their loyalty to the British. Public opinion was critical for Washington's war effort, particularly in southern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey, where 50,000 tons of wheat, meat, and iron were generated each year. These resources were effectively up for grabs to both armies, and the populace supported the army with the strongest currency. At the time, the Americans could only offer paper scrip, the value of which was minimal and inflating by the day. The British, on the other hand, could offer "hard" money. Their pound sterling, combined with recent British victories near Philadelphia, could spell disaster for Washington's commissary and quartermaster departments, especially with winter approaching.[23]

Despite minor and indecisive encounters between Brandywine and Philadelphia, the fighting did not resume in earnest until October 4 just five miles north of the city in Germantown, PA. Washington's forces took the initiative and attacked Howe's main body with a tactically sound, yet perhaps overly complicated plan. The heavy fog that morning disrupted the Continentals' coordination, and ultimately led to a strong British counterattack and Washington's

[21] George Washington To John Hancock, 11 September 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0190-0009.

[22] Ron Chernow, *Washington, A Life* (New York, The Penguin Press, 2010), 306.

[23] Thomas Fleming, *The Strategy of Victory: How General George Washington Won the American Revolution* (New York: De Capo Press, 2017), 69-70.

subsequent retreat twenty miles to the north. Again, in his report to Hancock, Washington noted minimal material losses and the uninterrupted high spirits of his army.[24]

As the fighting season neared to an end, neither side appeared to be in control of the war. General Howe won every battle, but he never brought forth the decisive engagement he so desperately sought. Capturing the capital of Philadelphia, which surely played well in the British newspapers, failed to deliver a true political victory against the Americans. The Continentals, on the other hand, spent the year retreating from every engagement. General Washington never delivered a sound tactical defeat to the British forces, and as a result Congress' patience was waning. John Adams, almost solely responsible for Washington's commission as Commander in Chief, was now chief among his skeptics. "Oh, Heaven! grant Us one great Soul! One leading Mind would extricate the best Cause," wrote Adams in his diary just days after fleeing from Philadelphia.[25] Adam's attitude was not lost on the General, who was well aware of the circumstances he was facing. Nevertheless, Washington and his Continentals survived, and so did their revolution. Their operational defeats had serious consequences, though, and while Washington combed the countryside for a location to rest his army, his campaign with Congress was just heating up.

Settling on Valley Forge

After Germantown, Washington moved his army into a defensive posture atop a ridgeline in Whitemarsh, PA, just fifteen miles north of Philadelphia. This temporary position afforded him an opportunity to weigh his options for the winter while keeping a close eye on Howe's forces. Washington was keenly aware of the competing interests in his decision to either fight or retire for the winter. Decades earlier, after his frustrating performance in the French and Indian War,

[24] George Washington to John Hancock, 5 October 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0419.

[25] 1777 Septr. 21. Sunday.," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-02-02-0007-0003-0006.

Washington returned home to Virginia, got married, and successfully ran for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses. It was in the House of Burgesses where Washington learned how politicians served their constituents, and more broadly how public figures approached political decisions. Fast forward to November 1777, when Washington had to choose between a winter campaign to recapture Philadelphia and retreating to winter quarters, he called on his own political experience to take inventory of the various stakeholders. The Continental Congress, the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, the civilian populace, and his own staff influenced Washington's decision. How he handled these interests and his ultimate decision to fight or retreat, and if so where to retreat, shaped his relationship with those he served.

The Continental Congress was the most outspoken group. For them, whether to fight or not was purely a political matter. As a newly formed government with power consolidated at the state level, Congress fought daily for legitimacy and influence, and Washington's Continental Army was their strongest weapon. By this time, Congress was aggressively seeking military aid from France to strengthen that weapon. On November 15, they adopted the Articles of Confederation, and while they were not ratified until years later, the legal precedent allowed them to enter into an alliance with a foreign government. Congress figured if Washington could take back Philadelphia, paired with news of General Horatio Gates' defeat of British forces at Saratoga, then France would finally enter into an alliance. So, in late November 1777, Congressional leaders were generally in agreement that, despite losses around Philadelphia and the state of Washington's Army, that he should carry forward with a winter campaign. For once, agreement in Congress was the easy task, but convincing Washington to attack the British main body with winter looming proved problematic.

Henry Laurens, a planter from South Carolina and now the President of the Continental Congress, oversaw a vote on November 28 to send a three-person delegation to Washington's camp to "consider of the best and most practicable means for carrying on a winter's campaign

with vigour and success."[26] Elbridge Gerry, Massachusetts Congressman and a delegate on the trip to Washington's headquarters, wrote to John Adams, "In some of the Officers, there seems to be an irresistible Desire of going into Winter Quarters but others are averse to it, as are Congress unanimously."[27] Despite identifying the growing consensus among Washington's officers to rest the Army over the winter, Gerry travelled to camp ready to exercise his committee's "larger powers" to spur Washington into action.[28]

Gerry and his committee's "large powers," however, did not appear to shake Washington. After all, Washington had already taken his own trip to Philadelphia a week earlier and determined "their [British Army] works much stronger than I had reason to expect from the Accounts I had received."[29] Washington and his generals had made up their mind against an offensive winter campaign, and now it was just a matter of where to camp. John Laurens, one of Washington's aides de camp and son of Henry Laurens, wrote often to his father throughout the campaign, both personally and professionally. As the committee promoted a winter campaign against Philadelphia, Laurens explained to his father, "The question is whether we are to go into remote Winter Quarters in the interior part of the Country…or whether we shall take a position more honorable, more military, more Republican, more consonant to the popular Wish in a proper situation for covering the Country."[30] Again, Washington was set on entering quarters, but he also understood that the location of his camp would drive a narrative all on its own. A "more

[26] To George Washington from Joseph Jones, 22 January 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0271.

[27] To John Adams from Elbridge Gerry, 3 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-05-02-0204.

[28] To John Adams from Elbridge Gerry, 3 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-05-02-0204.

[29] From George Washington to Major General Nathanael Greene, 25 November 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0387.

[30] Bodle, *The Valley Forge Winter*, 61.

honorable, more military, more Republican" position was closer to Philadelphia to challenge the British Army, a clear signal to the world that the Americans were not in full retreat and would challenge the British Army at every turn.

Figure 1. Map of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Ricardo Herrera, "Our Army will hut this Winter at Valley Forge: George Washington, Decision Making, and Councils of War," *Army History,* no. 117 (Fall 2020): 16.

