

George Washington and the Politics of War and Revolution

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

George Washington and the Politics of War and Revolution, by Maj Damon G. Field, 74 pages.

The outcome of the American Revolution was never inevitable. A military victory against British forces was a necessary but not sufficient condition to create a stable political structure in colonial America. Divisive social and political forces throughout the colonies weighed heavily on political elites prior to the outbreak of revolution. One actor, however, stood at the critical nexus of ideology, politics, culture, and military power to affect the outcome of the American Revolution and preserve the nascent political union in those precarious opening months of the conflict.

War is a social and, in turn, a political phenomenon. However, analysis of leadership in war often overlooks war's inherently political nature. How a leader manages or operates within a political system to preserve or generate political will while simultaneously weakening the will of an adversary is a critical, if often overlooked, component of leadership in war. George Washington was a remarkable paradox; both a congruent output from the social system he was a part of and a remarkably aberrant agent when compared to his contemporaries. Washington's impact on the social and political system of the colonies emerged in two distinct phases. First, Washington's innate leadership qualities and personal narrative secured political support among colonial elites at the Second Continental Congress and validated his selection as the commander of the newly formed Continental Army. Second, Washington, in concert with practical military requirements, navigated the political straits of the conflict by accounting for ideology, identity, and the colonial military tradition as he executed his siege of Boston. In doing so, Washington protected what most observers and many colonial commentators believed was the underlying weakness of the revolution: colonial disunity.

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Introduction

The outcome of the American Revolution was never inevitable. The survival of a rag-tag colonial force in opposition to an eighteenth-century superpower seemed unlikely. Yet despite the odds, colonial forces managed to prolong the conflict long enough to witness the struggle transform from an internal, albeit imperial affair to a classic great power conflict between Britain, France, and Spain. To add to the challenge, a military victory against British forces was a necessary but not sufficient condition to create a stable political structure in colonial America. The human tragedies associated with eight years of war certainly helped transform colonies into states and encouraged those states to reject reconciliation with the crown. However, in those opening days of conflict the colonies stood on a political precipice. After the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, a loose coalition that had coordinated economic resistance to parliamentary overreach embarked on a path of active revolution, but judging by previous colonial experiences at unified action, its future survival remained dubious. Divisive social and political forces throughout the colonies weighed heavily on political elites prior to the outbreak of revolution. In 1765, Massachusetts lawyer James Otis, Jr. concluded that “America would be a mere shambles of blood and confusion without the mother country’s guiding hand.”¹ One actor, however, stood at the critical nexus of ideology, politics, culture, and military power to affect the outcome of the American Revolution and preserve the nascent political union in those precarious opening months of the struggle.

A Framework to Analyze Washington

George Washington is one of the most analyzed and dissected figures in American

¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6; quoted in Don Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 4.

history. Washington's military campaigns, including the 1776 disasters in New Jersey and New York, the crossing of the Delaware River, and eventual victory at Yorktown in 1781, have inspired innumerable commentaries and analyses. However, war is a social phenomenon. "The dry bones of 'drum and bugle' history," as historian Don Higginbotham described it, has lacked sufficient social and political context to illuminate the power and influence of individual decision makers in their fuller context.² An analysis of leadership in war that ignores the social and political environment, and instead focuses on the maneuvers, the logistics, and the engagements, rejects a critical component of generalship. That notwithstanding, some historians have indeed framed Washington's role in the Revolution from a social and political perspective. In *The Ascent of George Washington*, John Ferling traced the political ascendancy of George Washington and demonstrated Washington's political acumen convincingly. Washington's rise from relative obscurity, to serve in the Virginia militia, to the House of Burgesses, and to eventually lend credibility to the Continental Congress in 1774 as "one of the best-known Americans" of the era revealed an unparalleled ability to maneuver and influence the political world.³ Where Ferling described Washington's political genius, Don Higginbotham, in *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, contends that Washington was a Revolutionary symbol and noted his ability to unite disparate political actors. Higginbotham argued forcefully, "Washington emerged as the most visible and meaningful sign of American cohesion throughout the independence struggle...[at a time that] Americans appeared almost wholly bereft of such symbolism at the outset of the struggle for independence, lacking as they did flags, anthems, great charters, and larger-than-life

² Don Higginbotham, "American Historians and the Military History of the American Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (October 1964): 33; see also Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenge of War: Prussia 1806* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 34.

³ John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 77.

heroes ensconced in [the future] American pantheon.”⁴ In *The Invention of George Washington*, historian Paul K. Longmore explored the intersection of Washington’s political ambition and the ideological context of the era. Washington, according to Longmore, embodied the Revolution as colonists projected their political desires and aspirations on the new commander-in-chief. In turn, Washington exuded social and political influence. Leading colonists, Longmore argued, “who exhorted the people to support the army often seemed to equate commitment to the cause with loyalty to Washington.”⁵ Washington’s political acumen emerged as one of the critical variables that influenced the revolutionary process.

Washington’s story connected structure with agency. His personal pedigree, professional resume, and the broad ideological themes of the era nested together and imbued Washington with significant political energy and power. In a manner unlike other Revolutionary leaders, Washington balanced the practical realities of soldiering in an ideologically charged environment. Where other Revolutionary leaders engaged the political environment with rhetoric, Washington connected that rhetoric with policy and action as the Revolution’s principal military commander. In short, George Washington negotiated the tension between symbolic and practical leadership to shape the Revolutionary political process with a unifying, ideologically congruent narrative during the opening days of the American Revolution.⁶ Washington’s impact on the social and political system of the colonies emerged in two distinct phases. First, Washington’s innate

⁴ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 8-9.

⁵ Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 86-100, 205.

⁶ Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 44. Higginbotham described the period from July 1775 to March 1776, during which Washington’s forces conducted the siege at Boston, as “the most crucial of the war.” See also Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 83-103. Ferling described the “crucial first year” of Washington’s military leadership and outlines many of Washington’s political struggles.

leadership qualities and personal narrative secured political support among colonial elites at the Second Continental Congress and validated his selection as the commander of the newly formed Continental Army. Second, Washington, in concert with practical military requirements, navigated the political straits of the revolution by accounting for ideology, identity, and the colonial military tradition as he executed his siege of Boston.

Carl von Clausewitz posited that war is “a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”⁷ The Prussian contends “politics...is the womb in which war develops—where [war’s] outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form.”⁸ Military strategists often cite, yet rarely contemplate the implications of Clausewitz’s pithy idiom that connects war and politics. The political landscape, which necessarily includes all the vagaries, complexities, and idiosyncrasies of human ideology, culture, and political identity, complicates and defines the contextual phenomenon of war. The political environment imbues the act of war with meaning and purpose. Though the violent nature of war may radically alter the political environment in which it occurs, it does not eliminate the complex nature of politics as a human, and in turn social, phenomenon.

Actors in war are rarely, if ever, unitary social constructions. Belligerents occupy the political spectrum between “an agglomeration of loosely associated forces” and “a personified intelligence acting according to simple and logical rules.”⁹ Clausewitz’s description, from a modern perspective, acknowledges the practical differences in political power conversion between alliances and coalitions on the one hand, and those actors with an integrated political

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.

⁸ von Clausewitz, *On War*, 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 588.

identity and apparatus on the other. The leader of a loose coalition must negotiate the interests and perspectives of partners and allies while simultaneously resisting the adversary. Thus, the structural organization of a group of political agents influences its ability to convert raw political energy into practical political will. How a leader manages or operates within a political system to preserve or generate political will within his or her coalition while simultaneously weakening the will of an adversary is a critical, if often overlooked, component of leadership in war. An analysis of leadership at this level requires a holistic framework of the social system.

Social systems define, and more so, set the parameters in which political interaction takes place. The social system, in a sense, establishes cognitive terrain, a terrain as real and relevant to the outcome of conflict as a mountain or river, upon which actors wage political battles. Aggregated social phenomenon, those threads that possess enough social inertia to penetrate and diffuse throughout a social system help illuminate, broadly speaking, the topography of the cognitive terrain. When viewed from a system wide perspective, George Washington was a remarkable paradox; both a congruent output from the social system he was a part of and a remarkably aberrant agent when compared to his contemporaries.¹⁰ In colonial North America, three threads of social continuity permeated the social, and in turn, political environment. First, commonwealth ideology diffused across every level of colonial society. Washington embodied the cultural and ideological ethos of the age. Second, expansive geography and diverse religious-cultural traditions of the colonies produced a disaggregated political identity. However,

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30-1. Historian John Lewis Gaddis describes the concept of continuities, or “patterns that extend across time.” Gaddis also describes the concept of contingencies, or “phenomena that do not form patterns” and instead exist as aberrant events or agents. Gaddis quite elegantly summarizes, “continuities intersect contingencies, contingencies encounter continuities, and through this process history is made.” Though not referenced specifically in this work, the germ of the idea behind the threads of colonial society and politics and Washington as an aberrant agent within the colonial milieu originated with Gaddis’ model.

Washington's unique personal experience produced an inter-colonial mindset vital to the course of political events during the Revolution. Third, the colonial military tradition, influenced by ideology and identity, represented a social institution not easily modified. Washington's military experience connected the social, political, and ideological trends of the era with the practical requirements of soldiering in eighteenth-century North America. Each thread distinguished broad social and political continuities and established the context of Washington's leadership, political influence, and constructed narrative.

The Colonial Social System and George Washington

Commonwealth ideology permeated every level of colonial society. As Pulitzer prize winning historian Gordon Wood in *The Creation of the American Republic* put it, "the result was phenomenal: an outpouring of political writing—pamphlets, letters, articles, sermons—that has never been equaled in the nation's history."¹¹ The diffusion of commonwealth ideology imbued colonial society with palpable political energy. Wood described the era as a unique confluence of ideas in that it "seemed indeed to be a particular moment in history when all knowledge coincided, when classical antiquity, Christian theology, English empiricism, and European rationalism could all be linked."¹² In that sense, though political discourse of the age focused on the relationship between humanity and the state, that debate was, in fact, a branch of a larger and more holistic conception of an idealized version of humanity and humanity's potential to achieve greatness when untethered from the bonds of tyranny. Commonwealth ideology anchored itself to a worldview that incorporated cultural aspirations, values, and preferences that gave social

¹¹ Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6.

¹² Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 7.

context to political action and outcomes. Wood suggested in eighteenth-century North America, “Man was pictured in classical terms struggling between the forces of virtue and vice, reason and passion.... The traits of character most praised were the classical ones—restraint, temperance, fortitude, dignity, and independence.”¹³ For Whigs, the future of society required the elevation and admiration of republicanism, virtue, and the martial spirit.

Republicanism suggested that a government’s legitimate source of power emanated from the governed. Tories, the loyalist camp that remained in the colonies, lamented that the social upheaval underway in 1775 spelled disaster for the foundations of society. Tories, Wood summarized, believed that “by the establishment of republicanism the Whigs were also founding their new government on the people’s voluntary obedience.”¹⁴ It was a system destined to cause more problems than solutions. In 1775, Samuel Adams worried though Whigs pursued “the Establishment of a Government upon the Principles of Liberty...there may be Danger of Errors on the Side of the People” to determine the course of the state and wield the power of government.¹⁵ Tories argued vociferously that to throw off the Mother Country was to lurch toward anarchy. Liberty, paradoxically, could not exist under the yoke of chaos. Despite the Tory argument, republicanism remained at the heart of efforts of the Whig establishment. However, the inherent tension between power and liberty required an answer.

To placate that tension, Whigs extolled virtue, that sacrificing spirit and commitment to personal honor, as the answer to the potential licentiousness of the people. Leaders, chosen from the people in a republican spirit, must demonstrate the tenets of virtue to garner support and

¹³ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 49-50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵ Samuel Adams to James Warren, 5 December 1775, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren, 1743-1777*, vol. 1, ed. Worthington C. Ford (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917), 192.

obedience.¹⁶ Wood explained, “A republic was such a delicate polity” that it required an individual “sacrifice his [or her] private interests for the good of the community” and demonstrate what the eighteenth-century Whigs termed “public virtue.”¹⁷ Virtue required a commitment to integrity and sacrifice. Additionally, it required active agency, a certain courage in the face of both temptation and danger. In that sense, public virtue resonated with the martial spirit.

Whigs connected the value of the martial spirit to their understanding of classical societies. Wood suggested that Whig ideologues believed:

it was not the force of arms which made the ancient republics great or which ultimately destroyed them. It was rather the character and spirit of their people. Frugality, industry, temperance, and simplicity—the rustic traits of the sturdy yeoman—were the stuff that made society strong. The virile martial qualities—the scorn of ease, the contempt of danger, the love of valor—were what made a nation great.¹⁸

These ideals imbued some actors with political influence and authority within the social milieu of colonial America.

The ideals of republicanism, virtue, and the martial spirit established the foundation for Washington’s ascendancy and consolidation of political power. Wood suggested that “Washington seemed to his contemporaries to fit the ideal perfectly; and someone like Landon Carter [a wealthy Virginia land owner elected to the House of Burgesses] could only lament that everyone was not as Washington was, ‘not so much in quest of praise and emolument to yourself as of real good to your fellow-creatures.’”¹⁹ Washington’s resonance with the cultural and ideological aspirations of the age proved a central component of his political power and

¹⁶ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 67-69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

influence. However, the social system from which Washington derived so much political power did not emerge, *ex nihilo*, but instead connected to a historic tradition and identity not so easily jettisoned.

