

An American Crisis: The Newburgh Address

A Speech Delivered at Mount Vernon

July 20, 2006

On the morning of January 6, 1783, the doors of the Continental Congress, sitting in session at Philadelphia, opened to admit Major General Alexander McDougall, Colonel John Brooks, and Colonel Matthias Ogden. The three officers bore an urgent message from the American army, encamped at Newburgh, New York, and they delivered it with all the solemnity it deserved. The congressmen were thunderstruck. A crisis of significant proportions was in the offing, and in it some saw an opportunity for the future and others a threat to the very liberties they were defending.

In 1783 most Americans believed, as many do today, that the surrender of the British army under Lord Cornwallis on October 19, 1781, marked the end of the American Revolution. British leaders shared that view as well. Upon hearing the news of Yorktown, Lord North, the king's first minister, exclaimed, "O God it is all over." They were all wrong.

Yorktown did not end the American Revolution. The War for Independence was not over, and no one understood this better than the American commander-in-chief. To Virginia's governor Thomas Nelson, George Washington wrote that he was apprehensive that "instead of exciting our exertions," the victory at Yorktown will "produce such a relaxation in the prosecution of the War, as will prolong the calamities of it."

Washington had cause to worry. The British still held Charleston, Savannah, and New York City. The distant northern posts of Oswego, Detroit, Michimackinac, and Niagara remained in enemy hands, and the Royal Navy, despite its setback at the battle of the Chesapeake Capes during the Yorktown campaign, continued to dominate the seas. Meanwhile, the details of Cornwallis's surrender, including the evacuation of troops, dragged on for weeks.

With cold weather closing in during the fall of 1781, the campaign season was over. The French fleet returned to the West Indies, the British hunkered down in their positions, and Washington prepared to move his army to winter quarters. After dispatching reinforcements to join General Nathanael Greene in the Southern Department, he ordered the bulk of his army to take quarters along the Hudson River, near Verplanck's Point, where they could monitor the British in New York City.

While his army marched north, Washington took the opportunity to make a brief visit to Mount Vernon, only his second in six years. After a few days at home, he and Martha left for Philadelphia on November 20. He was traveling to the capital, he told Greene, to "attempt to stimulate Congress to the best improvement of our late Success, bt **takg** the most vigorous and effectual Measures, to be ready for an early and decisive Campaign the next year. My greatest fear," Washington confided, "is, that Congress . . . may think our work too nearly closed, and will fall into a State of Languor and Relaxation."

If Washington worried that Congress might become apathetic, its host city gave him no such cause for concern. Philadelphia was electrified as it welcomed the conquering hero. Its citizens organized parades and dinners; they even enjoyed an opera

written in the general's honor. Washington was grateful but uneasy. He attended Congress and urged its members to support the army. Thus far, he noted, King George had shown no inclination to negotiate a peace nor to abandon New York. As long as the enemy held New York, he warned, the war was not over. He also reminded them of the army's distress. The "Officers, in particular," were disgruntled. Two years before, Congress had promised to pay a pension of half-pay for life to those who served for the duration of the war. Several states, however, rejected the agreement and refused to supply the funds necessary to honor the commitment. In the meantime, current pay had also fallen behind. The congressmen listened to the commander-in-chief, but they took no action. After four months of partying and lobbying, Washington presented himself to Congress on March 21, 1782, and asked leave to rejoin his army at its Hudson River encampment. In a less than enthusiastic farewell, Congress informed the commander-in-chief that it had "nothing particular to give you . . . and have appointed this audience only to assure you of [our] esteem and confidence . . . and to wish you happiness and success." On that empty note, Washington headed north.

