

## General Washington: Saving the Revolution\*

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I will talk to you today about General George Washington, Commander of the Army of the United States from 1775 to 1783 and subsequently Commander-in-Chief in the role of President of the United States from 1789 to 1797. As you know, General Washington was celebrated upon his death in 1799 as “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.”<sup>1</sup> What I expect you to be less familiar with is the manner in which he led soldiers and citizens toward the founding of the United States.



Naturally, we do not have time to review the entire 45 years General Washington devoted to the founding of the United States (by his own account). What I shall do instead, therefore, is to focus on a few illustrative moments, and indeed one in particular, namely, the famous Newburgh Address of March 1783. But permit me to provide a little context first.

For example, you might want to know how Washington became General Washington. Maybe you know that the former Colonel in the Virginia Militia had been a member of the Continental Congress that had organized to protest the policies of the British Parliament from its inception in 1764. He had been instrumental in leading the Virginia General Assembly and the Congress to take an uncompromising position towards Great Britain's repressive policies. He did more however. It is likely that he was the first person in America to speak of taking up arms in defense of the rights of the American colonies. After the hostilities erupted at Lexington and Concord, followed by the Boston Massacre, the Continental Congress urgently deliberated what course to pursue. Delegates gathered from all of the colonies gathered at Philadelphia. They moved steadily toward a declaration of war. One of the necessities of such a declaration, for a people who were not then a nation and had no military with which to prosecute a war, was to organize an army and to appoint a chieftain to head it. Some of the main leaders of the revolutionary movement, such as the Adamses in Massachusetts, reckoned that it would greatly improve their odds of uniting all the colonies in support of Massachusetts if they chose a general who was from one of the southern colonies. Charles Lee was one such likely choice, distinguished by being the only American who

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<sup>1</sup> Eulogy of Washington by Light Horse Harry Lee.

had held rank in the British Army. Nevertheless, Washington (who had won fame during the French and Indian War (though only a colonial militiaman) received the nod. And this occurred after he arrived at the critical meeting in which the decision for war was to be made, fully clothed in his military uniform and insignia. In short, Washington appeared ready!

What made Washington ready for so daunting a trial, one that he understood to mean, as Franklin expressed it at the time, “all the Americans had to hang together or they would each hang separately”? Perhaps it was a lifetime of disciplined commitment to the principles of freedom and a character of virtuous dignity. He had certainly paid attention to the “rules of civility” from his youth upwards, rules that placed a high value upon bearing oneself correctly in society and seeking to merit the esteem of the well-born. (6-13) Moreover, he had already begun to believe in the destiny of an “empire of liberty” on the North American continent. In short, not merely military training and bearing made Washington ready for the assignment he undertook but also the sure conviction that he would fight for a prize more worthy of a free man than any other imaginable.

Washington conveyed his attitude to his soldiers, even in the extremely difficult circumstances that dogged his army through eight long years in the field. Untrained farmers, mainly, were the bulk of his army. Often they were literally “sunshine soldiers and summer patriots,” heading for home when their enlistments ended without regard to the circumstances of the army. Washington knew that they had to be welded into cohesive fighting units, and he knew that this could only be accomplished if they understood as well as he did what they had to fight for. This is the reason that he became one of the earliest lobbyists for a declaration of independence in the United States. Already in 1775 he proclaimed to the troops in general orders that they were fighting, not for their local colonies, but for the United States of America. This early dream of his, eventually to become the fruit of extraordinary labors and perils, infused his every action. Further, he declared to them that unless America were to become independent and united, all their dangers would have been run in vain. As he told the President of Congress in February of 1776,

the spirit of freedom beat too high in us to submit to slavery, and that, if nothing else could satisfy a tyrant and his diabolical ministry, we are determined to shake off all connexions with a state so unjust and unnatural. This I would tell [the British], not under covert, but in words as clear as the sun in its meridian brightness. (67)

That was his first call for a declaration of independence, and those words were followed by an address to his troops on July 2, 1776; at the very hour when Congress was voting to declare independence, he noted that

The time is now near at hand which must probably determine, whether Americans are to be Freemen, or Slaves; whether they are to have any property they can call their own; whether their houses, and Farms, are to be pillaged and destroyed, and they consigned to a State of wretchedness from which no human efforts will probably deliver them. The fate of unborn Millions will now depend, under God, on the Courage and Conduct of this army – our cruel and unrelenting Enemy

leaves us no choice but a brave resistance, or the most abject submission; this is all we can expect – We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die... (71)

You can see, then, that Washington understood that he had to speak to his soldiers not only of courage, discipline, and skill. He had to provide not only faith in their abilities but still more importantly confidence that the battle they fought was just. At the same time, he had to encourage his countrymen – especially the representatives in Congress – to provide concrete evidence of the justice of their cause.