As the discussions continued at Whitemarsh, the British launched a probing attack on December 4 to lure Washington into a general engagement. Washington did not take the bait, and his defensive position proved too robust for Howe's forces, who retreated back to Philadelphia on December 8.[31] As Elbridge Gerry and his colleagues watched the events unfold firsthand, their strong stance on a winter campaign softened. Gerry still promoted an offensive disposition but concluded the American's lacked sufficient spirit for a thorough campaign. The delegation's official report to Congress on December 16 read "under the circumstances of the Army, attended with such a variety of difficulties as to render it [offensive operations] ineligible."[32] Fully convinced, congressional leaders finally joined Washington with their full attention on the best

[31] Bodle, *The Valley Forge Winter*, 62-63.

[32] To George Washington from a Continental Congress Camp Committee, 10 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0536.

location for winter camp.

Local farmers, iron forgers, and elected officials in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland were all concerned with where Washington chose to rest his Army, balancing the revenue from a hungry army with the safety of their families.[33] It was the Pennsylvania Legislature, however, that concerned Washington the most. Seen in Figure 1, the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council had relocated to Lancaster upon the British occupation of Philadelphia. One of Washington's key tasks was to ensure both their protection and the Continental Congress', who was still 25 miles west of Lancaster in York. Once those bodies were safe, and without an offensive campaign, then the Supreme Executive Council expected him to actively challenge Howe for resources, food, and influence along the Delaware River. Major General John Armstrong, Commander of the Pennsylvania Militia, wrote to Washington on December 1, "With respect to Winter Quarters for the Army—The longer I consider the measure pointed out in the back Villiages of this State, the more inadmissable that Step appears to be."[34] Armstrong, the military representative of Pennsylvania, ensured Washington knew that retreating to the hinterlands of Pennsylvania would depress the "hearts of good men" and lead to "an end to Government & the future aids of the Militia."[35]

Armstrong also alluded to Philadelphia's tenuous demographic outlook, which was not overwhelmingly sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. As Wayne Bodle notes, "Pennsylvanians had expected their government, especially its legislative branch, to insulate them from war."[36] Pennsylvania Quakers had dominated the region since the 1680s, and while they were no longer

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[33] E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 90, 112.

[34] To George Washington from Major General John Armstrong, 1 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0442.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Wayne Bodle, 'Generals and "Gentlemen"': Pennsylvania Politics and the Decision for Valley Forge,' *Pennsylvania History* 62, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 60.

the demographic majority, their pacifist ideals still controlled the region. Their government was split between democratic "radicals" who ratified "the most democratic state constitution in America," and "moderates" who merely cooperated against British arms.[37] No matter the government's political tendencies, their legitimacy depended on their ability to protect this majority of "disaffected" civilians. Their legitimacy waned after fleeing to Lancaster, and therefore cooperation with Washington's Army was their only hope.

Travelling from Philadelphia to the more fertile southeast, particularly Gloucester County, the demographic consensus shifted from a pacifist majority toward an undecided or even loyalist population.[38] The resulting sentiment boiled down to self-interest and greed, and whichever belligerent offered the most money in exchange for forage won their support. Continental currency was in the midst of total collapse, opening the door for British trade and increased influence in the region. As the British poured in from the south and west, Americans "lost no time in opening a brisk trade with the city", and that "distrust, fear hatred and abominable selfishness reigned."[39] Thus, If Washington ceded influence on the region of half-hearted citizens, then Howe would surely take it. Washington's challenge for the winter were starting to come into clear focus. Winter quarters were meant to rest and refit his Army, but his two sources of civilian leadership wanted him to challenge Howe at every opportunity, and the local civilians were not necessarily sympathetic to his cause. As Washington asked his senior commanders for their best advice, he quickly realized that there was no ideal solution and certainly no consensus.

Washington remained mostly mum on his personal thought process throughout November and December. To make the best decision, Washington relied on numerous letters

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[37] Ibid., 60-61.

[38] Ricardo Herrera, "Foraging and Combat Operations at Valley Forge, February – March 1778," *Army History*, no. 79 (Spring 2011): 18.

[39] Ibid.

from Continental Congressmen, senior officials from Pennsylvania, and trusted officers in his Army. Washington utilized Councils of War throughout the revolution to gather the best advice from his officers. Historian Lindsay Chervinsky writes that Washington's Councils of War "provided advice, helped Washington build consensus among his officers, and offered political cover for controversial decisions."[40] Typically, a Council of War consisted of five-to-fifteen of Washington's closest officers, most of which were senior generals. Prior to an in-person conference, Washington requested a written opinion from each invitee. Once he absorbed each general's stance, he then convened a traditional meeting to build consensus and inform his final decision.

Washington convened multiple Councils of War to determine the disposition and location of his Army for the coming winter. As he started to receive the opinions of each general, he noticed two distinct lines of thinking. One group advocated for a retirement to the interior of the state along the line Reading to Lancaster and the other advocated for an encampment closer to Philadelphia in Wilmington, DE. Those backing a winter along the Reading to Lancaster line desired an opportunity to rest and refit the army, while those advocating for Wilmington desired a competition for local resources and influence.

Among those in the Reading to Lancaster group was Brigadier General Henry Knox, a close friend of Washington and Commander of the Continental Artillery. "I shall be concise in my opinion, establishing the proposition that Winter Quarters are indispensably necessary for the army in order to give it that rest and refreshment of which it stands much in need." Knox believed that an encampment closer to the enemy would "be subject to frequent alarms and constant hard duty," and rather a line of cantonments along the Reading-Lancaster line had access to a "sufficiency of houses and good cover," and its distance allowed them "to cover a greater extent

[40] Lindsay M. Chervinsky, *The Cabinet: George Washington and the Creation of an American Institution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 17.

of Country."[41] Knox had one concern, the physical and mental state of the Army. Washington understood that the welfare of his Army had to be addressed, but simply ceding influence in the vicinity of Philadelphia would eventually trigger concern with his civilian leadership.

Washington then turned to the opinions of those promoting winter camp in Wilmington. In addition to General John Armstrong, another Pennsylvanian, Brigadier General Anthony Wayne, backed a winter in Wilmington. In his letter to General Washington, Wayne remarked that winter in Wilmington "will give Confidence to America and cover this Country against the Horrid rapine and Devestation of a Wanton Enemy."[42] The most thoughtful opinion came from Major General Nathaniel Greene of Rhode Island. Although Greene advocated for Wilmington, he thoroughly highlighted all of the strengths, weaknesses, and nuance that the Commander in Chief had to acknowledge. "I must confess if I was to speak from my own feelings and declare my wishes instead of my sentiments I should be of that opinion," said Greene, referring to the safety of the Reading-Lancaster line. Greene went on describe how it was not quite that simple, though, and that Washington must consider the broader logic of the war. "An army without a country is like an infant incapable of feeding or cloathing itself," remarked Greene, recognizing the Reading-Lancaster line as a shortsighted view that discounted "the whole military machine." The "military machine" included more than just the Army, but also "the country that feeds, cloaths and furnishes" it with troops."[43] Greene's letter is the best military advice given to Washington, not necessarily because of his opinion, but because of his rationale. Washington received all letters on December 4 and used a full day to think about the different views.