The general established his headquarters in the village of Newburgh, on the west side of the river, above West Point. After scouring the countryside for a suitable residence for the commander-in-chief, Colonel Hugh Hughes, the deputy quartermaster, commandeered the home of the widow Hasbrouck. The widow, according to Hughes, was not pleased. As he reported, "on hearing that his Excellency was to Quarter in her house [she] sat some time in sullen silence." On April 1, 1782, the Washingtons settled into their new residence. The Hasbrouck house was situated on the top of a small hill overlooking the Hudson. "[B]uilt in the Dutch fashion," with a wide porch, the house had

eight rooms that were “neither vast nor commodious.” The general and his wife occupied two rooms on the first floor, both opening directly onto the kitchen and eating area. There was little privacy. Outside, the grounds were turned into a military encampment.

Carpenters went to work building guardhouses, stables, and barracks. A nearby cellar was converted into a powder magazine. On the riverside, however, the general’s wife applied her softening touch by laying out a series of brick-lined flower-beds.

Washington spent the spring and summer inspecting troops in New York and New Jersey. He estimated British strength in the city to be about thirteen thousand. He could muster barely seven thousand effective troops. In May, when news arrived of the Royal Navy’s decisive victory over the French at the Battle of the Saints, Washington realized that French naval assistance, vital for any attack against New York, would never materialize. This adverse news, the general worried, would provide a “fresh opiate to increase the stupor into which we [have] fallen.”

The general’s fears took a new turn on May 22, 1782, when he received an extraordinary letter from Colonel Lewis Nicola. Nicola commanded the Corps of Invalids, a regiment composed of soldiers who, either from injuries or disease, were no longer combat ready but could, nonetheless, still provide other services for the army. Having watched his own men suffer, Nicola was sensitized to Congress and the states’ disregard for the army as a whole. When this war is over, he wrote, “we who have born the heat & labour of the day will be forgot and neglected.” The army, he ominously predicted, will not submit to this grave injustice. “From several conversations I have had with officers & some I have overheard among soldiers, I believe it is generally intended not to separate after the peace till all grievances are redressed, engagements & promises

fulfilled.” According to Nicola, “This war must have shewn to all, but to military men in particular the weakness of republicks.” To avoid “a new scene of blood and confusion,” he urged that a monarchy on the model of Great Britain be established, with, he implied, Washington as king.

Washington was taken aback and responded quickly. He read the letter, he told the colonel, “With a mixture of surprise and astonishment. [N]o occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed. . . . [Y]ou could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable.” He assured Nicola that he would do what he could “to see ample justice done to the army”—but only “in a constitutional way.”

Washington’s thunderbolt sent Nicola scurrying for cover. The next day the chagrined colonel wrote a fawning apology, begging Washington’s forgiveness. He pleaded with the commander-in-chief to attribute his grievous error to a “weakness of judgment” and not to any “corruptness of heart.” He promised that in the future he would “combat, as far as my abilities reach, every gleam of discontent.”

“Gleams[s] of discontent,” however, continued to plague him and the rest of the army. Barely one month after the Nicola episode, Washington received a letter from Major General James Mitchell Varnum of Rhode Island. In addition to his distinguished service in the army, Varnum had also represented Rhode Island in the Continental Congress, a body he described as a “baseless fabric.” He had even less regard for his fellow citizens, whom he counted as “totally destitute of that Love of Equality which is absolutely requisite to support a democratic Republick: Avarice, Jealously & Luxury

controul their Feelings, & consequently, absolute monarchy, or a military state, can alone rescue them from all the Horrors of Subjugation.” Washington’s response lacked the fire of his letter to Nicola. He agreed that “the conduct of the people at large is truly alarming,” but he held out “hope that some fortunate Crisis will arrive” that will return us “to that love of Freedom which first animated us in this contest.” As the summer wore on, Washington’s anxieties rose as his hopes fell. The pall of boredom descended on his army. In New York City, the new British commander-in-chief, Sir Guy Carleton, consolidated his lines and awaited orders from London. Good news arrived for the Americans. In March the government of Lord North had toppled, and the following month the Dutch recognized American independence. American commissioners were in Paris ready to negotiate a peace, but until a stiff-necked King George III acknowledged American independence, nothing could be accomplished. After more than seven years of war, the American cause was at a critical juncture. If Washington could hold the army together, independence was possible. Only American determination could defeat British intransigence.