What I am trying to say to you is very simple: the secret to successful warfare is something worth fighting for. If statesmen and military leaders fail to provide clear and frequent assurance of such a goal, there is no army under the sun that will long maintain its valor and will to fight. What this means is that the fates of war are far more surely tied to the moral convictions of those who fight than to their physical training and development. That is what George Washington understood, and it is, indeed, the only reason that Washington himself was willing to fight.

After Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence and it was duly reported throughout the country and to the Army a few days later, General Washington's response was to order the Declaration read aloud to all of the soldiers of the United States in every encampment, as it was on July 9, 1776. Indeed, we should even now remember to repeat that public reading of the Declaration of Independence. Accordingly, I shall conclude these remarks today with such a public reading.

In war strength does matter. Consequently, when the fledgling, third-world like United States took on the super power of its day – the empire of Great Britain – it could not have been expected that the United States would prevail. Nor did Washington ignore that important truth. That is why he concentrated mainly on avoiding a decisive defeat at the hands of the British throughout the war – no set battles for the colonies against the professional British troops and missionaries. Instead, they used artillery when they could (such as commanding Dorchester Heights in order to dislodge the British from the City of Boston), ambushes when they were reasonable (such as the important victory over the Hessians at Trenton), attacks on the enemies baggage train when possible, and frequent withdrawals. They led the British on a merry chase throughout the northeast and mid-Atlantic for six years, looking for an unguarded opportunity to inflict a decisive defeat on a significant British force and thus induce them to sue for peace. That moment arrived in October, 1781, when General Washington found the British in just such a vulnerable position in and about Yorktown, Virginia. In order to accomplish that stroke, much strategy, and above all perseverance through the long years of deprivation and what looked like certain defeat, with an army ill-clad, poorly armed, and more often unpaid than paid. The perseverance was largely accomplished through General Washington's constant moral reinforcement of an often rag-tag army. That was the main stroke by which he saved the Revolution, and went on subsequently to found the nation he had dreamed of. The strategy was also the product of Washington's genius. To effect that, however, he required to bring the wiliness of a Sun-Tzu to the field of battle.

Washington explained his wiliness in a letter to Noah Webster (of dictionary fame) in July, 1788. (413) Webster had inquired about the pervasive Monday-morning quarter-backing that had disparaged Washington as a hapless general, who did not know

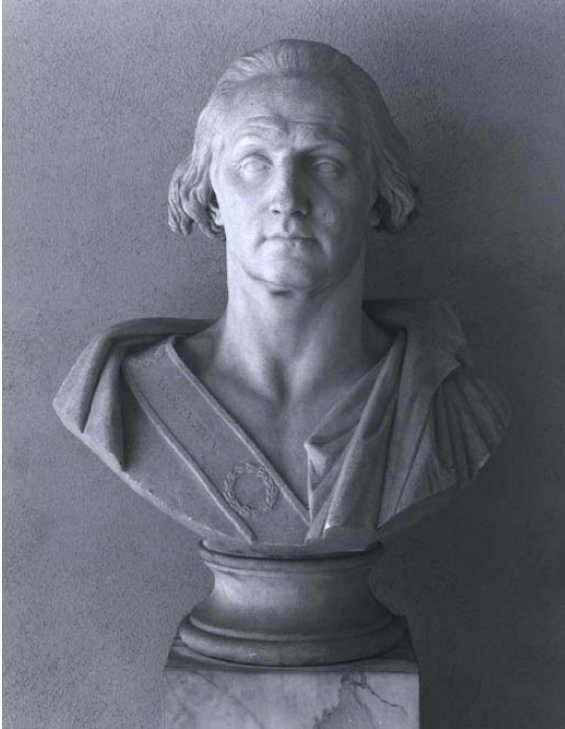
what he was doing, and who was rescued in the end by Admiral de Grasse and the French fleet. The story ran that General Washington pursued an unrealistic *idée fixe* of attacking the British in their New York stronghold, while the French cleverly figured out that a combined naval and land assault in the south-eastern region of Virginia would be more effective. Only after the French committed to their own plan, it was said, did Washington grudgingly go along and join them, thus producing the world-shaking victory at Yorktown.