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[41] To George Washington from Brigadier General Henry Knox, 1 December 1777, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0448.

[42] To George Washington from Brigadier General Anthony Wayne, 4 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0510.

[43] To George Washington from Major General Nathanael Greene, 1 December1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0445.

By December 5 winter was rapidly approaching and Washington had to make a final decision. The Continental Congress, the Pennsylvania legislature, and his generals had all made their cases. Washington's winter camp had to satisfy four basic objectives, two were political and two were military. His political concerns were to protect the national and state governments and to influence the civilians around Philadelphia. His military concerns were to compete with Howe for military supplies and to rest his tired army. Washington decided on a location just days later, and on December 10 he gave the order for Valley Forge.[44] By choosing Valley Forge, Washington satisfied most of his concerns. Being only 15 miles from the city and just west of the Schuylkill River, Washington was close enough to keep a watchful eye on Howe, compete for resources, and influence the local civilians, yet still far enough not to bother anyone. The greatest challenge that Valley Forge presented, however, was a severe shortage of comfortable quarters to rest the Continental Army.

Valley Forge might have been a reasonable location prior to September 1777, but an earlier British raid destroyed the depot and forge, leaving only frozen woods and open fields to construct a camp. "With activity and diligence Huts may be erected that will be warm and dry," said Washington to his troops upon arrival, acknowledging the camp's grim nature.[45] Thus, by choosing Valley Forge, Washington made the conscious decision to prioritize his civilian leadership before his Army. Washington knew his Army would find a way to overcome the challenges of Valley Forge. After all, there was plenty of wood to construct housing from, the Schuylkill River provided water, and the natural terrain prevented any serious British advances. But by satisfying the political objectives from Congress, and thus building up trust and good faith, Washington had their cooperation to begin reforming his Army into a professional force.

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[44] General Orders, 10 December 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0533.

[45] General Orders, 17 December 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0566.

As the Continental Army marched to Valley Forge, Congress passed a series of resolutions aimed at improving the Army's supply issue. One of the resolutions stated "That Congress, firmly persuaded of General Washington's zeal and attachment to the interest of these states, can only impute his forbearance in exercising the powers vested in him by Congress."[46] Congress now recognized that Washington was uninterested in personal glory or dictatorship, but instead he was deeply aware of where his power originated. In the process of choosing Valley Forge, he proved willing to put his Army out well before sacrificing his good faith with Congress. Later in the Resolution, Congress, recognizing Washington's dire commissary situation, directed Washington to take "every kind of stock and provisions in the country," and that said provisions should be "taken from all persons without distinction, leaving such quantities only as he shall judge necessary for the maintenance of their families."[47] As a result, Washington had carte blanche to procure virtually anything he needed from local citizens, and he was the judge of what was "necessary" and what wasn't. This newfound trust in Washington's discretion not only helped curb his supply crisis, but also facilitated additional reforms aimed at his subordinate personnel.

The congressional committee's final report included half-pay for all officers and a pension system for their widows. Congress was not pleased with the Army's "general discontent" about an offensive campaign, but they felt these new reforms promoted "A Spirit of emulation…among the Gentlemen of the army," and by "gentlemen," they meant the officers. In return for better pay and compensation, they expected more fortitude and determination from Washington's officers. Nevertheless, Congress could trust Washington, and with some rest, reforms, and winter training, his Army would take to the field next season and deliver sound

[46] To George Washington from Henry Laurens, 12 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0545.

[47] To George Washington from Henry Laurens, 12 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0545.

defeat to British forces.[48]

The Conway Cabal

Washington was starting to gain the confidence of his civilian leaders, however there were still congressmen and generals that could not look past his recent battlefield losses. James Craik, Physician General of the Continental Army and close friend of Washington, wrote to him in early 1778, revealing "A Strong Faction was forming Against you in the New board of War and in the Congress."[49] The Board of War was a new entity that helped Congress negotiate the growing administrative demands of the Army.[50] Serving on the Board was Thomas Mifflin, a former aide de camp to Washington and recently failed Quartermaster General of the Army. Craik referenced Mifflin's name multiple times in his letter, saying "I think I have reason to beleive him not your Friend."[51] Mifflin was joined by others critical of Washington, including Congressmen Samuel Adams, John Adams, and Richard Henry Lee. These men, apparently underwhelmed with Washington's capabilities on the battlefield, were propping up General Gates as a potential replacement for Washington.

Gates was the hero from the Battles of Saratoga, where he surrounded British General John Burgoyne's British Army in mid-October. Burgoyne was attempting to isolate New England from the Continentals and discourage the French from entering the war. On October 7, Burgoyne ran into stiff American resistance, led in the field by Major General Benedict Arnold. Arnold's forces proved too much for Burgoyne, and by October 12 the British Army had been cut off from

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[48] To George Washington from a Continental Congress Camp Committee, 10 December 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0536.

[49] To George Washington from James Craik, 6 January 1778," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0126.

[50] Thomas Fleming, *Washington's Secret War* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 17.

[51] To George Washington from James Craik, 6 January 1778," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0126.

their supply line, forcing Burgoyne to surrender some 5,800 men and ammunition to General Gates.[52] Many historians identify Gates' victory at Saratoga as the turning point of the war, as it helped bring France's financial commitment to the Americans and boosted Continental morale. Nevertheless, this "glorious termination of the Campaign" still lacked sufficient evidence to label Gates as a national hero to Washington.[53] Washington defended himself to his friend Landon Carter. "How different our case! the disaffection of great part of the Inhabitants of this State…have contributed not a little to my embarrassments this Campaign."[54] Washington was painfully aware of the wildly different circumstances that he was faced with in Philadelphia, but he also knew that an impatient Congress did not care about his excuses.

In a letter to Washington, Division Commander Marquis de Lafayette identified his critics as "Stupid men who without knowing a Single word about war undertake to judge you," and that "they are infatuated with Gates without thinking of the different Circumstances, and Believe that attaking is the only thing Necessary to Conquer."[55] Even the President of the Continental Congress was aware of the growing fad toward General Gates. Henry Laurens, writing to his son, had seen Washington's "opinions treated (in Congress) with so much indiscreet freedom..& convinced me that your suspicions of a baneful influence are not Ill founded."[56]

Washington's "public aura" was fading, and he was plainly aware of it.[57] Known to get

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[52] Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 391.