Washington’s concerns deepened as he reflected on the winter encampment ahead. He had endured six long winters with his army. The prospect of a seventh filled him with foreboding. He reported “the dark side of . . . affairs” to the secretary at war, Benjamin Lincoln. Officers had not been paid, and now they feared that the Congress might reduce the army and dismiss the troops without compensating them as promised. If these men, Washington wrote, who have “spent the flower of their days in establishing the freedom and independence of their Country,” are sent home “without one farthing of money,” great “Discontents” will arise. “[T]he patience and long sufferance of this Army

are almost exhausted. . . . While in the field, I think it may be kept from breaking out into Acts of Outrage, but when we retire into Winter Quarters I cannot be at ease, respecting the consequences. It is high time for Peace.” Washington received no official response, but in a private letter, Lincoln told him bluntly that if the officers of the army were looking to Congress for compensation, they could expect nothing but “Chagrin and disappointment.” On October 22, 1782, Washington ordered the army to a winter encampment at New Windsor, New York.

The cantonment, as it came to be called, was about five miles from Washington’s Newburgh headquarters. Despite the proximity, Washington rarely visited the troops. Each morning, however, he prepared general orders for the day and dispatched them three miles down the road to Ellison House, headquarters of General Horatio Gates, the cantonment’s senior officer. Gates described his headquarters as “a warm stone house.” Part of that warmth may have come from the occupants, for along with the general, two aides, six servants, and a variety of visitors were crammed into a few small rooms. Gates and Washington had tolerated a mutually unpleasant relationship for years. In the fall of 1777, with his great victory over the British at Saratoga, Horatio Gates had been the darling of the Congress. Around the same time, Washington had been forced to abandon Philadelphia. Some in Congress, particularly New England delegates, talked of replacing Washington with Gates. Whether such grumblings ever reached the level of serious consideration is uncertain, but the rumors that swirled about soured relations between the two men, and neither trusted the other.

Following the surrender of Charleston in May 1780, Congress offered Gates the southern command. He eagerly accepted the appointment since it would place him

beyond the eyes of Washington and his friends. Congress had made a bad decision. On August 16, 1780, Gates suffered a humiliating defeat at Camden, South Carolina. The general compounded the disgrace by fleeing from the battlefield. In retribution, Congress removed him from his post. Gates spent the next two years lobbying Congress in an attempt to clear his name. Finally, in August 1782, Congress relented and resolved that General Gates “take command in the main army, as the Commander in Chief shall direct.” Unwilling to trust Gates out of his sight, Washington ordered him to report to Newburgh to serve “under my immediate direction.”

By late November 1782, nearly eight thousand Continental soldiers, along with hundreds of camp followers, including wives, children and sutlers, had settled at the New Windsor cantonment. Their habitations dotted an area encompassing more than sixteen hundred acres. New Windsor had become one of the largest cities in America.

It was a city of tents, thousands of them, organized by regiment and lined up in neat rows across the countryside. Tents, however, were a poor shelter against frosty nights and the brisk northwest breeze. Colorful leaves signaled the onset of winter. To warm themselves, soldiers built fires inside their tents. It was a dangerous practice, and in one of his general orders, Washington instructed his officers “to be very attentive in seeing that the tops of the Chimneys are carried above the tents, to prevent their being scorched by the heat or fired by the sparks.”

But tents, no matter how well warmed, could never stand against the winter, and so Washington ordered “hutting.” On November 4, Colonel Timothy Pickering, the quartermaster general, issued exact specifications for the huts and indicated their precise locations within the camp. The huts for noncommissioned officers and enlisted men were

to be sixteen by eighteen feet and provide space for sixteen men. Officers' quarters were to be slightly larger and might be partitioned for privacy. Washington, mindful of the claustrophobia of camp life, added his personal touch: the huts were to have "regularity, convenience and even some degree of elegance." Forests for miles around disappeared as the huts took shape. Within a few weeks the entire army had struck their drafty tents and moved into snug huts, nearly seven hundred of them. General William Heath described the cantonment as "regular and beautiful," and Washington noted that the army had never been so well housed.