Webster wanted to know what really had happened, and Washington responded to his complete satisfaction. Washington explained, to make the long story a brief one, that it had long been his intention, formulated twelve months earlier, to look for a vulnerable opportunity that might offer, and, in order to facilitate that project, launched a deceptive effort targeting New York as his new strike point. He had two reasons for this, he reported: first, to induce the “eastern and middle states to make greater exertions in furnishing specific supplies, than they otherwise would have done,”(413) but also in order to make the enemy lessen his defenses elsewhere. Washington explained very carefully that he arrived at this scheme upon the certain conviction that the colonies were at the end of their resources, and that unless such a certain victory could be obtained, they stood to be once and for all overcome by the British.

Washington completed his preparations by identifying the Virginia outpost as the best target, made appropriate arrangements to concert operations between his forces and the French fleet (which had been in the Caribbean), and then undertook great “trouble” and “finesse” to persuade British General Clinton that he was headed to New York (including fictitious communiqués and the preparation of provisions and logistical supplies in the area of New York). When the die was cast, he made a rapid dash southward, rendezvousing at Mt. Vernon with the French, and then swooping upon the British at Yorktown. It worked, he said finally, because he completely deceived the British. But he could only completely deceive the British because he completely deceived Americans (including his own troops), without which the plan had surely failed.

Now, the fact that General Washington both recognized the need to convey moral certainty in order to sustain the struggle for independence and also recognized the need for deception in order to succeed in the military contest, perfectly portrays the challenge of statesmanship. We are not apt to applaud the Machiavellian whose arts of deception usually make us suspect moral indifference. If we think our leaders lie to us about contingent matters, we do not typically trust them to speak the truth to us about our dearest interests. But it is a certain truth that a well-established character, one that a people have learned to trust implicitly, is sufficient warrant for the necessary tactics that make independence and freedom a reality and not merely a vain dream. We don’t want our leaders to be stupid; we want them only to be faithful to us. Once they have established their faithfulness, the necessary deceptions they might practice will always be to our advantage.

That brings us to our main example today, the Newburgh Address of March, 1783. This address was occasioned by a pending mutiny in the Army. Consider the circumstances. The war had “ended” *de facto* in October, 1781, yet the peace had not yet been signed. It took two years before the Treaty of Paris finally concluded the war. Therefore the Army had to be kept organized, just in case. General Washington



maintained an army in the field that was largely inactive but still very much in distress. It was not being paid, and no definitive provision to make up its past and promised compensation had been made. Yet they felt deeply aggrieved and imagined that no resources other than rebellion remained for them.

General Washington, having learned of the conspiracy, showed up unannounced and surprised the officers. He asked to speak to them, producing the Newburgh Address. It was reported that, as Washington commenced reading his address, he fumbled in his pockets to pull out spectacles he had only recently acquired. In the delay he remarked, “I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in my country’s service.” Washington carried the meeting. His officers voted him

unanimous thanks and rejected “with disdain, the infamous propositions of the anonymous pamphlets. Listen to the address:

Gentlemen:

By an anonymous summons, an attempt has been made to convene you together; how inconsistent with the rules of propriety! how unmilitary! and how subversive of all order and discipline, let the good sense of the Army decide.

In the moment of this Summons, another anonymous production was sent into circulation, addressed more to the feelings and passions, than to the reason and judgment of the Army. The author of the piece, is entitled to much credit for the goodness of his Pen and I could wish he had as much credit for the rectitude of his Heart, 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, the Author of the Address, should have had more charity, than to mark for Suspicion, the Man who should recommend moderation and longer forbearance, or, in other words, who should not think as he thinks, and act as he advises. But he had another plan in view, in which candor and liberality of Sentiment, regard to justice, and love of Country, have no part; and he was right to insinuate the darkest suspicion, to effect the blackest designs.