[53] From George Washington to Major General Benjamin Lincoln, 26 October 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0011.

[54] From George Washington to Landon Carter, 27 October 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0018.

[55] To George Washington from Major General Lafayette, 30 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0063.

[56] Lengel, *General George Washington*, 276.

[57] Ibid., 277.

defensive and even paranoid about his public image, Washington kept his outbursts and complaining to close friends. At least up to this point, he proved unwilling to engage with Congress in a back-and-forth dispute regarding his fitness as the Continental Commander in Chief. The only explanation is that it ran contrary to his objective of building trust and a professional army, and especially because it was based largely on rumor.

The "Stupid men" that Lafayette spoke of needed a tool to drive dissent, and it came in the form of French General Thomas Conway. General Conway, originally from Ireland, was widely regarded as a proven officer in Washington's Army. Conway assembled one of the best drilled brigades and proved his military competence at the Battle of Germantown, where he led the lead brigade on the American right flank.[58] Military aptitude aside, Conway was best known for his abrasive personality and harsh tongue.

After Germantown, Conway sidestepped his direct commander, Lord Stirling, and General Washington, and wrote a letter directly to Congress requesting a promotion to Major General. Washington was understandably unhappy about Conway circumventing the chain of command, which led to an irreparable tension between the two generals and a growing anxiety between Washington and Congress. In a letter to Congressman Richard Henry Lee, Washington noted that "Conways' merit then, as an officer, and his importance in this Army, exists more in his own imagination than in reality."[59] But Washington did not just end his letter there, because merely engaging in petty name-calling with Congress about a foreign volunteer would have sacrificed their mutual trust. Later in Washington's letter, he explained that he did not want to "detract from any merit he (Conway) possesses, and only wish to have the matter taken up, on its

[58] Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence, 2*16.

[59] From George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 16 October 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0538.

true ground."[60] Washington wanted Congress to take up the issue just as they would any other officer, and that promoting a foreign officer before his American equal would have set a dangerous precedent. Washington clearly articulated that his dissent was not because he did not like Conway, but because Conway's military merits did not warrant the promotion. Through this small action, Washington displayed his ability to put the Army, and therefore the Country, before his personal attitudes toward other generals. He was continuing to build trust with Congress, albeit slowly.

After the American defeats at Brandywine and Germantown, Conway wrote a letter to General Gates, both congratulating him on his successes and criticizing the actions in Washington's middle department. The particulars of Conway's letter to Gates will never be known, but through a series of word-of-mouth speculations and pointed letters between Washington and Conway, the "Conway Cabal" was gaining steam. General Gates' aide de camp, James Wilkinson, came across the letter from Conway while sorting Gates' papers. On a routine trip to Philadelphia to bring news of victory at Saratoga, Wilkinson stopped to speak with Lord Stirling's aide, Major McWilliams. During their discussion, Wilkinson shared the contents of Conway's letter, underscoring the critique of Washington's generalship. Subsequently, McWilliams shared the information with Lord Stirling, who then shared it with Washington. "Heaven has been determined to Save your Country; Or a Weak General and bad Counsellors would have ruined it."[61] After reading it, Washington wrote one of his shortest letters of the war. He simply copied the quotation from Stirling's letter and sent it directly to Conway, asking for a prompt explanation.

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[60] From George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 16 October 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0538.

[61] To George Washington from Major General Stirling, 3 November 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0098.

Conway replied to Washington two days later, saying "i Spoke my mind freely, I found fault with several Measures pursued in this army; but I Will venture to say that in my Whole Letter the paragraph of Which you are pleas'd to send me a copy can not be found." Essentially, Conway denied the quote, noting "that the expression *Weak General* has not slipped from my penn." Conway did, however, admit to being critical of Washington's Army, arguing that he was overly "influenc'd by men who Were not equal to you in point of experience, Knowledge or judgment." Carefully, Conway claimed his criticism was aimed at Washington's "influencers," but not Washington himself. Additionally, playing off his experience fighting in Europe, Conway explained that "correspondence between General oficers in all army's is encourag'd rather than Discountenanc'd, because from this intercourse of ideas something usefull might arise".[62] Washington did not buy the excuses, and after receiving the letter, he turned to General Gates to clear the air.

Gates' reaction to Conway's letter only added to Washington's concern. Over a series of letters back and forth, Gates did little except plead his own innocence. Had Gates denounced Conway or emphasized his own loyalty to Washington, perhaps the matter could have been resolved. He did not, however, resorting instead to denouncing the "Wretch" that "stealingly copied" his mail, effectively blaming an aide.[63] Gates likely had little to do with any deliberate attempt to oust Washington, however, since he stood to gain the most from an ousting, he avoided choosing a side, choosing instead to blame distrustful aides and communication failures.

To many modern scholars, the idea that Conway was acting on behalf of Gates, Mifflin, or other influential politicians in an effort to replace Washington is a myth. Nevertheless, it was

[62] To George Washington from Brigadier General Thomas Conway, 5 November 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0119.

[63] To George Washington from Major General Horatio Gates, 8 December 1777," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0525.

surely a reality that Washington constructed in his mind and within his staff. At the time of Conway's letter, Congress was also filling out the remaining members of the Board of War. In addition to Mifflin, an obvious critic of Washington, Congress appointed General Gates as the President of the Board. The final member of the board was Timothy Pickering, who was known for critical remarks about Washington's staff earlier in the revolution.[64] So, while an organized conspiracy can be debunked in hindsight, Washington's concern was warranted.

To Don Higginbotham, the "Cabal" was also fueled by the most loyal members of Washington's staff. Generals Nathanial Greene, Henry Knox, and aides John Laurens and Alexander Hamilton were already irritated by Congress' lack of material and monetary support for the war, so they were quick to sum up all of these acts as a manufactured conspiracy. These aides and subordinate generals clearly had an influence on him in private, but Washington's professionalism would be judged by how he, and only he, managed the tension with Congress.

Washington refused to engage in emotional outbursts with Congress, but instead chose to focus solely on his Army's military effectiveness and the reforms of his commissary and quartermaster departments. From November 3 to early January, Washington could have written multiple letters to Congress to attack Conway's reputation, denounce the new Board of War, or at least condemn Gates as its President. Washington did none of those things, though. Washington wrote a total of 267 letters from November 3rd through January 2. Of those 267 letters, fifteen were to the President of Congress, Henry Laurens. All of those letters to Henry Laurens included operational matters within the Army, particularly the dire commissary and quartermaster departments. Again, whether deliberate or not, Washington was reinforcing his focus on reforming the Army rather than preserving his personal reputation against other generals, behavior that ultimately led to trust with congressional leadership.