As the days dragged on at Newburgh, Washington discovered that the immediate menace to his army was neither the British in New York nor the weather outside. General Carleton showed no inclination to leave his comfortable quarters, and the cantonment's serviceable huts kept the winter at bay. The chief threats were idleness, boredom, and growing discontent. At first the officers kept the men busy building huts. When the troops finished that work, the engineers laid out a road for them to construct across a swamp. Each day brought more busy work, interspersed with endless drills and annoying inspections. Before long, camp discipline began to crack. Some soldiers wandered aimlessly about the camp, while many others simply deserted. Washington described the breakdown as "scandalous beyond description." He rebuked his officers for allowing their men "to ramble about the country." This wanton behavior, he ordered, "must be abolished." Even Washington, however, was showing signs of stress. He complained that his headquarters was a "dreary mansion," where he was "fast locked by frost and snow."

Chaplain Israel Evans offered a plan to keep the men occupied and raise their morale. Evans suggested that the army construct a public building in the center of the

cantonment where gatherings, especially religious services, might be held. Washington heartily embraced the proposal. On Christmas Day 1782, he ordered that the project get underway. Over the next few weeks, soldiers gathered stone for the foundation, while others cut trees to be sawed into timbers. Extra rations and rum went to the work parties. Informally christened the “Temple of Virtue,” the building dominated the camp. It was large and elegant, with glass windows and a small cupola on the roof. Inside, carpenters finished the vaulted ceiling, constructed a stage, and plastered walls. All told, the hall seated at least three hundred men. Every Sunday, by rotation, Evans and the other chaplains preached to a packed house. During the week, the chamber was converted into an administrative center, and it hummed with military activity.

However busy the cantonment appeared during the day, though, at night, in the privacy of their huts, the men talked about what most mattered to them—peace and pay.

Letters from home, scattered newspaper reports, and camp gossip all suggested that the war’s end was near, but neither the British in New York nor the Americans at Newburgh had any definitive word. “We are,” wrote Washington “in a disagreeable State of suspense respecting Peace or War.” Equally disagreeable, noted the commander-in-chief, was the state in which Congress had left the army on the issue of pay. He put most of the blame on the states, which thus far had failed to supply Congress with the necessary funds. In November, several officers met to prepare a memorial to Congress. Washington was uneasy about challenging civilian authority, but the desperateness of the situation and the “profound lethargy” into which the states had sunk persuaded him to quietly support his officers’ efforts.

The memorial, signed by fourteen senior officers, began by recognizing the “supreme power of the Congress” and then implored that body, “as [the] head and sovereign,” to hear their plea. “We have borne all that men can bear. . . . [F]urther experiments on [our] patience may have fatal effects,” they warned. They asked that their pay, already significantly in arrears, be delivered to them and that Congress’s assurance of two years before be honored. In lieu of the half-pay for life they had been promised, however, the officers were willing to negotiate new terms: they might accept commutation to full pay for a limited number of years or a lump-sum payment. The officers then elected Major General Alexander McDougall, to be accompanied by Colonels John Brooks and Matthias Ogden, to deliver the petition. This was the urgent message they presented in Philadelphia on January 6, 1783.

In private, Brooks warned members of Congress that “the temper of the army was such that they did not reason or deliberate coolly on consequences and therefore a disappointment might throw them blindly into extremities.” Many congressmen were sympathetic to the officers’ pleas, but they were powerless to address them. The treasury was nearly empty, and it was unlikely that the states would grant Congress the authority to raise money. Some in the body, however, among them Alexander Hamilton of New York and James Madison of Virginia, joined by Gouverneur Morris an assistant to the Superintendent of Finance saw in this crisis an opportunity to advance an agenda that they had long held dear. These men despised the weakness of Congress and saw in the threat of mutiny leverage to fortify the central government at the expense of the states. Only through a strong national government could the United States, in their eyes, achieve greatness.