That the Address is drawn with great art, and is designed to answer the most insidious purposes; that it is calculated to impress the Mind, with an idea of premeditated injustice in the Sovereign power of the United States, and rouse all those resentments which must unavoidably flow from such a belief; that the secret mover of this Scheme (whoever he may be) intended to take advantage of the passions, while they were warmed by the recollection of past distresses, without giving time for cool, deliberative thinking, and that composure of Mind which is so necessary to give dignity and stability to measures, rendered too obvious, by the mode of conducting the business, to need other proof than a reference to the proceeding.

Thus much, Gentlemen, I have thought it incumbent on me to observe to you, to show upon what principles I opposed the irregular and hasty meeting which was proposed to have been held on Tuesday last: and not because I wanted a disposition to give you every opportunity consistent with your own honor, and the dignity of the Army, to make known your grievances. If my conduct heretofore has not evinced to you that I have been a faithful friend to the Army, my declaration of it at this time wd. be equally unavailing and improper. But as I was among the first who embarked in the cause of our common Country; as I have never left your side one moment, but when called from you on public duty; as I have been the constant companion and witness to your Distresses, and not among the last to feel, and acknowledge your Merits; as I have ever considered your own Military reputation as inseparably connected with that of the Army; as my Heart has ever expanded with joy, when I have heard its praises, and my indignation has arisen, when the mouth of detraction has been opened against it, it can *scarcely be* supposed, at this late stage of the War, that I am indifferent to its interests. But, how are they to be promoted? The way is plain, says the anonymous Addresser. If War continues, remove into the unsettled Country; there establish yourselves, and leave an ungrateful Country to defend itself. But who are they to defend? Our Wives, our Children, our Farms, and other property which we leave behind us. Or, in this state of hostile separation, are we to take the two first (the latter cannot be removed), to perish in a Wilderness with hunger, cold and nakedness? If Peace takes place, never sheath your Swords, says he, until you have obtained full and ample justice; this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our Country in the extremest hour of her distress, or turning our Arms against it, (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity recoils at the idea. My God! 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? Some Emissary, perhaps, from New York<sup>2</sup>, plotting the ruin of both, by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the Civil and Military powers of the Continent? And what a Compliment does he pay to our Understandings, when he recommends measures in either alternative, impracticable in their Nature?

But here, Gentlemen, I will drop the curtain, because it wd. be as imprudent in me to assign my reasons for this opinion, as it would be insulting to your conception, to suppose you stood in need of them. A moment's reflection will convince every dispassionate Mind of the physical impossibility of carrying either proposal into execution.<sup>3</sup>

There might, Gentlemen, be an impropriety in my taking notice, in this Address to you, of an anonymous production, but the manner in which that performance has been introduced to the Army, the effect it was intended to have, together with some other circumstances<sup>4</sup>, will amply justify my observations on the tendency of that Writing. With respect to the advice given by the Author, to suspect the Man, who shall recommend moderate measures and longer forbearance, I spurn it, as every Man, who regards that liberty, and reveres that justice for which we contend, undoubtedly must; for if Men are

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<sup>2</sup> New York, remember, remained the base of the British Army (as well as the bastion of such Tory loyalists as remained in the Country) until after the Treaty of Paris ended hostilities in October, 1783.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph bears an uncanny resemblance to *Federalist Papers* #1, which argues that policy proposals must be deliberated in terms of their reasons and not the motives of their proposers, since one's motives always remain hidden in one's breast.

<sup>4</sup> Washington refers here, perhaps, to those correspondences with Congress he maintained, and which reflect the prospects announced the following paragraph.

to be precluded from offering their Sentiments on a matter, which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences, that can invite the consideration of Mankind, reason is of no use; the freedom of Speech may be taken away, and, dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the Slaughter.

I cannot, in justice to my own belief, and what I have great reason to conceive is the intention of Congress, conclude this Address, without giving it as my decided opinion, that that Honble Body, entertain exalted sentiments of the Services of the Army; and, from a full conviction of its merits and sufferings, will do it complete justice. That their endeavors, to discover and establish funds for this purpose, have been unwearied, and will not cease, till they have succeeded, I have not a doubt. But, like all other large Bodies, where is a variety of different interests to reconcile, their deliberations are slow. Why then should we distrust them? and, in consequence of that distrust, adopt measures, which may cast a shade over that glory which, has been so justly acquired; and tarnish the reputation of an Army which is celebrated thro' all Europe, for its fortitude and Patriotism? And for what is this done? to bring the object we seek nearer? No! most certainly, in my opinion, it will cast it at a greater distance.