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[64] Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military attitudes, Policies, and Practice,* 216.

On November 14, nine days after being confronted by Washington, Conway offered his resignation as brigade commander.[65] Less than a month later, the Board of War recommended Conway for promotion to Major General and the new Inspector of the Army, reportable only to the Board of War and outside of Washington's authority.[66] Washington, rightfully so, saw this promotion as an explicit threat to his command. Conway's request for promotion, his letter to Gates, and now this new position would have left any general with a deep-seated rage. Washington was not just any general, though. He was he also a politician, or at least he was deeply in tune with the political environment around him. Washington did not correspond directly with Henry Laurens throughout November and December about the Conway Cabal, but he used those around him as the 18th century version of what today's politicians call *backchannels*.

Aide Alexander Hamilton expressed Washington's mood in a letter to William Duer, a politician from New York and architect of the new Inspector of the Army position. Hamilton described the Board of War as a "scheme" and "brat of faction, and therefore ought to be renounced." He goes on to argue that the Inspector position "would produce universal opposition" and, instead, Congress should "Let the Commander in Chief introduce, and the legislature afterwards ratify or reject, as they shall think proper."[67] Additionally, John Laurens, still writing regularly to his father, rarely omitted the unadulterated truth. The older Laurens was not left wondering how Washington felt about Conway, Gates, or Mifflin. In one letter to his father, John wrote "the promotion of Genl Conway has given almost universal disgust," and that "the influence of a certain general officer at Reading is productive of great mischief," speaking about General Mifflin.[68] Effectively, there was no mistaking how Washington felt about these

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[65] Mark Edward Lender, *Cabal!* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2019), 119.

[66] *Journals of the Continental Congress,* 1774-1789, ed. Worthington C, Fort et al. (Washington, DC, 1903-1937), 9:1023-1026.

[67] From Alexander Hamilton to William Duer, 18 June 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0482.

[68] Thomas Fleming, *Washington's Secret War: The Hidden History of Valley Forge* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 122.

characters, even though Washington's official correspondence was wholly professional.

The backchannel between Henry and John Laurens worked in reverse as well. In letter on January 8th, President Laurens urged Washington, via his son, to remain calm and stay the course. Laurens simply did not believe that any "rooted enemy" could take down Washington without his "consent." Washington should "have a little more patience" and avoid engaging in violent eruptions or even hinting at resigning his command, as that would play directly into the hands of his opponents.[69] Laurens was providing his unofficial support to Washington and felt that the situation would die a natural death if Washington just let it. Instead, he should focus on building a professional Army, installing a robust training regimen, and preparing his Army for the coming campaign season. That is exactly what Washington did. Other than allowing his aides to narrate his anger, Washington remained patient. He was not willing to surrender his professionalism and figured that Conway would eventually destroy his reputation without any help.

Now officially the Inspector of the Army, Conway was greeted by Washington and his staff at Valley Forge in a respectful manner, but not as a personal friend to the Commander. After their tense confrontation earlier, it is difficult to imagine why Conway expected warm and personal reception from Washington. "I perceive that I have not the happiness of being agreeable to your excellency, and that I can expect no support in fulfilling the Laborious Duty of an inspector general," said Conway to Washington upon arrival. Washington's patience had finally paid off. Instead of a long-winded tirade to Congress, he simply enclosed the letter he received from Conway and let Congress sort it out. "I shall not in this Letter animadvert upon them, but after making a single observation submit the whole to Congress."[70] Washington's decision not to

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[69] Fleming, *Washington's Secret War*, 126-127.

[70] From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 2 January 1778," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0100.

animadvert, or pass criticism, is important and consistent with his previous actions, especially in his official correspondence.

However, as usual, there was backchannel correspondence that filled in between the lines. John Lauren's letter to his father arrived the next day, noting that Conway's "Last Letter… affects the Genl very sensibly", and that "the Genl. therefore has determined to return him no answer at all—but to lay the whole matter before Congress they will determine whether Genl W. is to be sacrificed to Gnl C."[71] It is obvious from John Lauren's letter that Conway's rank and position bothered Washington, and that he wanted Congress to exercise their authority to make the decision. John Laurens was not the only member of Washington's staff that wrote letters in staunch support of Washington. As Mark Edward Lender describes in *Cabal!,* Washington's staff embarked on a "letter-writing campaign" from January through March that counterbalanced the initiatives of Gates' Board of War. Tench Tilghman, another one of Washington's closest aides, wrote to Robert Morris on February 2, asking for support "against the malicious attacks of those who can have no reason to wish his removal but a desire to fill his place."[72]

These letters, combined with the Board of War's inability to garner influence with Washington, eventually led to the dissolution of the Cabal. Congress made the decision to support Washington and sent Generals Gates and Conway to new commands. General Mifflin eventually retired, but his influence waned significantly after January. Later that year, in July, Brigadier General John Cadwalader of the Pennsylvania Militia challenged Conway to a duel. Cadwalader was another steadfast supporter of Washington, as evidenced by a sharp and public critique of Conway after Germantown. Cadwalader's gunfire caught Conway in the lip. The wound was initially thought to have mortally wounded Conway, but he survived. His military career in

[71] From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 2 January 1778," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0100.

[72] Lender, *Cabal!*, 177-180.

America was finished, though, and he returned to France shortly after the duel. On July 23, Conway wrote Washington an apology for his actions the past year. “I find my self just able to hold the penn During a few Minutes, and take this opportunity of expressing my sincere grief for having Done, Written, or said any thing Disagreeable to your excellency.”[73] There was nothing for Washington to say in return, and therefore he never wrote back to Conway.

The Conway Cabal was finally over for Washington. His ultimate decision to lay the matter before Congress, adding almost no personal commentary, might have been his most important decision while at Valley Forge. In choosing Washington over Conway, Gates, and Mifflin, Congress was admitting their trust in Washington. Washington had gone a long way in proving his priorities while dealing with the supposed conspirators. Had Washington’s motives been personal glory or tyrannical rule, then he would have dealt with Gates and Conway in a far more selfish way. The truth was that his one and only priority was the Cause, and he happily set aside his personal glory to achieve it.