Bernard Bailyn, in his Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, suggested that, broadly speaking, the American Revolution sought reinforcement, not revision, of the arc of political development in Britain.²⁰ Bailyn summarized the intellectual trajectory of Whig ideology as:

that elaborate pattern of middle-level beliefs and ideas that formed...[a] map of social and political reality—a map, originally formed within early seventeenth-century English libertarianism...modernized for the eighteenth-century by the political opposition...and diffused by an intricate process of cultural dissemination through the political culture of the American colonies. No simpler genealogy can explain the derivation of America's Revolutionary ideology.²¹

Colonists connected their political ideology and the British constitution with an expression of the innate rights of humanity, the laws of nature, and the manifestation of divine providence. For colonists, as Gordon Wood described it, their debate with England “was what made their Revolution seem so unusual, for they revolted not against the English constitution but on behalf of it.”²² Colonists, in some sense, pursued a perfection of Britishness, not a rejection of it. Here we find the fundamental tension between Whig ideology and a more traditional British identity that required obedience to crown and parliament.

Social and political inertia, fueled by the appeal of commonwealth ideology, favored continued political liberalization. Colonial context magnified and resonated with eighteenth-

²⁰ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1-54.

²¹ Bernard Bailyn, “What Were the Key Issues in the Revolution?,” in *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760 – 1791*, ed. Richard D. Brown (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 8.

²² Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 10.

century English radicalism. As Bernard Bailyn put it, “In the mainland colonies of North America...an altered condition of life made what in England were considered extreme, dislocating ideas sound like statements of fact.”²³ An explosion of free landholders, social and religious diversity, a proximal connection to representative government, and a nearly continuous conflict between colonial legislatures and the executive branch of government, exacerbated colonial injuries, real or perceived, suffered from the application of powers previously “stripped from the crown...as inappropriate to the government of a free people.”²⁴ Thomas Gordon, writing in the tradition of English Commonwealth thought, encapsulated the central ideological issue for the revolutionary movement in 1733: “Without giving his People Liberty,” wrote Gordon, “[the Governor] cannot make them happy; and by giving them Liberty, he gives up his own Power. So that...whatever is good for the People is bad for their Governors, and what is good for the Governors, is pernicious to the People.”²⁵ The tension between power and liberty described by Gordon and exacerbated by colonial circumstance animated the nature of political action throughout the American colonies. Though commonwealth ideology diffused throughout British America, specific colonial context modified how colonists perceived, connected, and constructed political goals and perspectives.

For Washington, his colonial pedigree, as a member of the Virginia planter class, placed him squarely at the center of an ideological and social tension. In mid-July 1774, the residents of Fairfax County, Virginia selected representatives, to include George Washington, George Mason,

²³ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁵ Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard, *Cato's Letters*, vol. 2 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 256; quoted in Barry Schwartz, “George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (February 1983); also quoted in Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 18.

and several others, to serve on a committee to espouse the grievances and agitations of the colonists to parliament. Bryan Fairfax, brother of George William Fairfax, dissociated himself from both Virginia politics and an ongoing effort to petition Parliament regarding the interests of Virginia and the colonies.²⁶ Instead, Fairfax penned a letter that outlined his general dissatisfaction with the course set by the committee members and the radical shift he observed in colonial politics. In a letter written 17 July 1774, Fairfax strongly objected to the tone and substance of formal resolutions drafted by the House of Burgesses for Parliament's review, and in a sense summarized the ideologically conservative opinion of the time. Fairfax rejected "a Resolve" developed by committee members that would "widen the Breach, and prevent Reconciliation" with parliament. Fairfax pleaded that "if a Petition should be agreed upon.... No Conditional Resolutions, which may be formed at the time, should be published until it is known, that the Petition has had no Effect." Fairfax summarized his position that "There are two Methods proposed to effect a Repeal [of the remaining intolerable acts]; the one by Petition, the other by Compulsion. They ought then to be kept separate and distinct, and we shall find few for joining them together, who are not rather against the Former." Fairfax believed that "if we go on at this Rate, it is impossible that the Troubles of America should ever have an end." Further, "it becomes good subjects to submit to the Constitution of their Country. Whenever a political Establishment has been settled, it ought to be considered what it is, and not what it ought to be." To do otherwise "is to lay the Foundation of continual Broils and Revolutions."²⁷ Fairfax encapsulated

²⁶ Richard Harwell, *Washington: An Abridgment in One Volume of the Seven-Volume George Washington* by Douglas Southall Freeman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 202-203.

²⁷ George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 20 July 1774, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick vol. 3, January 1770 – September 1775 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 230-233, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. [Hereafter *GW*, 3:]

the conservative argument that reasonable petition and debate within the political system offered the best hope of restoring the rights of colonists. However, Washington's response to Fairfax demonstrated a shifting tide of opinion, even among the political and social elite in Virginia.

Washington responded to Fairfax on 20 July 1774 and revealed a leader grappling with the tension derived from the ideas of political liberty juxtaposed with traditional notions of virtue and Britishness. Washington lamented "that government is pursuing a regular plan at the expense of law and justice to overthrow our constitutional rights and liberties, how can I expect any redress from a measure, which has been ineffectually tried already?" Washington enumerated the slanted "debates in the House of Commons...General [Thomas] Gage's conduct since his arrival [in Boston]...the exempt[ion of] offenders from trial in the place where offences were committed ...[and the attempt] to deprive the government of Massachusetts Bay of their charter" as evidence ...that should "satisfy one of the designs of the ministry." Washington questioned whether colonists should "supinely sit and see one province after another fall a prey to despotism?" The issue, as Washington stated, was more than "paying the duty of three pence per pound on tea." If Washington could reconcile the actions of parliament with his conception of liberty and the British constitution, then "to petition, and petition only, is the proper method to apply for relief; because we should then be asking a favor, and not claiming a right." However, for Whigs and those committed to commonwealth ideology writ large, the situation touched on foundational concepts of the rights of mankind. Hence, "by the law of nature and our constitution, we are," Washington argued, "indubitably entitled to" resist with more active measures.²⁸

Despite his rhetoric, Washington contended "if we owe money to Great Britain, nothing but the last necessity can justify the non-payment of it." Here, Washington illuminated his

²⁸ George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 20 July 1774, *WGW*, 3:230-233, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

internal tension. Virtue, an ideal of significant importance for Washington, required the legal payment of debt while the “voice of mankind” supported perfection of the British constitution. Simultaneously, in the midst of those competing interests, parliament seemed committed to derailing the reconciliation process.²⁹

The discourse between Fairfax and Washington demonstrated the nature of political debates in the colonies, especially within Virginia’s circle of elites. Some, like Fairfax, favored the use of legal mechanisms to reconcile with parliament, while others, like Washington, saw the opportunity to advance their cause while also preserving liberty slowly and methodically slipping away. Where social and political tension emerged between traditional institutions and new ideations of liberty in Virginia, political radicalism in New England fixated on an existential threat.

The threat of a standing army generated powerful negative affect throughout the colonies but proved especially powerful in New England. Historians James Kirby Martin and Mark Lender cited the emotive words of an American writer in 1774 to make the point. The writer stated, “the MONSTER or a standing ARMY [represents] a plan...systematically laid, and pursued by the British ministry, near twelve years, for enslaving America.”³⁰ A standing army, as Bernard Bailyn suggested, represented to colonists the pernicious and aggressive nature of government in pursuit of domination.³¹ For twelve years, the constabulary force left by parliament in North America had engendered fear and provided a target of opportunity for political energy and activism.³² Though

²⁹ George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 20 July 1774, WGW, 3:230-233, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

³⁰ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982), 20.

³¹ Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 56-8.

³² Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 20-28.

the sentiment directed toward standing armies smacked of hyperbole, it resonated with the deep distrust and antipathy that emerged between parliament and the New England colonies. In the late 1770s, Benjamin Franklin, a lauded intellectual and anglophile among colonial activists, attempted to divert popular colonial fear and mistrust away from the parliamentary government as a whole and toward a particular individual, the Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson. Franklin believed he could buy time to ease strained parliamentary-colonial relations by shifting blame for any malfeasance in executive management to Hutchinson through the publication of Hutchinson's private letters. Franklin got it wrong. The distribution of Hutchinson's private correspondence, when viewed through the lens of Whig ideology and tainted by the presence of the ministerial army, only exacerbated the rupture between crown and colony.³³ The proximity of Parliament's army, and in turn, the perceived threat to colonial liberty in New England added an almost frenetic political energy to the environment. In contrast, political ideology emerged differently in rural Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvanians connected with commonwealth ideology and recognized the need, as historian Gregory Knouff put it, of "balancing order and liberty in a virtuous society."³⁴ However, diverse demographics, the existence of rural and urban centers, and a significant distance from a ministerial power base, shaped the interests and conclusions of Pennsylvanians in different ways and for different reasons. Knouff suggested that western settlers in Pennsylvania first connected with the resistance movement after the Proclamation of 1763 that "forbade Anglo-American settlement west of the Alleghenies."³⁵ The Proclamation, Pennsylvanians believed, threatened the

³³ Bailyn, "What Were the Key Issues in the Revolution?," 10.

³⁴ Gregory T. Knouff, *The Soldiers Revolution: Pennsylvanians in Arms and the Forging of Early American Identity* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 24.

³⁵ Knouff, *The Soldiers Revolution*, 25.

economic and personal interests of rural communities. Further, Philadelphia, the economic center of the colony, emerged as the core of resistance to parliamentary authority after the Stamp Act, Townsend Duties, and Tea Act exacerbated the plight of the urban underclass during the 1760s and 1770s.³⁶ Pennsylvanians connected the concept of liberty with economic opportunity. Gradually, as Parliamentary encroachment increased, rural and urban Pennsylvanians generally concluded that Parliament threatened the basic economic rights of the region. Knouff cited an essay written in 1773 targeting artisans and skilled laborers in Pennsylvania that raised several concerns:

The point of the question is whether we have property of our own or not? Whether our property and the dear earned fruits of our labor, are at our own disposal or shall be wantonly wrested from us by a set of luxurious, abandoned, and piratical hirelings to be appropriated by them to increase the number of such infamous pensioners and support their unlimited extravagance?³⁷

Where New Englanders made a connection to the existential threats of parliamentary authority vis-à-vis a standing army in their communities, Pennsylvanians connected largely with threats to their economic liberty and freedom. By 1775, Whig ideology imbued the revolutionary movement with zeal, but political identity clouded a unified revolutionary outcome.

The expansive geography and diverse religio-cultural traditions of the colonies produced a disaggregated political identity. Political identity is tricky business. For political scientist Rogers Smith, the challenge in constructing political identity, from a holistic perspective, is that

though no political “people” is natural or eternal, the forging of senses of peoplehood never takes place de novo, in a state of nature. Aspiring leaders always confront populations endowed, individually as well as collectively, with a great variety of senses of membership, identity, and affiliation, with entrenched

³⁶ Knouff, *The Soldiers Revolution*, 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 28.

economic interests, political and religious beliefs, historical and cultural attachments, and animosities.³⁸

Colonial experience connected with many of these obstacles and produced a disaggregated political identity.

In an analysis of Pennsylvania militia during the revolutionary period, Knouff suggested “provincial British subjects in the 1760s and 1770s viewed their communities as combinations of physical spaces and perceived group memberships...one’s locale was the fundamental departure point for identifying one’s place in the Anglo-American world.”³⁹ This pervasive localism established classic zero-sum gain competitions and inter-colonial conflict. Don Higginbotham noted

most colonies quarreled with their neighbors over boundaries. New Yorkers and New Hampshireites fought over Vermont. Virginia and Pennsylvania set up overlapping counties in what eventually became southwestern Pennsylvania. Connecticut also challenged Pennsylvania’s boundary claims ... American loyalties in the mid-eighteenth century belonged first of all to their individual colonies or to the mother country, not to British-America in some collective sense.⁴⁰

In the mid-eighteenth century, despite the presence of external security threats, nominal political unity in colonial America remained elusive and revealed the power of local identity and inter-colonial distrust. Historian L.K. Matthews, in a description of the long and fruitless legacy of inter-colonial cooperation, noted that “between 1690 and 1748 various plans for colonial union against French and Indian enemies had been suggested, beginning with the scheme of Jacob Leisler and William Penn, and continuing with such projects as those of Robert Livingston and

³⁸ Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34.

³⁹ Knouff, *Soldiers’ Revolution*, 2.

⁴⁰ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 3.