Such robust nationalist sentiments did not sit well in a body that held at its core the belief that political power was the natural enemy of liberty and that all authority rested in the states. Indeed, with the war clearly drawing to a close, some might wonder why there was need for any central government at all. Despite these rising fears, for the moment at least, Hamilton and his colleagues were in a distinct minority. The Congress was inert.

Having failed to move the men in Philadelphia to action, the nationalists turned their attention north, toward Newburgh. They began to play a dangerous game, using the army as a tool to achieve their goal of strengthening the government in Philadelphia.

After a month of intense conversation and a series of meetings, Colonel Brooks left Philadelphia for Newburgh on February 8, 1783. He carried with him two letters. The first was a public letter to the officers explaining the impasse in Philadelphia. The second was a personal letter from Gouverneur Morris to his “dear friend” Major General Henry Knox the commander at West Point. Morris entreated Knox to press the officers to join with other public creditors so that together they might force Congress and the states to provide funds to pay their obligations. “The Army may now influence the legislatures, . . . and if you will permit me a metaphor from your own profession after you have carried the Post the public Creditors will garrison it for you.”

Five days after Brooks left Philadelphia, news arrived that George III had mentioned, in a speech to Parliament, that preliminary articles of peace had been signed between the United States and Great Britain. The report agitated the nationalists, for if peace was declared, the army would be disbanded and the threat it posed, and consequently its usefulness to the nationalists, would dissolve. In these urgent

circumstances, Hamilton wrote Washington. He told the general that Congress was awaiting news of the final peace. Such news, he suggested, was likely to impel Congress to disperse the army without addressing the issue of pay.

Hamilton feared that a disappointed army might exceed “the bounds of moderation.” He advised Washington to “guide the torrent.” He then notified the commander-in-chief, in a tone that Washington undoubtedly found offensive, that many soldiers did not believe that he had espoused their cause “with sufficient warmth.” He pushed Washington to exploit “the influence of the army.” He even went so far as to pointedly suggest that “General Knox has the confidence of the army and is a man of sense. I think he may safely be made use of.”

Morris did not have to wait for Knox’s reply. Knox had been by Washington’s side since the very first days of the war. He knew his commander-in-chief well, and although he sympathized with the nationalists, he would do nothing to betray his commander or the cause for which they had fought so dearly. “I consider,” Knox wrote, “the reputation of the American Army as one of the most immaculate things on earth. . . . [W]e should even suffer wrongs and injuries to the utmost verge of toleration rather than sully it in the least degree.” “I hope in God [that the army] will never be directed than against the Enemies of the liberties of America.”

Given their long relationship and Knox’s unwavering loyalty to his commander, it may well be that the two generals coordinated their responses to Hamilton and his associates. Ten days after Knox wrote to Morris, Washington wrote to Hamilton. Washington warned Hamilton that the “fatal tendency” to involve the army in political

matters “would . . . be productive of Civil commotions and end in blood.” He stood, he said, “as Citizen and Soldier.”

With neither Washington nor Knox to rely upon, the nationalists turned to General Horatio Gates. This came as no surprise to Washington, who had long suspected Gates of plotting with members of Congress. The source of discontent among the officers, Washington wrote, “may be easily traced as the old leaven [which] is again beginning to work, under a mask of the most perfect dissimulation, and apparent cordiality.”

Amidst rising tensions, Colonel Walter Stewart arrived at Washington’s headquarters. A close friend of Gates’s, Stewart traveled from Philadelphia, where he had been recovering from an illness. His stay had been prolonged, and Washington had complained that there was “no just reason for his being absent.” He had ordered Stewart to join the Northern Army immediately.