The most remarkable achievement throughout the Conway Cabal was how Washington managed the crisis despite the deadly challenges that truly existed at Valley Forge. Washington personally witnessed the absolute collapse of his commissary and quartermaster departments, the subsequent organizational overhaul of each department, all while competing with an aggressive British Army and disaffected civilians. As Thomas Fleming writes, Washington managed all crises with superior political skills, and he “understood and accepted leadership’s responsibilities.”[74] Fortunately, he was able to draw upon those political skills after the end of the Conway Cabal. As the episode was dissolving, Washington’s real-life issues were at a low point. It is at this point where Washington writes his famous letter to Henry Laurens, saying “unless

[73] To George Washington from Thomas Conway, 23 July 1778,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0153.

[74] Fleming, *Washington’s Secret War,* xiii.

some great and capital change suddenly takes place in that line this Army must inevitably be reduced to one or other of these three things. Starve—dissolve—or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can."[75] Perhaps hyperbolic, but the letter served its purpose and Congress sprung to life. On January 10, Congress constructed a delegation, or Conference Committee, to travel to Valley Forge and force changes in the Army's dire supply system.

The Conference Committee

By mid-January, Washington had nearly 12,000 soldiers at Valley Forge. Due mostly to his quartermaster and commissary department's failures, nearly 3,000 of those soldiers were unfit for duty. His latest commissary purchaser arrived at camp with "not a single hoof of any kind to slaughter, and not more than 25 Barrells of Flour!" "In short," Washington goes on to say, "there is as much to be done in preparing for a Campaign, as in the active part of it. In fine every thing depends upon the preparation that is made in the Several departments in the course of this Winter."[76] As Washington continued to build his narrative for the congressional committee, Congress chose who travelled to Valley Forge. Congress sought broad geographical representation at Valley Forge, but they also had to manage political leanings and temperaments. Francis Dana of Massachusetts, Nathaniel Folsom of New Hampshire, John Harvie of Virginia, and Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania were the delegates originally chosen to make the trip. The issue with this committee, according to Congressman James Lovell, was that it was too pro-Washington to set "upon the great Business of introducing discipline and Economy into the Army."[77] Lovell, a passionate Massachusetts republican, was likely Washington's most vocal critic in Congress. The good news for Lovell, though, was that Congress also selected three

[75] From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 23 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0628.

[76] From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 23 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0628.

[77] Lender, *Cabal!*, 143.

members of the Board of War to travel with the delegation, none other than Mifflin, Gates, and Pickering. These men would surely hold Washington's feet to the fire and retain military power back in York.

Ten days later, Congress finally came to their senses. At this time, the "Conway Cabal" was still in full swing, therefore sending Gates and Mifflin to Valley Forge to cooperate with Washington was a fool's errand. According to Board of War secretary Richard Peters, it would be "most prudent considering the State of Parties at Camp to keep General Mifflin and Gates here."[78] Henry Laurens felt the same way, remarking to General Lafayette that Congress had removed all of "their (delegation's) intended Military Coajutors & will consist (only) of members of Congress."[79] Instead of Mifflin, Gates, and Pickering, Congress added Charles Carrol of Maryland and Governeur Morris of New York to round out the delegation. Both Carrol and Morris were openly pro-Washington, which led to a best-case scenario for Washington. He received a six-man congressional delegation, none of which opposed to him, and from whom he could secure full support for his military reforms.

Congress' official guidance to the committee was broad and open-ended. Their indefinite mission, together with the last-minute changes to the committee's membership, left a void in direction that Washington closed. The committee first met at Valley Forge on January 28, and Washington met them with a manifesto. His agenda, drafted primarily by Alexander Hamilton, included nine proposals, including half-pay pensions for officers and standardized promotion procedures.[80] Washington's chief issue, the supply crisis, was not explicitly written in Hamilton's letter but received the most attention throughout the visit.

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[78] Lender, *Cabal!*, 144.

[79] Ibid., 144.

[80] From Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, [before 29 January 1778]," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0353 and Lender, 146.

Nobody was happy with the Army's current Commissary General William Buchanan. Washington wanted a replacement for Buchanan as soon as possible, for "if we let these slip or waste, we shall be labouring under the same difficulties all next Campaign."[81] Washington's recommendation was to fire Buchanan and replace him with somebody who reported directly to him. Additionally, Washington had a similar plan for the quartermaster department. Washington convinced the committee that the quartermaster was the "cog on which not only the future Success of your Arms, but the present Existence of your Army immediately depends."[82] Back in York, however, Gates and the Board of War were concurrently angling to make their own reforms to the supply crisis. Unbeknownst to Washington, Gates and Mifflin pushed a reform package through Congress that routed all supply issues through the Board of War. Their reasoning was quite simple; allowing Washington to choose his own quartermaster and commissary generals boxed out any available power for the Board of War. As Wayne Bodle notes, this was a "bold-faced attempt by the board to expand its authority from a supportive role into the day-to-day operation of the army itself."[83]

The reasoning for Congress to permit the Board's reforms are unknown to historians. Ultimately, however, Washington's patience and professionalism with the Camp Committee won out. As the committee's reports made their way back to York, Congress reversed its decision to give the Board authority on the Army's supply system. By the end of February, the Camp Committee effectively "slammed the door on the Mifflin plan." "In concert with the General (Washington)," the delegation concluded that the Commander should choose and command his own supply departments.[84] In time, Congress confirmed Major General Nathaniel Greene and

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[81] From George Washington to Henry Laurens, 23 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 14, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0628.

[82] Bodle, *The Valley Forge Winter*, 152.

[83] Lender, *Cabal!*, 153.

[84] Lender, *Cabal!*, 183-184.

Connecticut's Jeremiah Wadsworth as the Army's Quartermaster General and Commissary General, respectively. This was a major win for Washington, and although it took the rest of the spring to fully flesh out supply problems, the crisis eventually ended, and the Continentals entered the next campaign season well provisioned.[85]

Washington dealt with the Camp Committee much like how he dealt with General Conway throughout the winter. He relentlessly stuck to his message with Congress and spared no effort driving the reforms needed for a well-trained and well-equipped army. Moreover, he never became directly involved in public infighting with other Generals. For that, he chose to remain "above the fray" to the public eye, instead relying on his bevy of loyal aides and trustworthy generals. Hamilton, Laurens, Tilghman, Lafayette, and others proved more than willing to take on Washington's political opponents, and they were far less concerned about their own public image.

By all measures, the Camp Committee's visit to Valley Forge was a surpassing success for Washington. His crisis with Mifflin, Gates, and Conway was fizzling out, and all of his proposed reforms were becoming a reality with Congress. Congress, having watched Washington deal with the assortment of military, economic, and political issues over the winter, knew that he was not the same General they chose to lead the Continentals in 1775. Washington was more focused, more disciplined, and far more politically savvy than they could have ever expected. Using modern day terms, Washington was expected to use the Valley Forge winter to organize, train, and equip his Army for the upcoming campaigns. Through February, Washington worked to resolve the organize and equipping, but still needed to address the Army's training.