Daniel Coxe.”⁴¹ By 1754, in response to a deteriorating colonial security situation vis-à-vis the Six Nations and French Canada, Benjamin Franklin attempted to construct a loosely associated political apparatus amongst the colonies with his Albany Plan of Union. Colonies would share costs associated with defense and send delegates to meet in conference with an intent to craft uniform defense policy in conjunction with Parliament. In the background, Franklin hoped to reduce inter-colonial discord. Franklin suggested in 1750, “Perhaps if the council were to meet successively at the capitals of the several colonies, they might thereby become better acquainted with the circumstances, interests, and strengths, or weakness...of all...for a preference [of meeting place] might create jealousy and dislike.”⁴² It seemed like a reasonable plan for a reasonable purpose. However, even external observers in Parliament knew the Plan of Union was dead on arrival. Alison Gilbert Olson believed the Plan of Union failed because “no colony would make financial sacrifices demanded by commissioners of other colonies. At best the colonial assemblies might water down their quotas beyond all utility...this argument was strengthened (ironically) by the news of Washington’s defeat on the Ohio after a month’s siege when every other colony had refused to send aid to his Virginia militia.”⁴³ The demise of Franklin’s Plan of Union and conduct of the colonies revealed the deep rooted distrust and suspicion prevalent on the continent, notably between the Northern and Southern colonies.⁴⁴ Change required time, experience, and the application of effective leadership in the colonies. In this regard,

⁴¹ L. K. Matthews, “Benjamin Franklin’s Plans for a Colonial Union, 1750-1775,” *The American Political Science Review* 8, no. 3 (August 1914): 394.

⁴² Matthews, “Benjamin Franklin’s Plans for a Colonial Union, 1750-1775,” 395.

⁴³ Alison Gilbert Olson, “The British Government and Colonial Union, 1754,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 17, no. 1 (January 1960): 30.

⁴⁴ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 3; Don Higginbotham, *The War for American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practices, 1763-1789* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 7-9.

Washington's perspective and leadership proved an outlier.

Prior to 1776, Washington had never declared his support for an independent, unified political people in North America. Though, as has been suggested, an emergent American identity seemed to form in the colonies before the actual revolution, the course and destination of such an identity remained clouded. John Ferling noted that

Many were convinced that disunity among the colonists would be Washington's greatest problem, perhaps the cause of his undoing. In London, Frederick Lord North, the prime minister, and his cabinet had gone to war supremely confident of victory...they believed not only that colonists were strangers to one another, but that they were fatally divided by competing interests.⁴⁵

However, Ferling added that Washington held a unique, inter-colonial perspective, and was "well in front of the thinking of most Americans" in terms of unity.⁴⁶ Washington's personal narrative and experiences led early-American historian Don Higginbotham to speculate as to Washington's personal vision and objectives during those early months of the conflict.

Higginbotham's analysis is important and worth citing at length:

[Washington's] extensive travels in the colonial West, his military service in the Seven Year's War with British and colonial forces, his journeys on the Atlantic seaboard as far north as Boston, and his deepening involvement in the resistance movement in the decade prior to Lexington and Concord gave him a high-ground or continental perspective on the thirteen colonies unknown to virtually every member of the Continental Congress.⁴⁷

As early as 3 July 1775, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress lauded Washington and his "Zeal for the common Cause of America, and Compassion for the Distresses of this Colony" (Massachusetts). The Provincial Congress added their esteem that Washington would "hazard your Life, and to endure the fatigues of War, in the Defence of the Rights of Mankind, and for the

⁴⁵ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 90.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁷ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 8.

good of your Country.”⁴⁸ By “Country” it surely meant Virginia, as most delegates who supported the cause of Boston and New England against Parliamentary forces calculated the implications of armed struggle for their own colonies. However, Washington’s reply was subtle and telling of a man with a different vision, consistent with both Higginbotham’s and Ferling’s analysis. Washington lauded that Massachusetts “has sacrificed all the Comforts of social and political Life, in Support of the Rights of Mankind, & the Welfare of our *common* (emphasis added) Country.”⁴⁹ In a social world where colonists, even political elites sent to Philadelphia in the Continental Congress, maintained a powerful connection to their local communities and regional identity, it is remarkable that the principle military leader of the revolution possessed such a unique inter-colonial mindset.⁵⁰ Washington had experienced the consequences of disunity when the Albany Plan of Union failed, he had seen and explored parts of the continent unknown to his peers, and had lived out an idealized vision of the emergent American identity as informed by commonwealth ideology. Where Washington connected so deeply with ideology of the era, and demonstrated behavior congruent with that ideology, his unique perspective regarding political identity and the future political condition of the continent proved invaluable to the revolutionary cause. His unique perspective, however, did not alter the scope of Washington’s

⁴⁸ Address from the Massachusetts Provincial Congress to George Washington, 3 July 1775, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Philander D. Chase, vol. 1, June-September 1775 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 52. [Hereafter *PGWR*, 1:].

⁴⁹ George Washington to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 4 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:59; Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 90. Ferling identified Washington’s particular use of the phrase “our common Country” in his response to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, the Bay Colony’s language slightly modified, to express his perspective.

⁵⁰ Longmore, *Invention of George Washington*, 188-189. Longmore makes a similar observation of Washington’s use of the word “Country” as it applied to the whole continent and not an individual colony. Longmore cites Washington’s attempt to implore Brigadier General John Thomas of Massachusetts to remain in the service of the Continental Army despite a perceived insult from the Continental Congress. Washington wrote Thomas on 23 July 1775.

future burden.

The structural similarities between the security and political situation in 1754 and the outbreak of open conflict, just twenty years later, indicate the depth of the challenge laid at Washington's feet. In 1754, unable to jettison the baggage of political identity, the colonial assemblies had rejected nominal political union in the presence of external threats. In 1775, the Second Continental Congress and Washington would need to maintain a coalition in the presence of external threats to political liberty and simultaneously establish political norms to effect a future political consolidation, one that had eluded Franklin. To further complicate matters for Washington, ideology and identity influenced the military traditions of the colonies.

The militia system, heavily influenced by political ideology and identity, produced a unique military tradition in the colonies. The militia system stemmed from the prevalent security threats and isolation of the colonies in North America. Colonists knew that no white knight from afar would arrive in their time of trouble. They were on their own. As Don Higginbotham pointed out, "the charter of Massachusetts Bay made clear, the inhabitants alone were 'to encounter, expulse, repell and resist by force of armes, as well by sea as by lands' an attempt to invade or destroy their community."⁵¹ From that basic security reality, the militia system evolved into a foundational social and political institution throughout the colonies. However, it was not monolithic.

The composition of militia units reflected the nature of their mission and the social structure supporting them. John Shy, in *A People Numerous and Armed*, challenged the idea of a static task-oriented military institution in colonial North America. Shy suggested "that the early American militia was a more complicated—and more interesting—institution...[in that] it varied from province to province..., changed through time as the military demands placed upon it

⁵¹ Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 1.

changed, and that these variations and changes were of some historical importance.”⁵² From roughly 1650 to 1750 militia assignments expanded from local defense to include expeditionary tasks. As the military nature of the mission changed, so did the size, social composition, and general effectiveness of militia units change.⁵³ In other words, colonial militias traced their origins to the basic security needs of their colonies, but overtime the militias came to represent social institutions deeply connected to local communities. Militia structure, depending on its mission, expressed that reality.⁵⁴ Militia units tasked with local defense represented the middle to upper-middle class of the community.⁵⁵ Those in command tended to represent the more well-to-do since the “the deferential character of the late colonial society ... accepted the leadership of their socioeconomic betters in the officer-grade ranks.”⁵⁶ In contrast, “heavy combat and major offensive operations, such as those conducted during the French and Indian War, had not drawn so heavily on [middle class] militia as on the unprivileged and downtrodden who had been converted into quasi-regulars in arms.”⁵⁷ For colonial militia, form followed function and was deeply connected to identity and social structure, two variables Washington would need to manage in the ensuing Revolution. In addition to the complex social component of the militia system, practical experience, though a mixed bag, generally supported the narrative that espoused the superiority of colonial militia.

⁵² John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 31.

⁵³ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 38-40.

⁵⁴ Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 18-19; Higginbotham, *War for American Independence*, 10-11.

⁵⁵ Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

Washington's personal experience in 1755 reinforced the ideologically nested belief that militia forces were superior to regular forces, despite his desire for a regular-army commission. Under the command of British General Edward Braddock, Washington and elements of the Virginia Regiment, along with a large force of British regulars, embarked on a mission to capture French Fort Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio River.⁵⁸ The ensuing disaster shaped the future leader of colonial forces. British regulars, unaccustomed to hit-and-run bush fighting tactics collapsed under pressure in the field. Washington's Virginia militia performed better, though the defeat was almost total. On reflection, Washington heaped praise on his men from Virginia and seethed with anger toward British regulars. "The Virginians," he wrote to Virginia Governor Robert Dinwiddie, "behavd like Men, and died like Soldier's...I believe that out of 3 Companys that were there that Day, scarce 30 [men] were left alive...[British regulars] behavd with more cowardice than it is possible to conceive...they broke and run as Sheep pursued by dogs; and it was impossible to rally them."⁵⁹ Braddock's defeat and the contrasting behavior of militia versus regulars only exacerbated the ideologically motivated derision of regular forces and standing armies. Colonial publishers flooded the marketplace with invectives for regulars and romanticized support for the noble colonial militia.⁶⁰ Paul Longmore indicated that Washington's reputation for heroism emerged in the aftermath of the disaster. Longmore observed, the "applause [for Washington] reverberated in letters of congratulation from Governor [of Virginia] Dinwiddie,

⁵⁸ Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 8.

⁵⁹ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, 18 July 1755, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 1, 1745 – 1756 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931) accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

⁶⁰ Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 10-11.

William Fairfax, Councillor Philip Ludwell, and other members of Virginia's ruling class."⁶¹ The event revealed the power of narrative and its influence on the social system. Washington, however, continued to serve with forces from Virginia and his practical experience led him to form different conclusions regarding the value of militia forces.

Washington's personal experience during the French and Indian War freed him from the blinding influence of political ideology and narrative. When tasked to construct, occupy, and defend a line of forts of some 350 miles along the Virginia frontier, Washington "always had several concerns [regarding the militia]: would they be reasonably well armed, would they turn out in adequate strength, and would they remain long enough to be useful?"⁶² Washington spent much of the rest of his colonial military career, as it was, dealing with the headaches associated with employing the virtuous citizen-soldier.⁶³ Desertions, civilian-military discord, inter-colonial rivalry, and outright rebellions plagued Washington's campaign in command of both Virginia and Maryland militia.⁶⁴ James Kirby Martin summarized Washington's experience well when he wrote, "[Washington] did not question the inherent character of the citizen-soldier, but past experience had convinced him that virtue and moral commitment were not so important in sustaining soldiers in combat as rigorous training, regimen, and discipline."⁶⁵ In 1757, Washington reminded his subordinate officers, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small

⁶¹ Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington*, 28.

⁶² Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17-31.

⁶⁴ Freeman, *Washington*, 90-106.

⁶⁵ Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 45-46.

numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.”⁶⁶ Washington’s experience with the Virginia militia illuminated the practical requirements of efficient military power in colonial America. However, the modification of a system viewed by many to represent both the strength and virtue of colonial society would prove a daunting task for Washington.

The Awakening of a Continent

In the roughly twelve years prior to open military resistance, British parliamentary conduct sowed the initial seeds of colonial unity at the nexus of ideology and identity. In 1764, Parliament levied the Sugar Act, a more robust and sweeping version of the Sugar and Molasses Act of 1733. Later, in 1765, Parliament subjected the colonies to both the Stamp Act and the Quartering Act. From Parliament’s perspective, such measures spoke to fiscal reality. Britain’s national debt burgeoned to £130 Million pounds sterling from 1754 to 1763.⁶⁷ The Seven Years War drained British coffers, and the future defense of the colonies required financing. Regardless of Parliament’s intent, taxation policy and associated political controversies produced unintended consequences. By 1770, the Boston Massacre reverberated within the Whig establishment. With almost reckless abandon, Parliament encouraged and supplied Whig ideologues with all the propaganda they could muster. By 1773, the Boston Tea Party, as an act of open defiance, compelled Parliament to fixate attention on that New England trading hub with what, tellingly, Parliament described as the Coercive Acts and colonists described as the Intolerable Acts of

⁶⁶ George Washington to All the Captains of Companies, 29 July 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 2, 1757 - 1769 (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 114, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

⁶⁷ Freeman, *Washington*, 154.

1774.⁶⁸ Parliament's heavy-handed political tactics made the cause of liberty and its defense a very real and growing issue throughout the colonies.⁶⁹ In 1774, Samuel Adams described the crux of the Intolerable Acts and lamented,

This Town [Boston] has received the Copy of an Act of the British Parliament, wherein it appears that we have been tried and condemned, and are to be punished, by the shutting up of the harbor and other marks of revenge, until we shall disgrace ourselves by servilely yielding up, in effect, the just and righteous claims of America...The people receive this cruel edict with abhorrence and indignation. They consider themselves as suffering the stroke ministerial—I may more precisely say, Hutchinsonian vengeance, in the common cause of America.⁷⁰

In 1774, far removed from the perceived physical threat of the standing army in Boston, a young member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, Thomas Jefferson, recorded how he and several allies intended to change the local legislative agenda. Their aim was to “boldly take an unequivocal stand in the line with Massachusetts...under conviction of the necessity of arousing our people from the lethargy into which they had fallen.”⁷¹ Jefferson was a more radical Whig intellectual than Washington and many of his colleagues. However, the aggregate impact of the Intolerable Acts ostensibly pushed more conservative members of the House of Burgesses toward

⁶⁸ “The American Revolution, 1763-1783: The Colonies Move Toward Open Rebellion, 1773-1774,” *Library of Congress*, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/amrev/rebelln/>. The Library of Congress provides an excellent resource for outlines and summaries of critical events in American history.

