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DRAFT

On the morning of January 6, 1783 the doors of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia opened to admit Major General Alexander McDougall, Colonel John Brooks and Colonel Matthias Ogden. These officers bore an urgent message from the American Army encamped at Newburgh, New York. The army, they warned, was on the verge of mutiny. The members were thunderstruck. After eight years of bloody war the army that had brought the nation so close to victory now stood as a threat to the very principles for which they had fought. How could this have happened?

Most Americans in 1783, and even today, believe that the surrender of the British army under Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, October 19, 1781 marked the end of the American Revolution. Even British leaders of the time shared this view. Lord North, for example, the king's first minister, upon hearing the news of Yorktown 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 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 the setback at the battle of the Chesapeake Capes during the Yorktown campaign, continued to dominate the seas. Meantime, the details of Cornwallis's surrender, including the evacuation of the troops dragged on for several weeks.

With cold weather closing in 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 on November 20 he and Martha left for Philadelphia. He was going to the capital to "attempt to stimulate Congress to the best improvement of our late Success, by taking the most vigorous and effectual Measures, to be ready for an early and decisive Campaign the next year. My greatest fear is, that Congress ... may think our work too nearly closed, and will fall into a State of Languor and Relaxation."

Congress may have fallen into "Languor and Relaxation" but the citizens of Philadelphia certainly had not. The city was electrified as it welcomed the conquering hero. The citizens of Philadelphia organized parades and dinners, and even wrote an opera in Washington's honor. Washington was grateful but uneasy. He attended Congress and urged them 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 distress of the army. The

“Officers, in particular” were disgruntled. Two years before Congress had promised to pay those who served for the duration of the war a pension of half pay for life. Several states, however, rejected the agreement and refused to supply funds for any pension arrangement. In the meantime current pay had also fallen behind. The members listened to the commander in chief, but they took no action.

After three months of partying and lobbying on March 21, 1782 Washington presented himself to Congress and asked leave to rejoin his army at their Hudson River encampment. In a less than enthusiastic farewell they informed the commander in chief that we “have 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.

Washington 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. According to him “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 quarters. The Hasbrouck house commanded the top of a small hill overlooking the Hudson. “[B]uilt in the Dutch fashion,” with a wide porch overlooking the river, the house’s eight rooms 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 at 13,000. He could muster barely 7000 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 ill news, the general feared, would provide a “fresh opiate to increase the stupor into which we [have] fallen.”

That “stupor” was disturbed on May 22, 1782 when Colonel Lewis Nicola wrote an extraordinary letter to Washington. 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 particularly sensitive to the neglect the army as a whole had endured at the hands of the Congress and the states. 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 warned ominously, 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 the establishment of a monarchy on the model of Great Britain, 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 “combate, as far as my abilities reach, every gleam of discontent.”

“Gleams[s] of discontent,” however, continued to pop up. 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 who he counted as “totally destitute

of that Love of Equality which is absolutely requisite to support a democratic Republick: Avarice, Jealousy & 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” which 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 diminished. 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 fallen 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 moment. 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 suffered through six winters with his army. The prospect of enduring 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 them without the compensation 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 5 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 the Ellison House, headquarters of General Horatio Gates the senior officer at the cantonment. Gates described his headquarters as "a warm stone house." Part of the warmth may have come from the crowded conditions in the house, for in addition to the general two aides, six servants and a variety of visitors were crammed into a few small rooms.

Gates and Washington had long endured an unpleasant relationship. In the fall of 1777 after his great victory over the British at Saratoga Horatio Gates was the darling of the Congress. This was, of course, at the same time that Washington had been forced to abandon Philadelphia. Some in Congress, particularly New England delegates talked of replacing Washington with Gates. Whether such talk ever reached the level of a conspiracy is uncertain, nonetheless, rumors enough swirled about that relations between the two men soured to the point that neither trusted the other.

Following the surrender of Charleston in May 1780 Congress offered Gates the southern command. He eagerly accepted since it would place him beyond the eyes of Washington and his friends. Congress made a bad decision. On August 16, 1780 Gates suffered a humiliating defeat at Camden, South Carolina. The General compounded the disgrace by hastily fleeing from the battlefield. In retribution Congress removed him from his command. Gates spent the next two years lobbying Congress trying 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 8000 Continental soldiers, along with hundreds of camp followers, including wives, children and sutlers, had settled at the New Windsor cantonment. Crude huts and tents dotted an area encompassing more than 1600 acres. New Windsor had become one of the largest cities in America.