Prussian drillmaster Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben first messaged Washington in early December 1777. Steuben, the eccentric veteran of European wars and self-proclaimed aide to Frederick the Great, volunteered his services to Washington and the Continental cause. "The

[85] Lender, *Cabal!*, 187.

Object of my greatest Ambition is to render your Country all the Services in my Power."[86] Steuben was accepted by Washington and by Congress, and he was one of the best things that could have happened to the Army at Valley Forge. In a letter to his father on April 18, John Laurens noted Steuben was "exerting himself like a lieutenant anxious for promotion", and that the "good effects of his labours are visible."[87] Steuben's drills and exercises transformed Washington's Army, and by late Spring they were ready to reengage with the British.

As the French became militarily involved in the war, the British Army had to reframe its approach. The new British commander, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton, received orders from Britain to evacuate their position in Philadelphia to New York in an effort to defend against an impending French landing in the harbor. Washington shadowed Clinton's Army as they retreated east, and on June 28, Clinton stopped to give battle near Monmouth Courthouse in eastern New Jersey. When Washington's second in command, General Charles Lee, failed to engage the Recoats as ordered, Washington erupted with rage. The Commander in Chief "swore that day till the leaves shook on the trees," said one of Washington aides as he addressed Reed. The Continentals fought the British to a draw at Monmouth, but Washington's status as Commander in Chief rose to a new level. The work he put in at Valley Forge created a far more disciplined Army, and Congress witnessed firsthand the lengths he went to prepare them for battle. As historian Edward Lengel writes, the Continental Army was now "ready to follow Washington anywhere."[88]

After Valley Forge

With all attempts to undermine Washington's command behind him, he carried out the remainder of the war from a position of supreme political strength. By early 1783, Washington

[86] To George Washington from Steuben, 6 December 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0519.

[87] Bodle, *The Valley Forge Winter*, 201.

[88] Lengel, *General George Washington*, 369.

had completed his siege of Cornwallis' forces at Yorktown and moved his Army back north to New York in anticipation of any future engagements. As hostilities drew to a close, frustrations re-emerged between Washington's staff and Congress. Continental officers watched as civilian government employees got paid dependably while they "hunkered down in the snow." Younger officers, many of whom delayed starting families to fight for independence, felt increasingly unappreciated as the urgency of the war faded.[89] At a small camp in Newburgh, NY, Washington's staff let their frustrations bubble over the edge, and in March they penned an incendiary letter to Congress designed to intimidate them into meeting their financial commitments. This plot is now known as the Newburgh Conspiracy, but Washington quickly dispelled it and any additional attempts undermine Congress' authority. "What can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures! Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather is he not an insidious foe?" said Washington to the plotters, acknowledging that such an attempt would have destroyed all of the trust gained by the Army throughout the war. Instead, the Army must continue to place their "full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress."[90]

Later in December 1783, at the Maryland statehouse in Annapolis, Washington solidified both Congress' trust in him and America's tradition for civilian control of the military. After congratulating Congress for their victory in the War, he surrendered "into their hands the trust committed" in him, and "to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service" of his country.[91] Congress' ultimate fear since the start of the Revolution stemmed from the opportunity for

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[89] David Head, *A Crisis of Peace: George Washington, the Newburgh Conspiracy, and the Fate of the American Revolution* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019), xii-xiii.

[90] From George Washington to Officers of the Army, 15 March 1783," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed September 18, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10840.

[91] Washington's Address to Congress Resigning his Commission, [23 December 1783]," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-06-02-0319-0004.

tyrannical rule. If Washington had not proved it to this point, then resigning his commission at a time of unbelievable public support satisfied their fears. Historians commonly refer to Washington as the modern-day Cincinnatus, the 5th century Roman dictator who similarly resigned in lieu of retaining absolute power.[92] Cincinnatus and Washington both understood the power they commanded at the height of their rule, but they also understood that their power was the result of the trust they earned from the Roman Senate or American Congress. They knew that military dictatorship would eventually corrupt their institutions, and that the ultimate act of trust was to resign their power back to the state.

Implications for the Modern Military Officer

A persistent theme throughout America's civilian-military dynamic is the military's criticism of how politicians think about using the military. General Jack D. Ripper, a fictional character in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove,* sums up the military's sentiment, remarking that "war is too important to be left to politicians. They have neither the time, the training, or the inclination for strategic thought."[93] This outlook endures throughout the modern military. After all, a senior military officer spends a lifetime learning how to win wars yet must receive guidance from a civilian body devoid of military expertise. The root of this difference is how they face confrontation. "for, as Men see thro' different Optics, and are induced by the reflecting faculties of the Mind, to use different means to attain the same end" said Washington at Newburgh.[94] Washington understood that Congress sought the same objectives that he did, yet they were legitimized by a different metric. As Everett Dolman writes in *Strategy*, democratic governments

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[92] Roman Roads Media, "The Story of Cincinnatus and George Washington," February 16, 2015, Video, 4:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBUEaF9pjqI.

[93] *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,* directed by Stanley Kubrick, featuring Peter Selers, George C. Scott, and Sterling Heyden (Hawk Films, 1964), DVD (Columbia Pictures, 2001).

[94] From George Washington to Officers of the Army, 15 March 1783," *Founders Online,* National Archives, accessed October 12, 2020, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10840.

are legitimized by public support.[95] The military, on the other hand, is legitimized first by their military effectiveness, then by their support from the government and public. Therefore, it is understandable that their methods to achieve an objective could be vastly different.

No matter Congress' method of attaining independence, Washington subordinated himself to their will, a concept that is tough to swallow for the military professional. Surrendering autonomy to Congress does not, however, strip a military officer of his power or influence with civilian leadership. It means that power and influence is not a birthright, but subject to the degree of their professionalism. Military professionalism, like that of lawyers and doctors, is dependent on trust with the society and their elected officials. Therefore, it is incumbent on the modern military officer to understand how Washington demonstrated the path to mutual trust, trust that was not wholly given to him with his commission, but trust that emerged organically over the course of a seven-year war. Over the 250 years since the Revolution, the US Military has continuously reinvigorated that mutual trust as new generals and elected officials take their positions from society.