⁶⁹ Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 17-24; Rubert Hughes, *George Washington: The Rebel and The Patriot, 1762-1777* (New York: William Morrow, 1927), 201-15.

⁷⁰ Samuel Adams to James Warren, 14 May 1774, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, vol. 3, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing (Nabu Press, 2010), 124, Kindle. Adams referenced Governor Hutchinson, the target of Ben Franklin's unsuccessful attempt to protect the relationship between Parliament and the colonies.

⁷¹ James Miller Leake, “The Virginia Committee System and the American Revolution” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1914): 144; quoted in Hughes, *George Washington: The Rebel and The Patriot*, 201.

the radical camp. Robert Nicholas Carter, on 24 May 1774, motioned his fellow Virginians in the House of Burgesses to support the plight of Massachusetts with a day of fasting and prayer set for 1 June, the same date Parliament intended to shut down Boston's harbor by force of arms. The Virginia house ratified the motion and in an act of political misjudgment, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, proceeded to dissolve it. Dunmore's actions pushed a middle colony caught in the tension between traditional British identity and a more radical conception of American identity squarely toward the radicals. Meeting at the Raleigh Tavern, the now extra-legal body adopted an official statement outlining their position:

We are further of opinion, that an attack, made on one of our sister Colonies, to compel submission to arbitrary taxes, is an attack made on all British America, and threatens ruin to the rights of all, unless the united wisdom of the whole be applied. And for this purpose, it is recommended to the Committee of Correspondence, that they communicate, with their several corresponding committees...to meet in general congress.⁷²

From letters and speeches, Washington personally supported the resistance in Boston. Washington earned bona fides with other future revolutionary leaders when he promised to "raise one thousand men, subsist them at my own expense, and march myself at their head for the relief of Boston."⁷³ John Adams recalled in his autobiography an assessment of Washington's words "as the most eloquent speech at the Virginia Convention that ever was made."⁷⁴ Washington's rhetoric helped secure his nomination as a delegate to the Continental Congress. Where once distrust and discord permeated inter-colonial conduct, a sense of cooperation and shared interest, at least among political elites, emerged in response to Parliament's political ineptness.

⁷² Freeman, *Washington*, 200-201.

⁷³ *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, vol. 2 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 360. This is a second hand quotation. John Adams dined with a Mr. Lynch while on a visit to Philadelphia. Mr. Lynch recounted the story and the quotation to Mr. Adams who subsequently recorded it in his autobiography.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Washington, as of 1774, though he supported New England's defiance of parliamentary actions, occupied political middle ground. As his actions at the Virginia House of Burgesses demonstrated, Washington was committed to the cause of liberty, but like many in Whig political circles, there were limits to Washington's political goals. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed that the Continental Congress authorize the formation of a continental wide militia force during the First Continental Congress. However, the Congress rejected the plan and instead focused its efforts on coordinated economic resistance.⁷⁵

Colonial leaders, including Washington, were unwilling to escalate the conflict, and certainly unwilling to proclaim support for independence. On 9 October, Washington wrote to Captain Robert Mackenzie, a British officer who had previously served under Washington in the Seven Years' War, and echoed what had become the rallying cry of the Whig establishment. Mackenzie articulated his belief that colonists in Massachusetts were guilty of treason in pursuit of political independence. Washington responded that "when you condemn the conduct of the Massachusetts people, you reason from effects, not causes; otherwise you would not wonder at a people, who are every day receiving fresh proofs of a systemic assertion of an arbitrary power, deeply planted to overturn the laws and constitution of their country." Moreover, Washington asserted that, with respect to an independence movement, "no such thing is desired by any thinking man in all North America; on the contrary, that it is the ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty that peace and tranquility, upon constitutional grounds, may be restored, and the horrors of civil discord prevented."⁷⁶ Washington was emblematic of many colonists. Political ideology and colonial identity rooted in Britishness supported the preservation of rights and

⁷⁵ Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1983), 11.

⁷⁶ George Washington to Robert Mackenzie, 9 October 1774, WGW, 3:245-246, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

liberty, but independence was still a bridge too far for many subjects, including Washington. The politically intemperate behavior of Parliament from 1774 to 1776 changed that sentiment.

Local committees of safety and of correspondence seized the opportunity during those key months to exert “political control over the countryside, a control which the British authorities were never able to shake. This political control included leadership of the militia, and that institution became an instrument of resistance” to Loyalist elements and British regulars.⁷⁷ As Parliament’s authority over the colonies began to fracture, the political process of coalition formation emerged. Colonial opinion and objectives did not emerge or form in unison. Instead, a spectrum of ideologically and regionally derived perspectives weighed on the revolutionary process. In turn, the emergent coalition initially resisted Parliament through coordinated economic policy transitioned to an active conflict. Washington, because of his moderate political position and Whig bona fides was a central figure of the coalition formation process.

Washington’s political influence at the Continental Congress facilitated coalition formation through the construction and transmission of an acceptable narrative amongst political elites.⁷⁸ Delegates at the Congress occupied a range of political positions, from fire-brands and radical leaders like Patrick Henry and John Adams to more conservative participants like Joseph Galloway, and each group viewed events of the day and the desired state of affairs differently. When the Second Continental Congress met on 10 May 1775, two questions defined the scope and nature of discourse between delegates. First, would the colonies unite, at least in purpose, with Massachusetts and defend colonial liberty through force of arms? Second, how would the

⁷⁷ Wright, *The Continental Army*, 11.

⁷⁸ Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25-28.

delegates construct and support a unified system of resistance?⁷⁹ A variety of opinions and levels of commitment manifested themselves in those opening days of the revolution.

For the New England delegation, its proximity to the security threat and the recent bloodshed in Massachusetts certainly elevated and inspired Yankee efforts to push for a unified and committed front. In a plea for support, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress described its resistance as a response to the “sanguinary zeal of the ministerial Army” whose purpose is “to ruin and destroy the Inhabitants of this Colony.” Thus, Massachusetts “passed an unanimous Resolve for thirteen thousand six hundred Men, to be forthwith raised by this Colony; and proposals are made by us to the Congress of New Hampshire, and Governments of Rhode Island and Connecticut Colonies, for furnishing men in the same proportion.”⁸⁰ Colonies in New England answered the call and within weeks some 16,000 militiamen swarmed around Boston to isolate the British regulars.⁸¹ However, though the broad social response to the bloodshed in Lexington and Concord had engendered a sense of energy and commitment, for political elites, even from New England, fears of a standing army and its threat to liberty generated questions about command structure and the future purpose for this new meta-colonial force.

The outbreak of violence in New England placed many delegates from other regions in a difficult position. Joseph Galloway, a Pennsylvania delegate to the Continental Congress and eventual loyalist, testified before the House of Commons after the war and explained the political tension in the extra-legal colonial body. For Galloway, the march toward revolution and

⁷⁹ Jonathan Gregory Rossie, *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975), 1.

⁸⁰ Massachusetts Provincial Congress to American Continental Congress, 3 May 1775, *Journal of Continental Congress, 1774 – 1789*, eds. Worthington C. Ford, et al., vol. 2, May 10, 1775 – September 20, 1775 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 24, accessed March 23, 2015, Library of Congress. [Hereafter JCC, 2:].

⁸¹ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 83.

independence was the work of a radical few. Galloway estimated that “early as the year 1754, there were men in America,” namely “in the towns of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Williamsburg, who held independence in prospect, and who were determined to seize any opportunity that offered to promote it.” The Intolerable Acts gave independence seekers the energy they needed. However, “in 1774, the same men ... whilst they held [independence] tenaciously and religiously in their hearts, they almost to a degree of profanity denied it with their tongues—and all this was done on their knowledge, that the great bulk of the people of North American was averse to independence.” Galloway declared that the independence faction maintained its duplicity to “the very time they declared independence.” Moreover, Galloway recalled that each colonial legislature, almost to the letter, instructed its delegates to the Continental Congress to seek out a redress of grievances from and reunification with Britain. For example, Massachusetts delegates received instructions “to determine on measures for the restoration of union and harmony between Great Britain and the Colonies.” The Pennsylvania legislature tasked delegates “to consult upon the present unhappy state of the Colonies, and to form and adopt a plan for the purposes of obtaining a redress of American grievances..., and for establishing that union and harmony between Great Britain and her Colonies, which is so indispensably necessary to the welfare and happiness of both.”⁸²

Galloway’s account described a Continental Congress influenced by a myriad of perspectives, with some who pushed for strident action and others, in accordance with their political direction, who sought a reasoned approach to preserve both liberty and union with Britain. The spectrum of desired objectives occupied by delegates and their inherent political tension, as described by Galloway, only adds to the substance of Washington’s contribution.

⁸² Thomas Balch, ed., *The Examination of Joseph Galloway, Esq., by a Committee of the House of Commons* (Philadelphia: The Seventy Six Society, T. K. and P. G. Collins, 1855), 4-6.

In the midst of political tension, how does a leader achieve unity of purpose in the political realm? Identity formation requires the transmission and acceptance of a unifying narrative. Rogers Smith, in *Stories of Peoplehood*, suggests that ethically constitutive stories “present membership in a particular people as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are...[because] culture, religion, language, race, ethnicity, ancestry, history, and other such factors are constitutive of their very identities as persons.”⁸³ Smith goes on to suggest “these stories are almost always intergenerational, implying that the ethically constitutive identity espoused not only defines who a person is, but who her ancestors have been and who her children can be.”⁸⁴ Political integration via identity formation, according to Smith, is not a natural or emergent process of social systems.⁸⁵ Instead, leaders construct and use narratives to facilitate the identity formation process. As Smith puts it, “Mass publics rarely if ever act consciously to create a new form of political community unless they are organized to do so through mobilizing leaders.”⁸⁶

Enduring narratives, those with the capacity to form a pluralistic and diverse political community, require those ethically constitutive elements that connect to the underlying ideology and existing identity of a population. Smith offers a way to think about identity formation and how that process occurs as an act of agency through the transmission and internalization of a particular political narrative. For eighteenth-century North America, the language of commonwealth ideology competed with a more traditionally oriented identity of Britishness and

⁸³ Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 65.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36.

its demand for loyalty to crown and Parliament.

Smith identifies Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* of 1776 as an example of an ethically constitutive story required for the formation of a political people.⁸⁷ Paine's work certainly meets Smith's criteria, and, in fact, Washington recognized Paine's rhetoric and its ability to affect "a powerful change...in the minds of many men."⁸⁸ However, the aggregate effect of commonwealth ideology, with its broad diffusion and vision of the future, enabled formation and transmission of an ethically constituted story before the influence of *Common Sense*. Put another way, Paine authored *Common Sense* as a narrative distilled from a broad emergent identity in the social system of the colonies. Before the outbreak of open conflict, that emergent identity, without the guiding force of a mobilizing leader or fully developed narrative, expressed itself in various ways throughout the colonies. In the process, colonists constructed their own versions of the desired trajectory of political change, fixated on different threats to their liberty, and negotiated the inherent tension between the established political order and a new American identity in its embryonic form. Washington emerged as the mobilizing leader commonwealth ideology required to become a more potent and unifying element of colonial politics. However, before the Congress selected Washington as commander of the Continental Army, tension shifted in favor of those who supported a hard line against Parliament as the conflict widened and the issue of military leadership boiled to the surface.

The acceleration of the conflict placed the Continental Congress and the future of the cause in a precarious position. By mid-April, Parliament had ordered four regiments to New York

⁸⁷ Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 7, 43, 93; Smith describes *Common Sense* as "inviting, positive stories of economic and political worth."

⁸⁸ George Washington to Joseph Reed, 1 April 1776, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 4, October 1775 – April 1776 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 455, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. [Hereafter WGWS, 4:].

in an attempt to bisect the northern colonies. Those in New York were alarmed. Congress implored local authorities remain on the defensive.⁸⁹ However, on 10 May a small force raised by Massachusetts and Connecticut crossed into New York and attacked and captured Fort Ticonderoga. In the process, this brazen attack led by colonels Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, seriously complicated the political discourse between the colonies and Parliament.⁹⁰ When news reached the Congress on 17 May “New Englanders...readily appreciated the strategic importance of [Fort Ticonderoga’s] capture. They were pleased with the political significance of the move.”⁹¹ For those moderates in the Congress, events indicated things were spiraling out of control. The Continental Congress maintained that a war of defense was, in aggregate, politically desirable.⁹²

However, in the midst of the political maneuvering between the Continental Congress, Parliament, British fielded forces, and militia expeditions in northern New York, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress demanded the Continental Congress take a position on the future of the conflict.⁹³ Would the Continental Congress recognize the Massachusetts assembly as the legitimate civil government of the colony, and if so, would the Congress support the army assembled outside Boston?⁹⁴ The ability to wage and control a defensive war, both militarily and politically ended quickly. Many delegates, with the attacks on Fort Ticonderoga in mind, feared

⁸⁹ Resolution of the Continental Congress, 15 May 1775, *JCC*, 2:52; Continental Congress to New York Committee of One Hundred, 16 May 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, eds. Paul H. Smith, et al., vol. 1, August 1774 – August 1775 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1976-2000), 353. [Hereafter *LDC*, 1:].

⁹⁰ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 84.

⁹¹ Rossie, *Politics of Command*, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

New Englanders were dragging the colonies into an unwanted war. In contrast, New Englanders, along with a few strident political allies from other colonies, were ready for action.