Stewart reported to Washington on Saturday, March 8. Given Stewart’s unfortunate behavior and his close relationship with Gates, he may well have received a frosty reception at Hasbrouck House. After finishing his business with the commander-in-chief, Stewart, whom Gates described as “a kind of agent from our friends in congress,” rode the three miles to Ellison House, where the general and his staff welcomed him. Although no record exists of the meeting, it seems likely that Gates’s staff, perhaps with Gates himself present, lamented the fact that neither Washington nor Knox seemed willing to challenge Congress on behalf of the army. Would Gates? The next day, Sunday, several officers worked to prepare a letter to the officers at Newburgh. The final version was drawn in the hand of Major John Armstrong, Gates’s aide. On

Monday morning, Major William Barber, Stewart's aide, delivered copies to the adjutant's office requesting that it be distributed.

The anonymous address began

To the Officers of the Army

Gentlemen:—A fellow **soldier**, whose interest and affections bind him strongly to you—whose past sufferings have been as great, and whose future fortunes may be as desperate as yours—would beg leave to address you.

In a highly charged tone, the writer asked his fellow soldiers, Is the country “willing to redress [our] wrongs, cherish [our] worth—and reward [our] service? Or is it rather a country that tramples upon [our] rights, distains [our] cries and insults [our] distress?” “If this, then, be [our] treatment, while the swords [we] wear are necessary for the defence of America, what have [we] to expect from peace when [our] voice shall sink and [our] strength dissipate by division?”

Now, urged the writer, is the time to strike, for “If the present moment be lost, every future effort is in vain.” In a swipe at Washington and Knox, the writer warned his fellow soldiers to “suspect the man who will advise to more moderation and longer forbearance.” He called a general meeting for the next day, Tuesday, March 11, at the “Temple of Virtue.” There, the writer said, the officers would prepare a remonstrance that would go beyond the “meek language of entreating memorials” and give Congress notice that “the army has its alternative.”

Thanks to friends in Congress, Washington was well aware of the machinations in Philadelphia. He suspected old “leven,” Gates, and he knew that Stewart was eager to be

baker's assistant. More useful than intelligence and suspicions, however, was the loyalty of the officers close to Washington, including Colonel John Brooks, one of the three officers who had met with Congress in January and February. Brooks may well have revealed the conspiracy to Washington.

In his general orders for March 11, Washington canceled the meeting that had come to his attention, "although," he wrote, I am "fully persuaded that the good sense of the officers would induce them to pay very little attention to such an irregular invitation." In its stead, Washington issued his own regular invitation. He ordered field officers and company representatives to assemble at the community building at noon on Saturday, March 15, to discuss "rational measures." To avoid giving undue importance to the meeting, Washington decided that he would not attend. In his absence, "the senior officer in Rank [i.e., Gates] will be pleased to preside and report the result of the Deliberations to the Commander in Chief."

Late Saturday morning, hundreds of officers made their way up the hill, in the middle of the cantonment, to the Temple of Virtue. Inside benches were arranged in neat rows, and by the time the noon hour arrived, nearly three hundred men were present. All stood as General Gates entered the hall. A few moments later, to the surprise of all, the commander-in-chief entered through the portico. Everyone stood again. The sea parted as Washington walked to the platform at the end of the room. He took his seat as a surprised General Gates acknowledged his superior. Gates then deferred to Washington, and the general rose to speak.

According to an eyewitness, Major Samuel Shaw, "Every eye was fixed upon the illustrious man, and attention to their beloved general held the assembly mute."

Washington began by apologizing for his presence. He told his officers that he had intended to leave the proceedings in the hands of General Gates. Upon greater reflection, however, he had determined to take a more direct role. Indeed, Washington told his officers, the matter was so serious that he had committed his thoughts to paper and asked their indulgence while he rehearsed them. He then took out several large sheets and commenced to read his speech, one clearly written in his own hand. According to Colonel Timothy Pickering, who by his own testimony was at that moment “but a small distance from General Washington,” the general “in a little time finding some embarrassment in his sight, he paused to get the aid of his spectacles, and while drawing them from his pocket and preparing to put them on, he said with evident feeling, but in a moderate though audible tone of voice—“I have already grown gray in the service, and am now growing blind.”