Three snapshots in time illustrate how Washington's legacy of trust evolved and illuminates the context of modern civil-military relations. Despite the tremendous agricultural and manufacturing advantages in the 19th century American north, President Lincoln's Union Army floundered for years under Generals Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, George Meade, and the infamous George B. McClellan.[96] According to historian Stephen W. Sears, "The General's [McClellan's] single mistake, that was the source of all his misfortunes, was his distrust of Lincoln."[97] After hiring Ulysses S. Grant in 1864, the North went on to develop a true nation-

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[95] Everett Dolman, "Seeking Strategy," in *Strategy*, ed. Richard J. Bailey Jr., James W. Forsyth Jr., and Mark O. Yeisley (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 9.

[96] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), 816-817.

[97] Stephen W. Sears, "Lincoln and McClellan," in *Lincoln's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50.

wide strategy and won battle after battle. Grant might have been Lincoln's commander for little more than a year, but he was a man that Lincoln could finally trust, a man that shared "a common cause and a shared dedication to seeing the matter through."[98]

Roughly eighty years later, General George C. Marshall displayed similar qualities as Washington and Grant with President Franklin Roosevelt. Leading up to World War II, Marshall developed a harmonious relationship with the President despite wildly different personalities and outlooks for America. "It took me a long time to get to him," noted Marshall as he continued to provide valuable advice during the initial blows of the war. In 1944, Roosevelt's options to command Operation Overlord came down to Generals Marshall and Eisenhower. When Roosevelt confronted Marshall to choose between army chief of staff or supreme commander in Europe, Marshall declined to answer. "I wanted him [Roosevelt] to feel free to act in whatever way he felt was to the best interest of the country…and not in any way to consider my feelings."[99] In a surprising decision, Roosevelt chose Eisenhower. Marshall, like Washington, displayed supreme focus to the objectives at hand, and declined to provide personal commentary to Roosevelt's authority. Roosevelt trusted Marshall, could count on his focus, and ultimately retained him in Washington, DC. Unfortunately, many current officers attribute the allies' victory in World War II to overwhelming manpower and industrial overmatch. While those qualities were certainly critical to victory, they were not the root cause. The trusting relationship between all senior allied commanders with their respective civilian leaders made the difference in World War II, and Marshall's relationship with President Roosevelt remains chief among them.

As American war aims shifted from total to limited after World War II, senior officers

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[98] Harry S. Laver, "Determination and Leadership: Ulysses S. Grant," in *The Art of Command: Military Leadership from George Washington to Colin Powell,* ed. Harry S. Laver and Jeffrey J. Matthews (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 57.

[99] Debi and Irwin Under, *George Marshall: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 294-295.

lost focus of the professional qualities of Washington, Grant, and Marshall. One needs not look beyond Vietnam for an unsuccessful example of civilian-military relations, as American finance and technological might could not overcome the severe distrust between President Johnson, his staff, and senior military commanders. As retired General H.R. McMaster outlines in *Dereliction of Duty*, both President Johnson's administration and senior military commanders effectively shut each other out of their thought processes. The result was a war without an appropriate political vision for success nor a suitable plan for military involvement.[100] After Vietnam, the modern military was reformed into the military that we still recognize today. Trust with the public and political leadership reemerged and was put on full display in Operation Desert Storm. Moving into the 21st century, wars with limited aims continue, and the relationships between military and civilian leaders remain just as critical, especially because the relationships are more public than ever. The outcome is in an even greater requirement for mutual trust, trust that must be built over time, and trust that cannot be taken for granted.

Conclusion

In May 2015, General Martin Dempsey, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, traveled to West Point to commission the newest Second Lieutenants in the United States Army. After his commencement address, General Dempsey signed and delivered a fresh one-dollar bill to each cadet, symbolizing "the respect and trust that exists between leader and led within our profession."[101] General Dempsey's message stressed trust and professionalism, and thus it is only fitting that each of those dollar bills bears the image of our nation's first military professional, General George Washington. Washington's actions throughout the American Revolution,

[100] H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 324-329.

[101] Martin Dempsey, "Gen. Dempsey's Remarks at the West Point Graduation," accessed January 3, 2021, https://www.jcs.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/590027/gen-dempseys-remarks-at-the-west-point-graduation/.

particularly during the Valley Forge winter, laid the foundation of trust as the single most important characteristic of a military professional. Congress' trust in Washington after Valley Forge enabled the Army's subsequent success and their relationship remains the gold-standard in the evolution of civilian-military affairs.

Washington had every reason to doubt his civilian masters during the winter of 1777-1778. Their inability to feed the soldiers, pay the officers, or just their half-baked support for the Commander in Chief would have driven most commanders toward resignation or mutiny. Not Washington, though, as his commitment to the continental vision only emerged stronger during the Army's most challenging circumstances. Washington went about earning Congress' trust with an intense focus on organizing, training, and equipping his Army as he settled into camp at Valley Forge.

Washington's genius lay not in his proposed reforms, but in how he navigated the political minefield to get them. Washington understood power, notes Edmund Morgan, "both military power and political power, an understanding unmatched by that of any of his contemporaries."[102] Despite attempts to undermine his command, Washington remained committed to cooperating directly with Congress, and his proposals were always causally linked to the organization, equipment, and training of his Army. His critics attempted to lure him into public squabbles, yet he refused to oblige. After he resigned his commission in 1783, Thomas Mifflin, once Washington's nemesis but now President of the Continental Congress, said of Washington, "You have conducted the great military contest with wisdom and fortitude invariably regarding the civil power and through all disasters and changes."[103] Washington was now the military professional we all want leading the military. He had the courage and skill of a

[102] Edmund Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington* (New York: WW Norton & Company 1980), 6.

[103] Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 105.

military leader, and still the political skill necessary to support his soldiers.

The national security environment facing George Washington is hardly worthy of comparison to the situation faced by today's senior commanders. The Continental Congress struggled to reach a quorum during their time at York, and yet today's civilian leadership includes the President's White House staff, a 535-person Congress, and well over a hundred members working for the National Security Council.[104] To be effective today, generals must build trust with several bodies of elected officials and appointed leaders across the federal government. Still, however, relying on Washington's foundation for military professionalism is timeless. Journeying into partisan politics, leaking military plans to the media, and endorsing political candidates is slowly seeping into the military ecosystem. Understanding the demonstrated patterns that came natural to Washington and reinforced by Grant and Marshall are invaluable to the military professional. These leaders have proven that the conventional American way of war, that of exceedingly superior technology, finances, and firepower, are not the underlying themes of successful military strategy. Rather, the intangible qualities make the difference, including military professionalism and mutual trust, both with civilian leaders and the American people.

[104] Janine Davidson, Emerson Brooking, and Benjamin Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue: Civil Military Relations and Presidential Decision Making," *Council on Foreign Relations* (December 2016), 5.

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