Once again, Richard Henry Lee brought a motion before the Continental Congress that the crisis around Boston required a continental army. This time, the “motion received some support from all elements of the political spectrum, but it also faced opposition.”⁹⁵ Though colonial representatives to the Congress embraced a more forceful position than pure economic resistance, there were concerns that the military situation could spiral out of control. Those fears were not unfounded.

The Massachusetts Provincial Congress and the Bay Colony’s military leader General Artemas Ward, had crafted a comprehensive plan for the development and deployment of a substantial military force in New England well before the Second Continental Congress had even considered an inter-colonial force. The Massachusetts plan “called for a New England army of 30,000 men, of which Massachusetts would furnish 13,600.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress coordinated their effort with other New England colonies. The “call for a joint army of observation was answered by the three other New England Colonies – New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.”⁹⁷ The swarm of militia that surrounded Boston demonstrated “nearly two centuries of American colonial experience,”⁹⁸ in both a military and social context. The Army that gathered was, in fact, a “collection of separate armies. The forces raised by each of the New England colonies in response to Massachusetts’ call for assistance arrived piecemeal and were assigned positions and responsibilities around Boston according to

⁹⁵ Wright, *The Continental Army*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

the needs of the moment.”⁹⁹ New England, in the minds of some delegates, was playing with fire. A disorganized and undisciplined force in the presence of British regulars could generate unintended and unrecoverable consequences.

This environment accentuated the need to place a mobilizing leader, one whose martial spirit and Whig bona fides could placate New Englanders, and simultaneously assuage fears of unchecked radicalism. By the end of May 1774, a loose coalition of politically disparate colonies, bound by the actions of a perceived external threat, set forth on a full-fledged military conflict.

Conditions and context, not some grand design, thrust the Continental Army on the American Revolution. The ideological foundations, political identity, and accepted colonial military traditions influenced every aspect of the army around Boston, from its command and control structure, its organization and complement, and to whom it would remain obedient. In that chaotic, highly political environment, Congress laid the mantle of military leadership on George Washington. Washington quelled fears of military dictatorship, set aside the influences of provincialism and localism, inspired trust among delegates, and connected with the Whig concepts of liberty, virtue, sacrifice and martial spirit.¹⁰⁰ He was, by any estimation, the perfect choice.

Washington began his political maneuvering immediately. The rapid and undisciplined escalation of hostilities between the colonies and Parliament engendered distrust, especially between the Northern and Southern colonies. As John Ferling suggested, “Some thought the Yankees were radicals, troublemakers who covertly sought independence.... Nearly all also considered it intolerable that an army raised by one colony could, without authorization, march

⁹⁹ Wright, *The Continental Army*, 20; see also Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 46-75; Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 84-89.

into another province.”¹⁰¹ John Adams summarized Washington’s burden: “The Liberties of America depend on him, in a great Degree.” Though Adams believed Washington’s selection would “have a great Effect, in cementing and securing the Union,” Adams noted that maintenance of the political union was an arduous task.¹⁰² In his autobiography, Adams described a Continental Congress divided into camps each anchored in the pursuit of a particular outcome. Adams recalled there was “Not only the Party in favour of the Petition to the King, and the Party who were jealous of Independence, but a third Party, which was a Southern Party against a Northern and a Jealousy against a New England Army under the Command of a New England General.”¹⁰³ That “strong Jealousy” of the New Englanders, “Massachusetts in Particular,” in the Congress prevented, in many ways, the establishment of a unified and concerted political front. “Suspensions were entertained of Designs of Independency—an American Republic—Presbyterian Principles – and twenty other Things” by delegates from other regions. At first, delegates made little progress to assuage the distrust that permeated deliberations. However, time and circumstance slowly demonstrated “the Necessity of pursuing vigorous Measures” to defeat ministerial “Designs against” the colonies. Resistance required maintenance of the political union, and guidance of “a great, unwieldy Body.” Leadership in that environment required patience and political acumen. Washington had both.¹⁰⁴

In his first speech to Congress, Washington touched on the major ideological themes of

¹⁰¹ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 84.

¹⁰² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:498.

¹⁰³ John Adams, *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, vol. 3, ed. L.H. Butterfield, et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962), 321.

¹⁰⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:498; Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 41. Higginbotham describes the political diversity of the Continental Congress.

the era and demonstrated his ability to influence the political process. Washington's speech, conduct, and reputation assuaged fears of tyranny, dictatorship, and the potential power of a rogue political general. Washington pledged he would "exert every power...for the Support of the glorious Cause." Washington accepted the command with humility, proclaiming he was not "equal to the Command [he was] honoured with." In a stroke of political genius, Washington also explicitly stated he "did not wish to make any profit" from his new command. Instead, Washington offered to "keep an exact Account of [his] expenses" in the hope that he would receive reimbursement. For delegates at the Congress, the speech made eminent sense.¹⁰⁵

Washington's rejection of a salary spared the Congress debate over one aspect of a hot issue. Charles Lee, perhaps the only other revolutionary with a military resume that could eclipse Washington's, refused to accept a commission in the Continental Army until the Congress guaranteed a particular compensation package. Patrick Henry, Thomas Lynch, and John Adams, reported that Lee "expressed a high sense of the honour done him and assured [the committee] he was ready to render America all services in his power..., But before he entered upon the service he desired a conference with a committee to consist of one delegate from each of the associated colonies, to whom he desired to explain some particulars respecting his private fortune."¹⁰⁶ The Congress, desperate for leaders with significant military experience resolved, "That these colonies will indemnify General Lee for any loss of property which he may sustain by entering into their service, and that the same be done by this or any future Congress as soon as such loss is ascertained."¹⁰⁷ Phillip Papas, in *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee*,

¹⁰⁵ George Washington to the Continental Congress, 16 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:1; see also Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 86-87.

¹⁰⁶ Record of the Continental Congress, 19 May 1775, *JCC*, 2:98.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

pointed out that Lee would lose his estate regardless of the outcome of the conflict while other delegates would only suffer financial and personal disaster after a defeat.¹⁰⁸ Lee made a reasonable argument. However, Lee “demonstrated a lack of political savvy and personal diplomacy. His financial demands contrasted sharply with Washington’s refusal to accept a regular salary.”¹⁰⁹

Representatives differed significantly on this issue. New Englanders, heavily influenced by commonwealth ideology and a fear of personal enrichment through the mechanisms of the state, feared military officers would pursue their narrow interests and take advantage of the situation. John Adams believed that when constituents “come to know the Pay of general officers and others” they would “grumble.” In contrast, Southern delegates, influenced by a cultural familiarity with aristocracy, thought the “amazingly high” (as Adams described them) salaries of generals were, in fact, “vastly too low.” Adams along with Thomas Paine debated the issue with, what Adams described sardonically as “Southern Genius’,” “But in vain.” Washington shielded himself from whatever ideologically charged mudslinging ensued during the pay debate, and in doing so, preserved and enhanced his reputation for humility and virtue amongst delegates.¹¹⁰ Washington’s ability to avoid unnecessary controversy preserved his political potency, commitment to service, perceived subordination, and his uncanny ability to levy the gravity of his personality and presence to capture other delegates in his orbit of personal influence.

Washington’s personal conduct and Tidewater, gentry background bridged the political

¹⁰⁸ Phillip Papas, *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 111.

¹⁰⁹ Phillip Papas, *Renegade Revolutionary*, 111.

¹¹⁰ John Adams to Cotton Tufts, 21 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:529.

divide in the congress. Some historians suggest that Washington's selection as commander-in-chief was inevitable.¹¹¹ The requirement to bridge New England with the Middle, Chesapeake, and Southern colonies all but guaranteed Washington's appointment. However, this analysis cannot overstate the impact Washington's selection had on the tumultuous political process underway in Philadelphia. The structure of the situation encouraged the selection of a Virginian, but Washington's agency and conduct proved unique and instrumental. Adams described Washington as "brave, wise, generous and humane."¹¹² For Eliphalet Dyer, a delegate from Connecticut, there was "no doubt but that [Washington would] render himself very Agreeable & Acceptable to all." Though Dyer wondered whether Washington's service made him more a military expert than some of the New England contenders, "His appointment will tend to keep up the Union & more strongly Cement the Southern with the Northern Colonies, & serve to the removing all jealousies [of an] Army composed principally of New Englanders." It is remarkable that, without exception, delegates to the Continental Congress described Washington as, without sounding grandiose, perfect for the job. Washington's personal qualities shone through and set at ease fears of a dictator in being. For Dyer, Washington was "Adapted to please A New England Army and much better Suited to the Temper & Genius of our People than any other Gent not brought up in that Part of the Country." Dyer declared that Washington was "Clever, & if anything too modest. He seems discret & Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow but Sober, steady, & Calm."¹¹³

In a letter to James Bowdoin Sr., a prominent political figure in the Massachusetts

¹¹¹ John Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 85-86.

¹¹² John Adams to William Tudor, 20 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:518.

¹¹³ Eliphalet Dyer to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., 16 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:496; Dyer to Trumbull, 17 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:500.

Assembly, Massachusetts congressman Thomas Cushing extolled the selection of Washington as Commander in Chief of “American forces.” Cushing advocated that Bowdoin “take notice” of this “compleat gentlemen.” Cushing described Washington as “sinsible, amiable, virtuous, modest, & brave.” Cushing made a sales pitch intended to shape opinion and narrative using Washington’s “agreeable behaviour & good conduct” as selling points that would “give great satisfaction to our people of all denominations.” Cushing made sure to note that the Congress elected Charles Lee as second in command, a decision he had resisted but hoped that would be “agreeable to our people.” Cushing demonstrated the power of messaging during that formative period.¹¹⁴

Perhaps most telling is how delegates who interacted with Washington described him, not publicly where the trappings of politics and civility could influence their evaluations, but in private correspondence with family members. Silas Deane, a Connecticut delegate to the Continental Congress, had never met Washington prior to their mutual service on committees tasked to develop regulations for the newly designated Continental Army. Deane, like most of his colleagues, immediately gravitated to Washington.¹¹⁵ Deane’s letter to his wife, Elizabeth, dated 16 June 1775, is emblematic of Washington’s political and social influence and worth citing at length. Deane stated:

Washington, will be with you soon, elected to that high Office by the Unanimous Voice of all America. I have been with him for a great part of the last Forty eight Hours, in Congress & Committee and the more I am acquainted with, the more I esteem him. He promises Me to call, & if it happen favorably, to spend one Night with You. I wish to cultivate this Gentlemans acquaintance & regard, not from any sinister Views, but from the great Esteem I have of his Virtues, which do not

¹¹⁴ Thomas Cushing to James Bowdoin Sr., 21 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:531.

¹¹⁵ Milton C. Van Vlack, *Silas Deane: Revolutionary War Diplomat and Politician* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), 55-57. Van Vlack quoted the same letter written from Deane to his wife. Additionally, Van Clack observed that Deane served with Washington on a committee for several days. Deane formed his opinions of Washington over that time.

shine in the View of the World by reason of his great Modesty but when discovered by the discerning Eye, shine proportionably brighter. I know You will receive him as my Friend—what is more, infinitely more, his Countrys Freind—who sacrificing private Fortune independant Ease, and every domestic pleasure, sets off at his Countrys call, To exert himself in her defence without so much as returning to bid adieu to a Fond partner & Family. Let Our youth look up to This Man as a pattern to form themselves by, who Unites the bravery of the Soldier, with the most consummate Modesty & Virtue.¹¹⁶

Washington's conduct, speeches, and general reputation garnered allies who, in turn, legitimated Washington's leadership to constituents. It was, to put it bluntly, graceful politics.

Washington's public and private proclamations of reticence to accept command and his humility when faced with the task acquitted well with a Whig worldview.¹¹⁷ Washington had, in his own words to Martha Washington, acquiesced to "That Providence which [had] heretofore preserved, and been bountiful to [him]" and accepted that his appointment was "out of [his] power to refuse...without exposing [his] Character to such censures as would have reflected dishonour" on him.¹¹⁸ Washington assured Martha, "in the most solemn manner, that, so far from seeking this appointment I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it. Washington implored Patrick Henry to 'Remember...what I know tell you: From the day I enter upon the

¹¹⁶ Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, 16 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:494.

¹¹⁷ Longmore, *Invention of George Washington*, 32. Longmore suggested Washington's humility reflected political lessons learned as an aspiring Colonel operating in Virginia politics. Longmore noted "four [political] tactics" employed by Washington when offered command of the Virginia militia that later emerged again, albeit in a more subtle and sophisticated manner, at higher levels of inter-colonial politics. Longmore observed Washington, "carefully observed appearances...protests his inadequacy...avoids actively seeking the job...and makes the offer come to him, rather than promoting himself." Washington employed some of the same language at the Continental Congress. Whether influenced by ambition, commitment to ideology, or some combination of the two, the influence of Washington's political maneuvering remained consistent; Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 86. Ferling makes an observation similar to Longmore.