For myself (and I take no merit in giving the assurance, being induced to it from principles of gratitude, veracity and justice), a grateful sense of the confidence you have ever placed in me, a recollection of the cheerful assistance, and prompt obedience I have experienced from you, under every vicissitude of fortune, and the sincere affection I feel for an Army, I have so long had the honor to Command, will oblige me to declare, in this public and solemn manner, that, in the attainment of complete justice for all your toils and dangers, and in the gratification of every wish, so far as may be done consistently with the great duty I owe my Country, and those powers we are bound to respect, you may freely command my Services to the utmost of my abilities.<sup>5</sup>

While I give you these assurances, and pledge myself in the most unequivocal manner, to exert whatever ability I am possessed of, in your favor, let me entreat you, Gentlemen, on your part, not to take any measures, which, viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained; let me request you to rely on the plighted faith of your Country, and place a full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress; that, previous to your dissolution as an Army they will cause all your Accts. to be fairly liquidated, as directed in their resolutions, which were published to you two days ago<sup>6</sup>, and that they will adopt the most effectual measures in their power, to render ample justice to you, for your faithful and meritorious Services. And let me conjure you, in the name of our common Country, as you value your own sacred honor<sup>7</sup>, 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. By thus determining, and thus acting, you will pursue the plain and direct road to the attainment of your wishes. You will defeat the insidious designs of our Enemies, who are compelled to resort from open force to secret Artifice. You will give one more distinguished proof of an unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the

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<sup>5</sup> Here we behold the first appearance of “cares, labors, and dangers” that became the theme of Washington’s September 17, 1796 “Farewell Address.”

<sup>6</sup> Following the aborted secret meeting of “Tuesday last” and in response to Washington’s insistence that something needed urgently to be said.

<sup>7</sup> Here, as throughout the address, Washington invokes the clarion call of the “Declaration of Independence.”

pressure of the most complicated sufferings; and you will, by the dignity of your Conduct, afford occasion for Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, “had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.” (217-221)

Washington dispatched to Congress a report on the Newburgh meeting and resolutions unanimously adopted by the officers, which transpired “in a manner entirely consonant to my wishes.” Thus we may say that his decision to intervene was crowned with success, in the ordinary sense of the immediate developments that ensued. But may we not also say that his decision was crowned with success in the larger sense to which he adverts in his closing paragraph? Washington pursued “the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining” and remitted no effort in the pursuit. Here is the germ of that opening declaration in *Federalist Papers* #1 to the effect that it fell to the people of America to determine for all of mankind whether they can establish “good government from reflection and choice.”

The moral of this story is plain: a critical decision shapes the future, but it is the character of the statesman that shapes the decision for good rather than ill.

Much that Washington did on and off the field of battle contributed to saving the American Revolution. Perhaps, though, no decision so decisively shaped that result as his decision to challenge the pending mutiny at Newburgh and to redirect its energies toward further efforts to secure an effective union of the United States of America. What explains his success on this occasion, however, is nothing so much as the reputation of his character, on which he traded throughout the address. As he noted in his June, 1783 “Circular Address” to the thirteen colonies (an effort to fulfill the promises he made in the Newburgh Address), “honesty is the best and only true policy.” (244) Washington’s reputation for honest, self-sacrificing devotion to the freedom of the United States was the badge that made his leadership current throughout the founding. In the name of that badge, he realized in his person the promises of the Declaration of Independence, which we memorialize this day and will continue to memorialize for as long as freedom resounds in the breasts of its heirs.

Let us hear the Declaration once again, but let us hear it now as if for the first time:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. – That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that

governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. – Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

[There follow eighteen specific indictments, one of which (abuses in cooperation with Parliament) has nine sub-heads).]

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have we been wanting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in Peace Friends. –

WE, THEREFORE, the REPRESENTATIVES of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by authority of the good people of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which Independent States may of right do. – And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.

July 4, 1776