It was a city of tents, thousands of them, organized by regiments and lined up in neat rows across the countryside. Tents however, were a poor shelter

against frosty nights and the cool northwest breeze. Colorful leaves signaled the onset of winter. To warm themselves soldiers built fires inside their tents. That 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.” Tents, however well warmed, could never stand against the winter, and so Washington ordered “hutting.” On November 4 Colonel Timothy Pickering, the Quartermaster General issued the exact specifications for the huts and indicated their precise location within the camp. The huts for non commissioned officers and enlisted men were to be 16 feet by 18 feet and provide space for 16 men. Officer’s quarters were to be slightly larger and they might be partitioned for privacy. Washington chimed in personally instructing that 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 nearly 700 snug huts. General William Heath described the cantonment as “regular and beautiful” while Washington noted that the army had never been as 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 snug huts kept the winter at bay. The chief threats were idleness, boredom and growing discontent. Keeping the troops active was a priority. At first the officers kept the men busy building huts. When they finished that work the engineers laid out a road across swamp for them to construct. Each day brought more "busy," work, interspersed with endless drilling 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 chided his officers at their lack of control allowing their men "to ramble about the country." This behavior he ordered "must be abolished." Even Washington however was showing signs of stress complaining that his headquarters was a "dreary mansion" where he was "fast locked by frost and snow."

In the midst of this restlessness Chaplain Israel Evans offered a plan that he hoped would keep the men occupied and raise morale. Evans proposed that the army build a public building in the center of the cantonment where

gatherings especially religious services might be held. Washington embraced the proposal heartily. On Christmas Day he ordered that the work get underway. Over the next few weeks parties of soldiers gathered stone for the foundation while others cut trees to be sawn 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 small cupola on the roof. Inside the carpenters finished the hall with a vaulted ceiling and plastered walls. At one end a raised platform offered a stage with space below to seat at least 300 men. Every Sunday by rotation Evans and the other chaplains preached to a packed house while during the week the chamber bustled with military matters as officers used the chamber as an administrative center.

However busy the cantonment appeared during the day with construction, drilling, and paperwork at night as the men returned to their huts and talked about what mattered most 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 in the matter of pay. He put most of the blame on the states which thus far had failed to supply Congress with the funds to pay the army. In November his officers met to prepare a memorial to Congress. Washington was uneasy at the prospect of 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 14 senior officers began by recognizing the “supreme power of the Congress” and asking that body “as [the] head and sovereign” to hear their plea. “We have borne all that men can bear....further experiments on [our] patience may have fatal effects.” They asked that the pay already in arrears be delivered and that the promise made by Congress two years before that officers be entitled to half pay for life be recognized, but that in that regard they were willing to negotiate for commutation to full pay for a limited number of years or a lump sum payment. The officers then elected Major General Alexander McDougall accompanied by Colonels John Brooks and Matthias Ogden to deliver the petition.

In private Brooks warned the 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 of the members were sympathetic to the officer’s pleas but they were powerless to address them. The treasury was near empty, and the chance that the states would grant additional power to Congress to raise money was highly unlikely. Some in the body, however, among them Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Gouverneur Morris saw in this crisis an opportunity to advance an agenda that they had long held dear. These men despised the weakness of the Congress and saw in the threat of mutiny a lever that they press to strengthen 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 strong 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 power rested in the states. Indeed, with the war drawing clearly 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 towards 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 meetings in Philadelphia Colonel Brooks left the city for Newburgh on February 8. 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” Henry Knox. He urged Knox to influence the officers to join with other public creditors so that together they might force the Congress and 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 in a speech to Parliament had mentioned that preliminary articles of peace had been signed between the United States and Great Britain. This sent the

nationalists into high gear, for if peace descended the army would disband and their lever would disappear. In these pressing circumstances Hamilton wrote hurriedly to Washington. He told the general that Congress was awaiting news of the final peace. Such news, he suggested, was likely to push Congress towards disbanding the army without addressing the issue of pay. Under these circumstances Hamilton feared that a disappointed army might exceed “the bounds of moderation.” He urged Washington to “guide the torrent.” He then told 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 urged Washington to use “the influence of the army.” Hamilton even went so far as to conclude by informing Washington that “General Knox has the confidence of the army and is a man of sense. I think he may safely be made use of.”