¹¹⁸ George Washington to Martha Washington, 18 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:510-511.

command of the American armies, I date my fall, and the ruin of my reputation.’”¹¹⁹

Washington, as a young man, was ambitious.¹²⁰ However, reflecting his cultural origins as a Virginia aristocrat, Washington was also concerned with his reputation and the preservation and cultivation of his personal virtue. Washington lamented feeling as if “Imbarkd on a tempestuous ocean from whence perhaps, no friendly harbour is to be found.” However, Washington recognized that his colonial heritage, as a Virginian, shifted the cold geo-political calculus toward colonial unity during a time of tremendous distress. “The partiality of the Congress” coupled with “political Motives, left [him] without a choice” but to honor the “unanimous Voice of the Colonies to the Command of the Continental Army.”¹²¹ Washington’s behavior, his humble reluctance to accept power, his rejection of personal profit, his message of virtue and service, along with his reputation for martial strength, nested so congruently with commonwealth ideology that his appointment to command the new army ended almost all controversy over who should occupy that critical position. Certainly, an emergent security threat engendered a sense of unity amongst delegates. New Hampshire delegates recorded that, “It is impossible to conceive of a greater unanimity in the Colonies, than that which at present subsists, one and all being determined to defend our Rights to the last.”¹²² However, inter-colonial politics

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Rush, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His “Travels Through Life” Together with His Commonplace Book for 1789-1813*, ed. George W. Corner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 113; quoted in *PGWR*, 1:2.

¹²⁰ Longmore, *Invention of George Washington*, 1-16. Longmore describes Washington’s political ambition at the Continental Congress as a continuation of the same type of behavior observed throughout Washington’s life. Longmore suggested “ambition for distinction spun inside George Washington like a dynamo.... Even before the Revolution, that hunger for recognition prodded him to great exertions.”

¹²¹ George Washington to Burwell Basset, 19 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:12-13; see also John Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 89.

¹²² New Hampshire Delegates to Matthew Thornton, 20 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:525.

and rivalry remained a powerful force in the new coalition. A comparison to other general officer appointments reveals George Washington's uniqueness.

The selection of subordinate commanders in the new army generated significant controversy. Washington and his advocates managed the situation carefully to avoid creating a rupture amongst delegates. John Adams described the sensitive and heated disagreements, even within delegations of the same colony, regarding the appointment of general officers. Cushing, Hancock, and Paine all argued vociferously against and generated "a great deal of Trouble, in the Election of [Charles] Lee." Adams expected the controversy to continue with the selection of brigadier generals and that disgruntled representatives would "avail themselves of all the Whims and Prejudices" of constituents influenced by the pervasive localism and political vagaries of the colonies. Adams recalled that during the selection process "there were Prejudices enough among the weak and fears enough among the timid as well as other obstacles from the Cunning" which exacted a political toll among delegates.¹²³ The headaches Adams described existed within his own delegation and barely scratched the surface of the controversy amongst other colonial players.

Command structures, especially amongst multi-national coalitions and allies, generate political controversies. Even within mature alliances and coalitions, the appointment of military commanders and their relative position in the hierarchy of a command structure requires balancing more than strict assessments of military operations. Washington, without any obvious cajoling, subordinated his desires and inputs regarding command appointments for his subordinates in deference to the Continental Congress and its pursuit of an acceptable political process. For the Congress, that political process left delegates bruised and battered. "Nothing has

¹²³ John Adams to Cotton Tufts, 21 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:529; Adams to James Warren, 21 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:519.

given me more Torment,” John Adams remarked, “than the Scuffle We have had in appointing the General officers.” Though Adams “had as high an Opinion of General Lees’ Learning, general Information and especially of his Science and experience in War” as anyone else, he could not ask another New England general, this time Artemas Ward, to “humiliate himself and his Country so far as to serve under” Lee. Thus, the Congress appointed General Ward second in command and General Lee third.¹²⁴ Washington’s deference to civil authority proved critical. The new general, at least initially, lacked the authority to challenge the social nature of the existing militia system from which the Continental Congress created the new army. By subordinating himself to the political process he legitimated the chain of command for a broad constituency and helped codify his reputation as a humble servant of the will of Congress.

Washington’s presence in Philadelphia proved instrumental for the cohesion of political elites during the Continental Congress. In Washington delegates saw a man of the age, a living symbol and embodiment of Whig virtues—a committed republican, an exemplar of public virtue, and a leader imbued with the martial spirit. Additionally, Washington’s political positions, temperament, and the power of his personality, encouraged delegates to accept his leadership and rally support from their constituents. Taken together, all the variables of Washington’s life, when juxtaposed against the social context of the era, established Washington as a remarkable paradox and an actor uniquely positioned to assume the mantle of military leadership. The absence of controversy regarding his selection, when compared to subordinate commanders, only confirms the centripetal power of Washington’s leadership.

Overall, Washington’s time at the Continental Congress served two purposes. First, Washington reinforced political unity and support for the cause at the level of political elites.

¹²⁴ John Adams to James Warren, 20 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:519; John Adams, *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, vol. 3, 324.

Washington benefited from the unofficial sponsorship and endorsements of delegates as he took command of a feared standing army. Second, Washington's time in Philadelphia informed him of the delicate balance of the coalition. No matter how unified delegates seemed, colonies still pursued their own interests.¹²⁵ Washington's knowledge of the political and ideological terrain guided his execution of a dangerous military operation around Boston while protecting the revolution's critical vulnerability: political disunity. Washington succeeded in Philadelphia. However, he was about to embark on his greatest challenge yet.

Washington's Command: The Power of Symbolism, Unity, and Purpose

At the outbreak of the conflict, political elites tapped into the social energy informed by the Whig ideology that permeated the colonies and had unleashed a powerful yet undisciplined martial entity. Historian John Shy summarized the events well, "Within days after Lexington and Concord, 20,000 armed Americans had penned the British Army inside Boston."¹²⁶ Charles Royster described this initial phase of the revolution as the "*rage militaire*," a passion for arms that compelled colonists to action.¹²⁷ Over the next several months, scores of militia from New England to western Pennsylvania, influenced by the ideology of liberty and the political messages of colonial elites, answered the call to defend their sister colony.¹²⁸ What the colonial militia forces possessed in zeal they lacked in discipline, logistics support, and a politically unified

¹²⁵ Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 42. Higginbotham reaches a similar conclusion. Washington's experience in the political arena informed his understanding of the strategic environment.

¹²⁶ John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 126.

¹²⁷ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 25-51.

¹²⁸ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 125-26.

operational approach. During those opening months, Washington exuded what sociologist Barry Schwartz called heroic leadership. As Schwartz described it,

heroic leadership is a form of domination which evokes strong reverential sentiment in the context of fateful enterprises, campaigns, and movements. The heroic leader, then, is not any leader who is revered because of the authority or the personal qualities he possesses, but one who uses these attributes to mobilize people for strenuous efforts to change or maintain existing cultural values and institutional structures.¹²⁹

In this environment, filled with chaos, danger, and energy, Washington accounted for ideology, identity, and military tradition with decisions that influenced the course of the revolution.¹³⁰

Within the social and political context of fear over a standing army's inexorable assault on liberty, Washington developed and nurtured a politically viable civilian-military relationship. Washington set a critical political precedent that acknowledged the Continental Congress as the legitimate source of power within the united colonies and for military subordination to civilian political authority, at great potential cost to the needs of the Continental Army. Beyond the civilian-military relationship, Washington shaped continental military means in pursuit of a unified political goal. Finally, Washington executed an ideologically appropriate operational approach meant to preserve popular support and maintain the army as a symbol of nascent American unity.

¹²⁹ Barry Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (February 1983): 19.

¹³⁰ See also, Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 47-54. Higginbotham described a threefold challenge for Washington. First, Washington intended to create an inter-colonial force. However, the record of inter-colonial military operations remained clouded. Second, the militia system and the attitude of those in the militia remained hostile to the concepts of discipline and order that Washington required. Third, colonial legislatures feared a standing army and, in turn, maintained obtuse positions regarding supply and organization of the Continental Army.

Washington, as he shaped a viable civilian-military relationship, managed public opinion with a purpose. Colonists' fears of standing armies, so deeply ingrained in colonial society, permeated public opinion even in light of the violence committed by the ministerial regulars. The New York Provincial Congress expressed the underlying anxiety of the day. The New Yorkers diplomatically lamented "the unhappy Necessity of taking up Arms to defend their dearest Rights and Privledges," but "rejoice in the Appointment of a Gentleman from whose Abilities and Virtue we are taught to expect both Security and Peace." However, the New York body also hoped that the General would "cheerfully resign the important Deposit committed" to Washington's care and "reassume the Character of our worthiest Citizen."¹³¹

Washington's response demonstrated his ability to calm nerves and reassure supporters using the very same ideologically charged language used to question, if not delicately, his overall intentions. Washington agreed with the New York congress in the "unhappy Necessity" of the cause. Washington's "every Exertion ... will be equally extended to the reestablishment of Peace & Harmony between the Mother Country and the Colonies." Washington went on and reassured the civilians that "when we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen." Success in the defending "American Liberty," Washington extolled, would allow all "to return to our private Stations in the bosom of a free, peaceful, & happy Country."¹³² Washington made a similar address to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and assured the Bay Colony that his "highest Ambition is to be the happy Instrument of vindicating those Rights [of Englishmen], & to see this devoted Province again restored to Peace, Liberty, & Safety."¹³³ Washington ensured his public

¹³¹ Address from the New York Provincial Congress, 26 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:40; see also Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 87-88.

¹³² Address to the New York Provincial Congress, 26 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:35.

¹³³ Address to the Massachusetts Legislature, 4 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:54.

narrative remained consistent and carefully addressed fear of military aggrandizement. Papers in New England and New York reprinted the questions from the Provincial Legislatures and Washington's emphatic responses throughout the region.¹³⁴ The event was a classic example of strategic messaging. Washington simply added to his political credibility and further united the colonies behind him.

As word of Washington's new command spread, the martial spirit that engulfed New England and much of the colonies colored public perception of the commander-in-chief. Barry Schwartz summarized public perception of Washington as:

Washington's ascension to national honor was abrupt. On his way to Boston, where the Massachusetts militia had already begun to hem in the British occupying force, he was repeatedly delayed by enthusiastic crowds. Symbols of his adoration emerged before he even did anything. While Washington was still encamped in Boston, and before even a shot was fired on his command, books were dedicated to him, children were named after him, and ships were named after both him and his wife.¹³⁵

Washington emerged, within the ideological context of revolution, as a lightning rod for political energy. Delegates at the Continental Congress transmitted Washington's narrative back to their home colonies with glowing endorsements. Once again, Washington's martial spirit, virtue, and commitment to liberty resonated with the Whig ideology that already permeated the colonies. Washington's elevation, as described by Schwartz and Higginbotham, placed colonial

¹³⁴ *PGWR*, 1:40.

¹³⁵ Schwartz, *Heroic Leadership*, 21.

legislatures and executives in the middle of a two level political game.¹³⁶ Colonial constituents would object, perhaps vociferously, if a legislature failed to support the new general or if a colonial governor attempted to usurp the general's authority. However, as pointed out by Schwartz, Washington had yet to take any significant actions and the weight of military necessity had yet to burden Washington's decisions. Washington respected local legal systems and turned over to local magistrates men under his command when accused of local crimes.¹³⁷ However, those demonstrations of military power subordinated to civilian authority were at little to no cost. In contrast, Washington's approach to solving his logistics crises, especially during those opening months of the campaign, illuminated Washington's commitment to civilian oversight of military power and reinforced his symbolic and political influence as a virtuous symbol of American liberty.

The challenge for Washington, as Higginbotham pointed out, "was to avoid the kind of controversies that had bedeviled relations between the British army and the colonists in the French and Indian War, controversies involving impressment of supplies and equipment" while campaigning.¹³⁸ Washington, upon departing for his command, immediately beseeched the

¹³⁶ Robert D. Putman, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 434-441. Strategic political leaders negotiate the tension between the acceptable outcomes of audiences. Robert Putman describes a conceptual model for international negotiations as a two-level game. Putman suggests that, "at the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments." Though Putman's analysis of the political process focuses on the tension placed on political leaders between domestic and international audiences, the concept applies to coalition management, especially in times of significant change. To preserve a coalition, a strategic leader engages the overlapping win-sets, or those outcomes actors deem acceptable, of constituents.

¹³⁷ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 36.

¹³⁸ Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 49.

Continental Congress for support in provision and supply. “Powder is so essential an Article,” wrote Washington, “that I cannot help again repeating the necessity of a supply.”¹³⁹ Though Congress formed an army of the “Troops of the United Provinces of North America,” the Congress lacked the authority to directly supply and manage mustered forces.¹⁴⁰ Instead, individual colonies supplied troops and, ostensibly, agreed to equip and provision them. The Continental Congress coordinated and recommended action, but lacked the power to enforce proclamations. This scenario produced a logistical and planning nightmare for Washington and his staff. Provision and supply of Continental forces emerged as perhaps the single most enduring and vexing issue Washington faced, especially in the opening months of the conflict. Washington lamented to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, “I esteem it therefore my Duty to represent the Inconvenience which must unavoidably ensue from Dependence on a Number of Persons for Supplies, & submit it to the Consideration of the Congress whether the publick Service will not be best promoted by appointing a Commissary General for these Purposes.”¹⁴¹ Washington’s commitment to provision his army in a particular politically and ideologically acceptable way, with a deep respect for personal property, is remarkable when compared to Washington’s assessment of the tactical situation around Boston.