Although Washington began his remarks in muted tones, his timbre quickly deepened. He condemned the anonymous summons—“how inconsistent with the rules of propriety! How unmilitary! And how subversive of all order and discipline.” Did Washington know who had written the summons? He may not have, but he would have suspected that it came from Ellison House. He took personal umbrage at the criticism leveled against him. “I was among the first who embarked in this cause of our common Country—I have never left your side one moment.” “With respect to the advice given by the author—to suspect the man, who shall recommend moderate measures and longer forbearance—I spurn it.” “My God!” Washington responded, “What can this writer have in view?” He assured his officers that although Congress moved slowly, he had full faith that it would deliver to the army “compleat Justice. . . . [T]heir endeavours to discover

and establish funds for [the army's pay] have been unwearied, and will not cease, till they have succeeded, I have no doubt." "And let me conjure you," he concluded dramatically, "in the name of our common Country—as you value your own sacred honor—as you respect the rights of humanity; and as you regard the Military and National character of America, to express your utmost horror and detestation of the Man who wishes, under any specious pretences, to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood Gates of Civil discord, and deluge our rising Empire in Blood."

The officers sat in silence. Some wept openly. Washington stood alone wrote Shaw, "not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them; and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition! He spoke—every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course." In an address lasting not more than ten minutes, Washington had diverted a conspiracy and saved the republic

Washington took his leave quickly. The body then elected three men—Henry Knox, John Brooks, and Jedediah Huntington, all friends to the commander-in-chief—to prepare resolutions. They retired to a corner room and returned thirty minutes later with a series of resolves pledging support for the Congress, condemning the "Infamous propositions contained in the late anonymous address," and asking the commander-in-chief to continue his efforts to persuade Congress to answer their grievances.

Almost as soon as the meeting adjourned, reports were on their way to Philadelphia. So too was the announcement of a final peace with Great Britain. Under heavy pressure, on March 22, Congress agreed to grant five years pay to officers who had

served for the duration of war. The act, however, was meaningless. Congress had no money, and the states were not going to grant any additional funds.

On April 19, 1783, those still resident at the cantonment gathered at the Temple of Virtue. The commander-in-chief was present as an officer read “The Proclamation of Congress for a Cessation of Hostilities.” The proclamation was then posted on the temple’s door, and the men cheered and cried a loud “discharge.” The passion to return home trumped pay, and over the next several weeks, the army at Newburgh dispersed peacefully.

The issue of pay tormented the nation for more than forty years. Not until the formation of the Union was there a government sufficiently competent to fulfill its obligations, and not until 1828, on the recommendation of President John Quincy Adams, did Congress grant full pay for life to all surviving officers and men of the Continental army.

It would be an exaggeration to accuse the politicians in Philadelphia and the officers at Newburgh of a coup d’état. They did not seek to topple a government, only to strengthen it. Besides, a coup by any modern standards would have been impossible in Revolutionary America. There was no government to seize. And once Washington and Knox, had given their answers, who would have been qualified to lead? But if these men did not plan a coup they certainly threatened the republic. The purity and virtue of the American Revolution had been at stake in Newburgh. Through a long and difficult war, the Continental army had remained loyal to the cause and its commander, and he had remained loyal to the republic. Had he wavered at Newburgh, civilian control of the military would have been challenged, and a barrier would have been broken impossible to

repair. In that one moment, in the Temple of Virtue George Washington established a principle that has endured and that has preserved our republic, and kept it safe from internal assault, for more than two centuries.

William M. Fowler, Jr.

Distinguished Professor of History

Northeastern University