Knox’s reply came first. Henry 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 he had fought so dearly. “I consider,” he wrote “the reputation of the American Army as one of the most immaculate things on earth....we 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 his letter Washington sent his reply to Hamilton. The tone and message was similar to the one delivered by Knox. 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 reluctantly 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 had been in Philadelphia suffering from an illness. He had stayed in the city well beyond his recovery annoying Washington who complained that there was “no just reason for his being absent.” He ordered him to join the Northern Army immediately.

Stewart arrived at Washington’s headquarters on Saturday March 8th. Given his prolonged absence 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, who Gates described as “a kind of agent from our friends in congress,” rode the three miles to the Ellison House where the General and his staff welcomed him. Although no record exists of the meeting it seems quite 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 copy was drawn in the hand of Major

John Armstrong, Gates's aide. On Monday morning, copies were delivered to the adjutant's office by Major William Barber, Stewart's aide, for distribution.

The anonymous address was written in the first person.

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 whether the country is “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.”

The writer called for the next day Tuesday, the 11th to be the time for a general meeting at the new public building the “Temple of Virtue.” There, he said, they would prepare a remonstrance that would go beyond the “meek language of entreating memorials” and warn the Congress that “the army has its alternative.”

Washington was ready. From friends in Congress he was well aware of the machinations in Philadelphia. He suspected old “leaven,” Gates and he was certainly aware of Stewart’s role in stirring the pot. Most importantly, however, Washington had an inside man, Colonel John Brooks. Brooks, one of the original three officers who had met with Congress in January and February, revealed the conspiracy to Washington. Thanks to Brooks Washington was ready with a quick response. In his General orders for March 11 Washington canceled the meeting, (“although,” Washington

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 place of this “irregular invitation” Washington issued a regular invitation. He ordered field officers and company representatives to meet at the new building at noon Saturday March 15 to discuss “rational measures.” To prevent giving undue importance to the meeting Washington decided that he would not attend. Instead “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 300 men were present. All rose at the entrance of General Gates. 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. Washington took his seat as a surprised General Gates acknowledged his commander. 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 attending. He told his officers that after publishing his general order on the 11th it had not been his intention to come in person, but to leave the proceedings to 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 writing and asked their indulgence while he read them. He then took out several large sheets of paper and commenced to read the 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 begun his remarks softly his tone shifted quickly. 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 known the precise author but he suspected that it came from Ellison House. He took personal umbrage at the criticism leveled at 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! What can this writer have in view?” He told his officers that while the Congress moved slowly he had full faith that they would deliver to the army “complete Justice...their 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 openly wept... He 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 torrent and saved the republic

Washington took his leave quickly. The body then elected three men, all friends to the Commander in Chief, Henry Knox, John Brooks and Jedediah Huntington, to prepare resolutions. They retired to a corner room and returned 30 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 at persuading 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 war. The act, however, was meaningless. They had no money and the states were not going to grant any additional funds.

On April 19, 1783 those left 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 door to the Temple as the men cheered and cried aloud “discharge.” The passion to return home trumped pay and over the next several weeks the army at Newburgh dwindled peacefully.

The issue of pay tormented the nation for more than 40 years. Not until the formation of the Union was there a government sufficiently competent to fulfill its obligations, nonetheless, not until 1828, on the recommendation of President John Quincy Adams, did Congress grant full pay for life as of March 1826 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’etat. 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. Power was too diffused in the nation. What government was there to seize? Furthermore

who would they have gotten to lead the effort? Washington and Knox had given their answers. Who would follow Gates?

But if these men did not plan a coup they certainly threatened the republic. In 1783 the roots of civilian control over the military were still shallow. It would not have taken much to tear them out. These men in Newburgh and Philadelphia were engaging in a dangerous game. They were playing with a weapon they could not control - the army. Even short of a coup what might have happened if Washington had not intervened? The purity and virtue of the American Revolution was 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. Washington never challenged civilian control of the military. Had he wavered at Newburgh a precedent would have been set for military influence over civilian government. A fine line would have been crossed that could never be redrawn. Who in the future of America would ever again trust a military institution? The republic would never be safe. In that one moment, in the Temple of Virtue George Washington established a principle that has endured and preserved our republic for more than two centuries.