Washington described a desperate situation. Around Boston, Washington “found a numerous army of Provincials under very little command, discipline, or order.” In contrast, Washington “found [his] Enemy...strongly Intrenching, and from Accts had reason to

¹³⁹ George Washington to Continental Congress, 25 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:32; see also Freeman, *Washington*, 232-233.

¹⁴⁰ General Orders, 4 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:54; see also Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 90-91.

¹⁴¹ George Washington to John Hancock, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:88.

expect...another attack from them.”¹⁴² Washington described his assessment of the tactical and operational situation to Richard Henry Lee on 10 July 1775. Washington lamented, “Between you and me I think we are in an exceeding dangerous Situation, as our Numbers are not much larger than we suppose...of the Enemy to be; theirs situated in such a manner as to be drawn to any point of attack without our having an hours previous notice of it.”¹⁴³ The military situation was dire. The British regulars possessed interior lines and equivalent personnel numbers. The enemy was, in hindsight, one aggressive decision away from a breakthrough of Washington’s ill-equipped, untrained, undisciplined, and precariously arrayed forces. However, Washington never commandeered, even under military necessity, the supplies he so desperately needed. Instead, Washington used the situation as best he could to engender trust and support from the colonies for their new army.

A letter sent 4 August 1775 to Rhode Island Governor Nicholas Cooke was emblematic of Washington’s diplomatic approach. Washington entreated:

I am now, Sir, in strict Confidence to acquaint you that our Necessities in the Articles of Powder & Lead are so great as to require an immediate Supply – I must earnestly intreat you will fall on some Measures to forward every Pound of each in the Colony which can possibly be spared – It is not within the Propriety & Safety of such a Correspondence to say what I might upon this Subject; it is sufficient that the Case loudly calls for the most strenuous Exertions of every Friend of his Country and does not admit the least Delay – No Quantity however small is beneath notice, & should any arrive I beg it may be forwarded as soon as possible.¹⁴⁴

Washington sent similar correspondence to both the New Hampshire Committee of Safety and Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull on 4 August 1775. The tone of each letter matched Washington’s request to Rhode Island. The dire military situation and political

¹⁴² George Washington to Samuel Washington, 20 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:135.

¹⁴³ George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:99.

¹⁴⁴ George Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 4 August 1775, *PGWR*, 1:221.

sensitivities of the era compelled Washington, the aristocratic Virginian, the new commander of the Continental Army, to labor over banal requests for “Tow Cloths” to make “Hunting Shirts for Men,” along with various other mundane supply shortfalls.¹⁴⁵ Washington believed the political and social context required a softer approach, but his forces paid a heavy price to account for those political and social realities. Unfortunately for Washington, the supply situation only grew worse.

By September, both Washington’s supply disposition and the availability of critical military stores remained critical. Washington attempted to arrange the purchase of “a Quantity of Gun Powder, Lead, & 500 Stand of Arms” from Rhode Island. Washington possessed the power, in a martial sense, to commandeer the supplies. However, he dispatched one of his aides to negotiate their purchase and implored the Rhode Islanders not take “Advantage of the Distresses of their County so as to exact an unreasonable Price.” Military necessity supported aggressive procurement of necessary supplies, but Washington’s politically and ideologically mindful approach constrained his actions. Washington had a similar interaction with New Yorkers.¹⁴⁶

Washington, having received intelligence that “a large Quantity of Powder, & 500 Stand [of] Arms” arrived in New York, immediately requested access to the precious supplies. Washington’s forces had “taken Possession of a Hill considerably advanced towards the Enemy,” but a lack of powder prevented exploitation of that position.¹⁴⁷ In response, the New York Committee of Safety, answering in place of the temporarily adjourned New York Congress, exemplified the precarious security position of all the northern colonies. The Committee stated:

¹⁴⁵ George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, 4 August 1775, *PGWR*, 1:244.

¹⁴⁶ George Washington to Nicholas Cooke, 31 August 1775, *PGWR*, 1:387.

¹⁴⁷ George Washington to New York Legislature, 30 August 1775, *PGWR*, 1:385.

We deplore the Situation of the Army under Your Command; and were our Abilities equal to our Wishes, we should not fail to contribute to Your immediate Assistance and Supply. We are heartily sorry that your Poverty in the necessary Article in Question, prevents You from availing Yourself of the Advantage of Situation you have lately gained. But be assured, Sir, We have not Powder enough for the necessary Defence of this Colony.¹⁴⁸

Despite the military emergency, Washington remained true to his commitment to serve the interests of the Congress and to preserve the liberty of the various colonies. As the struggle continued and Washington's actions matched the political and ideological rhetoric of the age, there were indications of a return on investment from Washington's militarily risky approach. Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut, in a letter dated 15 September 1775, having received intelligence of British activity in the vicinity of his colony, thanked "Divine Providence and [Washington] for this early warning to great care and watchfulness, that so the Union of the Colonies may be settled on a permanent and happy Basis." Trumbull went on, "You may depend on our utmost Exertions for the defence and security of the Constitutional Rights and Liberty of the Colonies, and of our own in particular—none have shewn greater forwardness and thereby rendered themselves more the Objects of Ministerial Vengeance."¹⁴⁹ Washington's disciplined action in the procurement of critical supplies ensured colonial angst remained fixated on British regulars and Parliament. While Washington kept colonial enmity focused on British regulars, he also informally established a political chain of command.

As Don Higginbotham noted:

No rules or guidelines existed concerning the jurisdictional boundaries between Congress and the Revolutionary governments in the colonies ... the concept of congressional primacy, to the extent that the colonies (and later states)

¹⁴⁸ New York Committee of Safety to George Washington, 9 September 1775, *PGWR*, 1:443.

¹⁴⁹ Jonathan Trumbull to George Washington, 15 September 1775, *PGWR*, 1:469.

acknowledge such superintendency from Philadelphia, first received explicit attention from Washington.¹⁵⁰

Washington thus helped ingrain Congressional primacy with two distinct issues, Congress's singular control over the Continental Army compared to the colonial legislatures and the ability of Congress to task military operations and courses of action.

Washington's forces surrounded Boston, but British regulars dominated the sea, allowing them freedom of action to maneuver and raid along the New England seaboard. On 29 July 1775, a group of Massachusetts legislators visited Washington at Cambridge. The representatives arrived "to inform [Washington] of the distress'd Situation of the Inhabitants of the Eastern Parts of this Colony, and know of him, if he can, consistent with his Instructions, and the general Service, order a Detachment there, to prevent the Enemy from Ravaging" the countryside.¹⁵¹ The Continental Congress requested on 18 July that each colony provide for its own defense based on the judgment of individual committees and perceived threats.¹⁵² Washington, with the Continental Congress's wishes and his instructions in mind, replied to James Warren, speaker of the Massachusetts assembly, on 30 July 1775:

Upon referring to my Instructions & Consulting with those Members of Congress who are present as well as the General Officers, they all agree that it would not be consistent with my duty to detach any Part of the Army now here on any Particular Provincial Service. It has been debated in Congress and Settled that the Militia or other Internal Strength of each Province is to be applied for Defence against those Small and Particular Depredations which were to be expected, & to which they were supposed to be competent ... It would give me great Pleasure to have it in my Power to extend Protection & Safety to every Individual, but the Wisdom of the General Court will anticipate me in the Necessity of Conducting

¹⁵⁰ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 35.

¹⁵¹ Massachusetts House of Representatives Journal, July-November 1775, session 24; quoted in *PGWR*, 1:196.

¹⁵² George Washington to James Warren, 30 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:196.

our Operations on a General and impartial Scale, so as to exclude any first Cause of Complaint & Jealousy.¹⁵³

Washington maintained a similar position in September when he advised General David Wooster, who had received requests for support from the people of Long Island that a “Resolution of Congress” demanded each “Province should depend on its internal Strength.”¹⁵⁴ The orders of Congress superseded any provincial order. Washington preserved the Continental Army as a weapon meant for inter-colonial interests. The Continental Army represented the collective will of the colonies and no entity on the continent could usurp that authority. Washington’s subordination to Congress extended to operational direction.

The Continental Congress recommended particular ways of prosecuting the campaign, informed by a general assessment of the strategic position of the colonies. John Hancock informed Washington that Congress had tasked General Philip Schuyler to “Examine into the State of the Posts at Ticonderoga & Crown Point, and of the Troops Station’d there, as also to Enquire into the Disposition of the Canadians and Indians.”¹⁵⁵ Washington, however, had misgivings about the operational approach suggested by Congress, as it had suggested that Schuyler invade Canada if he deemed it appropriate. The Continental Congress had initially rejected a Canadian invasion.¹⁵⁶ However, by early June the tone in Congress had changed. John Adams, in a letter to James Warren on 7 June 1775, believed Canadians were “not unfriendly” to the Cause and the Native-Americans “intended to be neutral.” However, despite available

¹⁵³ George Washington to James Warren, 30 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:195.

¹⁵⁴ George Washington to David Wooster, 2 September 1775, *PGWR*, 1:407.

¹⁵⁵ John Hancock to George Washington, 28 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:42.

¹⁵⁶ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 94. Ferling discusses, at some length, the relationship between the Continental Congress and Washington concerning a Canadian expedition.

intelligence and the consensus of the Congress, Adams still feared that an invasion from Canada into New York or a Parliamentary incitement of Native American tribes was “such kind of Humanity and Policy as we have experienced, from the Ministry.”¹⁵⁷ Washington was less fearful of a stroke from Canada. On 28 June 1775, Washington wrote General Schuyler, commander of the Northern Department, that he believed “the Canadians [were] very averse to engage in this unnatural Contest.” Instead, Washington worried of political fractures in the war effort. Washington described the “Confusion and Discord [that] reigned in every Department, which in a little Time must have ended either in the Separation of the army or total Contests with one another.”¹⁵⁸ Washington’s assessment of the political terrain upon which the coalition was built convinced him, as historian John Ferling noted, that “strenuous resistance to the Canadian invasion was unthinkable.”¹⁵⁹ Washington learned, both from his time as an inter-colonial military commander and as a delegate to the Continental Congress, that most colonies, especially their provincial legislatures, framed their security interests from a colonial, not inter-colonial perspective. Unity emerged when the security situation dictated, not out of a discernable identity transformation. Military commanders on both sides of the war recognized New York, with its large population, size, and geographic position, as the key to isolating the colonies, especially New England.¹⁶⁰ The coalition would not survive an unanswered existential security threat to a key colony. As a leader informed by the political reality of war, Washington submitted to

¹⁵⁷ John Adams to James Warren, 7 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:453.

¹⁵⁸ George Washington to Major General Phillip Schuyler, 28 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:188-189.

¹⁵⁹ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 95.

¹⁶⁰ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66-80. The Howe brothers, British commanders following General Gage, later articulated this strategy before their joint operations in 1776.

Congressional authority and prevented a significant civilian-military rupture.¹⁶¹ Though Washington subordinated himself to Congressional direction in light of political realities, he also risked changing the military means under his command.

Washington shaped Continental military means in pursuit of a particular political end. The Massachusetts Provincial Congress warned Washington as to what he could expect from the soldiers, such as they were, arrayed around Boston. The Massachusetts representatives praised Washington's "laudable Zeal for the common Cause of America," but warned that his "Zeal" may prove challenged by the task ahead. The Continental Army, heavily derived from New Englanders, lacked "Experience in military Life" and eschewed the formality of "Cleanliness in their Dress." Though local leaders attempted to train and discipline the fledgling force, that task fell squarely to Washington.¹⁶² Washington's response demonstrated an appreciation for the importance of political support and the fragility of the situation.

Washington assured Massachusetts that "Whatever Deficiencies there may be, will I doubt not, soon be made up by the Activity & Zeal of the Officers, and the Docility & Obedience of the Men." In Washington's mind, the army required discipline if it, and in turn the legitimacy of the nascent political movement, were to survive. Washington's experience soldiering with Virginia militia certainly colored his appreciation of the challenge. The Commander in Chief wasted no time. Washington "required and expected that exact discipline be observed." An Army without discipline created "Hazard, Disorder and Confusion" and its endeavors would "end in shameful disappointment and disgrace."¹⁶³ Washington confided to Richard Henry Lee, "The

¹⁶¹ John Hancock to George Washington, 28 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:42; Richard Henry Lee to George Washington, 29 June 1775, *PGWR*, 1:45.

¹⁶² Address from the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 3 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:52.

¹⁶³ General Orders, 7 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:54.

abuses in this army, I fear, are considerable, and the new modeling of it, in the Face of an Enemy from whom we every hour expect an attack is exceedingly difficult & dangerous.”¹⁶⁴

Washington’s General Orders dated 4 July 1775 demonstrated an understanding of the powerful social and political forces at work in the army and throughout the colonies. Colonial militias identified strongly and drew their legitimacy and obedience from their local communities. However, Washington initially delivered messages to the army around Boston meant to shape identity and purpose with a continental perspective. It was “The Continental Congress,” Washington declared, that assumed command and authority over “all the Troops of the several Colonies, which have been raised, or which may be hereafter raised, for the support and defence of the Liberties of America.” Washington extolled the creation of the “Troops of the United Provinces of North America.” Washington “hoped that all Distinctions of Colonies [would] be laid aside; so that one and the same spirit may animate the whole, and the only Contest be, who shall render, on this great and trying occasion, the most essential service to the great and common cause.”¹⁶⁵ Washington’s quest for unity and discipline in the Continental Army had begun.

Despite the opinion of senior officers like Charles Lee and Horatio Gates, Washington intentionally shaped the Continental Army to fight a particular type of war. Historian John Hall observed, “Washington conceived of war as a contest of political will, and his apparent preoccupation with confronting the British Army in conventional combat masked a subtler understanding of war than many have acknowledged.”¹⁶⁶ To that end, Washington labored to develop a core of conventional military power, augmented by the innate strengths of colonial

¹⁶⁴ George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:99; see also Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 97.

¹⁶⁵ General Orders, 7 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:54.

¹⁶⁶ John W. Hall, “An Irregular Reconsideration of George Washington and the American Military Tradition,” *The Journal of Military History* 78, no. 3 (July 2014): 967.

militia.¹⁶⁷ Washington's efforts balanced the practical requirements of military resistance with an eye toward the political future of the revolution. In contrast, Charles Lee, a former British officer with years of practical experience, saw strength in the militia's ability to wage a war of the people.¹⁶⁸ Gates agreed with Lee's position and both men were, at least initially, pleased with the colonial forces arrayed around Boston. When Lee arrived in Cambridge he declared, "Upon my Soul, the materials here (I mean the private men) are admirable." Gates echoed the assessment and said he "never desired to see better soldiers than the New England men made."¹⁶⁹ Washington was less than impressed.

On 7 July 1775, Washington made his position on inter-colonial rivalry and discord known. Washington had Captain John Callender of Colonel Richard Gridley's Regiment of Massachusetts Artillery court-martialed for cowardice in the face of the enemy. Moreover, Washington, in reviewing Callender's conduct, trial, and subsequent cashiering, lamented "the fatal Consequences of such Conduct to the army and to the cause of america." Callender's case illuminated many of the systemic problems within the inter-colonial army, especially ruptures in identity and legitimacy. Callender, an artillery officer, retreated with his cannon at Bunker Hill after he realized his ammunition and powder were incompatible with his weapon. General Israel

¹⁶⁷ See also, James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1982). Martin and Lender trace Washington's struggle to construct, despite the social and political obstacles, a military force that could achieve desired political ends. Eventually, Washington employed a nucleus of regulars augmented by militia. However, that army did not emerge until the end of the conflict.

¹⁶⁸ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 126, 133-162.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 10 July 1775, *The Lee Papers, 1754-1811*, vol. 1 (New York: New York Historical Society Collections, 1872), 196; Massachusetts Historical Society, "Journal of Dr. Belknap," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 4 (1858-1860), 83; cited in Paul David Nelson, "Citizen Soldiers or Regulars: The Views of American General Officers on the Military Establishment, 1775-1781," *Military Affairs* 43, no. 3 (October 1979): 127; Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 126.

Putnam ordered Callender back to the line. Callender initially refused, but under penalty of death proceeded back to the line. Callender argued that, as an officer of Massachusetts, he was not obligated to obey General Putman, an officer of Connecticut. From Callender's perspective and informed by the militia tradition and political identity in the colonies, it was a fair argument. Washington had none of it. The survival of the army and the cause, in Washington's mind, depended on unity and the preservation of a combined Continental Army.¹⁷⁰

Washington informed the Continental Congress on 10 July 1775 that "all the General Officers agree that no Dependence can be put on the Militia for a Continuance in Camp, or Regularity and Discipline during the short Time they may stay...The Deficiency of Number, Discipline & Stores can only lead to this Conclusion, that their Spirit has exceeded their Strength."¹⁷¹ Washington went on to couch his reservations and concerns with a ray of optimism. Though it required "no military Skill to judge of the Difficulty of introducing proper Discipline & Subordination in to an Army while we have the Enemy in View ... every Effort will be made which Time & Circumstance will admit. In the mean Time, I have a sincere Pleasure in observing that there are Materials for a good Army, a great Number of able-bodied Men, active and zealous in the Cause & of unquestionable courage."¹⁷² Perhaps Washington penned his assessment gently so as not to offend the newly-associated New England militia and provide a sense of hope. Truth be told, Washington's quest for discipline and unity with the initial iteration of Continental forces proved largely a failure.

¹⁷⁰ General Orders, 7 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:71-74; Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army during the War of the Revolution, April 1775 to December 1783* (Washington, DC: W. H. Lowdermilk, 1893), 113; see also Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition*, 54.

¹⁷¹ George Washington to John Hancock, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:90.

¹⁷² George Washington to John Hancock, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 90-91.

Washington's messaging and leadership failed to diminish the structural problems of the *rage militaire* army. Though, as Don Higginbotham pointed out, many officers "accepted Washington's gospel that they should think of themselves not simply...[from their colony]...but as Americans," most line soldiers did not.¹⁷³ One-year enlistments, the harsh conditions of military life, and the hazards of actual campaigning proved too much for the initial wave of militiamen and, beginning in December of 1775, those forces began their rotation out of the service. However, to Washington's credit, he never altered his position that the American army required a "new modeling."¹⁷⁴ Where some colonial generals, notably Lee, Gates, and Montgomery, saw a need to accommodate immediate military necessity and employ military forces available according to their nature, Washington took the long view.¹⁷⁵ Some historians have suggested that Washington desired command of a traditional or European style standing army to assuage his personal ambitions. Marcus Cunliffe concluded that Washington "did not visualize himself a guerilla leader, a will-o-the-wisp harassing the stolid British like some brigand thief."¹⁷⁶ John Shy suggested, "Washington and other native American leaders stressed a regular army...because they felt a need to be seen as cultivated, honorable, respectable men, not savages leading other savages in a howling wilderness."¹⁷⁷ Washington's ambition surely influenced him, but to chalk up Washington's actions solely or even largely to personal psychology misses the connection between Washington's command decisions and his experience with the political

¹⁷³ Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ George Washington to Richard Henry Lee, 10 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:72.

¹⁷⁵ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 126, 133-162.

¹⁷⁶ Marcus Cunliffe, "George Washington: George Washington's Leadership," in *George Washington's Generals*, George A. Billias, ed. (New York: Morrow, 1964), 11-12.

¹⁷⁷ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 127.

quality of war. As John Shy summarized, “American strategy from 1775 to 1783 was indeed keyed to conventional operations, not simply to...[avoid] the horrors of guerilla warfare, but because a central army visibly helped to meet two acute needs: the need for internal unity, and the need for external support.”¹⁷⁸ This appreciation for the political quality of war also influenced the type of campaign Washington envisioned.

Washington constructed and executed an ideologically and politically appropriate operational approach. Washington’s militia experience, once again, distilled the critical relationship between a military force and the civilian population from which that force draws support. Moreover, Washington identified the political coalition amongst the colonies as a principal source of strength for the revolution. Washington espoused his summation of the political environment to his brother Augustine in a letter dated 31 March 1776. Washington wrote:

It is not sufficient for a Man to be a passive friend and well-Wisher to the Cause ... It is a great stake we are playing for, and sure we are of winning if the Cards are well managed. Inactivity in some, disaffection in others, and timidity in many, may hurt the Cause; nothing else can, for Unanimity will carry us through triumphantly, in spite of every exertion of Great Britain, if link'd together in one indissoluble Bond; this they now know, and are practising every stratagem which Human Invention can devise, to divide us, and unite their own People ... they wish for reconciliation; or in other Words they wish for Peace without attending to the Conditions.¹⁷⁹

Washington’s General Orders issued on 5 July 1775 revealed Washington’s conception of the coming conflict and his responsibility to manage violence toward a political end. Washington required “of all the Officers, that they be exceeding diligent and strict in preventing all invasions and Abuse of private property in their quarters, or elsewhere...every soldier will

¹⁷⁸ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 221.

¹⁷⁹ George Washington to John Augustine Washington, 31 March 1776, WGW, 4:450, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

abhor and detest such practices when he considers, that it is for the preservation of his own Rights, Liberty and Property, and those of his Fellow Countrymen, that he is now called into service.” If Washington’s forces added to the “Distress of those of their Countrymen, who are suffering under the Iron hand of oppression,” then political support for the army and, perhaps, the nominal union itself, could disintegrate.¹⁸⁰ Washington’s assessment of the situation harkened back to his time in command of the Virginia Regiment, where the connection and support of local populations proved critical to his success and survival. Washington’s requirement for disciplined conduct in the coming war stemmed not only from his belief in virtue, but also from an understanding of the challenges ahead. John Shy, in *A People Numerous and Armed*, described a triangularity of the conflict, in which rebels seek every advantage to maintain their connection with the local population while the government often fails to incorporate such a calculation.¹⁸¹ Washington’s approach avoided the depredation of war amongst civilians at a critical time for the revolution. Washington also demonstrated wisdom in his employment of Continental forces.

As the winter of 1775 approached, conditions and political context weighed on Washington. He knew “the Connecticut and Rhode Island Troops stand engaged to the 1st. December only, and none longer than to the 1st. January.”¹⁸² In the face of the enemy, the hazard of changing out significant numbers of personnel was obvious. Additionally, since the beginning of the conflict Congress had pushed for a swift end to the conflict.¹⁸³ John Adams had hoped the colonists would give “a good Account” to Generals John Burgoyne, Henry Clinton, and

¹⁸⁰ General Orders, 5 July 1775, *PGWR*, 1:63.

¹⁸¹ Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed*, 219.

¹⁸² George Washington to John Hancock, 21 September 1775, *WGW*, 3:506, accessed March 23, 2015, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.

¹⁸³ Ferling, *Ascent of George Washington*, 93.

especially that “Wretch” William Howe.¹⁸⁴ Jefferson suggested that the Congress hoped “by a vigorous campaign to dispose our enemies to treaty.”¹⁸⁵ Finally, in an army where logistics and supply were critical from the outset of the campaign, the thought of preserving a large conventional force throughout the winter must have vexed the senior commander in the field. To that end, Washington penned a circular letter, dated 8 September 1775, to his general officers that outlined his concerns regarding changing weather, barracks, provisions, and his seemingly eternal battle to procure ammunition and powder. Those factors induced Washington “to wish a speedy finish” to the present contest. However, Washington warned “not to lose sight of the difficulties—the hazard—and the loss that may accompany the attempt—nor, what will be the probable consequence of failure.”¹⁸⁶ Both military judgment and politics informed Washington’s decision to cancel the attack. The avenue of approach was too narrow for the Continentals to arrive in mass on the lines of the British regulars.¹⁸⁷ More importantly, two political issues weighed heavily on deliberations. First, Washington’s generals recognized Congresses unanswered remonstrations to Parliament as reason enough to delay the attack. Second, how could Washington maintain a durable connection to the people if he was willing to throw away the lives of citizen-soldiers just before the term of their enlistment expired? As the Continental Army prepared for winter quarters, Washington, along with his council of officers, demonstrated the capacity to make operational decisions that incorporated both military and political factors.

¹⁸⁴ John Adams to Joseph Palmer, 20 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:517.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Francis Eppes, 26 June 1775, *LDC*, 1:544.

¹⁸⁶ Circular to the General Officers, 8 September 1775, *PGWR*, 1:432-433.

¹⁸⁷ Freeman, *Washington*, 238.

Conclusions

Washington campaigned with the Continental Army for another eight years after taking command. Remarkably, most of challenges Washington faced, from dire logistics, to poor discipline, insufficient enlistment terms, inter-colonial rivalries, and the maintenance of popular support relationships, all emerged in some degree during the first few months of Washington's command. Even more notable, Washington's approach to negotiate the inherent political complexities that influenced those issues remained consistent throughout the Revolutionary War. Washington diplomatically implored colonial governments for more support and more practical force structure arrangements. Washington labored continuously to instill a sense of discipline and unity in his forces. Washington's power to engage politically, however, started well before he took command of the Continental Army.

The foundation of Washington's political influence rose from his place in the social system of colonial North America. Three threads of social continuity diffused across the social, and in turn, political environment. First, commonwealth ideology permeated every level of colonial society. Washington embodied the cultural and ideological ethos of the age. Second, expansive geography and diverse religio-cultural traditions of the colonies produced a disaggregated political identity. However, Washington's unique personal experience produced an inter-colonial mindset vital to the course of political events during the Revolution. Third, the colonial military tradition, influenced by ideology and identity, represented a social institution not easily modified. Washington's military experience connected the social, political, and ideological trends of the era with the practical requirements of soldiering in eighteenth-century North America.

As colonial resistance transitioned from economic coordination to marital activity, Washington provided a stabilizing effect amongst political elites at the Continental Congress.

Washington's legitimacy stemmed from his moderate public political positions, his connection to the idealized Whig leader, and his innate leadership capacity.

After taking command, Washington capitalized on knowledge of the political terrain he gleaned while at the Continental Congress and executed a politically mindful military operation. Washington supported deeper colonial integration through the construction of a durable and acceptable civilian-military relationship. Washington adapted the forces under his command to produce not only military but political effects. Finally, during his execution of the campaign, Washington framed his operational approach with a holistic perspective that connected the deep political nature of the conflict with his chosen course of action. In doing so, Washington protected what most observers and many colonial commentators believed was the underlying weakness of the revolution: colonial disunity. Overall, Washington stood at the critical nexus of ideology, politics, culture, and military power to affect the outcome of the American Revolution and preserve the nascent political union in those precarious opening months of the conflict.

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