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**The American Revolution: The First Major
Mobilization of a Nation's People**

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Executive Summary

Title: The American Revolution: The First Major Mobilization of a Nation's People

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Thesis: It is the American Revolution, not the French Revolution of 1789, which was the first example of a war being fought through a mobilization of a nation's people, and thus fundamentally different from the wars that had been previously fought at the behest of sovereigns.

Discussion: Lexington and Concord were but a single day in what would be nine years of fighting in the War of American Independence. Nonetheless, that day was a remarkable mobilization of Americans in response to a British patrol. By 1775, the colonies were well within the grips of what has been referred to as the *rage-militaire*, where a collective desire to fight was to be found in every aspect of life in the thirteen colonies. However, the single day in April 1775 and the *rage militaire* did not last; the Continental Army and the militias of each colony were the two organizations that would see the War for American Independence to its end. The fact that the Continental Army consisted of only the poor and disenfranchised, who fought only because they could afford to do nothing else, ignores the American patriots that these men became as a result of their service. Additionally, the low opinion of the militia on the battlefield overlooks the basic fact that these men served, and as such, the militia was a large group of men, mobilized for the common cause of American Independence. Finally, many Americans who did not fight in the Continental Army or Militias, but provided support as merchants and camp followers, also mobilized in support of the cause. Statements to the effect that the "loyalists" were actually the majority do not seem to follow any rationale as there were so many times and places that such a majority, if it truly existed as a majority, could and would have made its presence felt but did not. There were definitely those that did not support independence from Britain, but history would have been much different had they truly been the majority.

Conclusion: Whereas the American Revolution was far less bloody than the French, and it did not include a major change in the class standing of the average American, it fundamentally changed the government of the land through the removal of British rule and establishing of a national congress. This could only have been accomplished through the mobilization of Americans in many ways identified. The American Revolution may have been different than other revolutions in history, but it was a revolution nonetheless, and the first of its kind.

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With the advent of the French Revolution in 1789, the late 18th century saw a change in the way wars were fought in the western world through the *levee en masse*, the bringing of the people under arms. No longer did the rulers of state direct wars only conducted by professional or mercenary armies; rather, the citizens themselves were now becoming involved in the fighting and the reasons to fight. Again, most often it is the French Revolution that is described as the first example of this change, and as such, 1789 is the year that is delineated as the first example of the "citizen-soldier." This is because of the *levee en masse*.¹ While the basic assertion of a change in the demographics and motivations of the men on the battlefields holds merit, the argument seems to forget that only fourteen years prior, the first fighting of the American Revolution saw a large uprising of the American colonists.

In light of revolutions in world history, the American Revolution has been described as incomplete, moderate, or conservative which in some ways brings the question as to whether or not the American Revolution was a revolution at all. By conservative, many point to the lack of major bloodshed, such as the Reign of Terror in France, or the actions of Stalin in the Soviet Union, which seems to go hand in hand with revolution.² Others have pointed out that the American Revolution did not include social or economic change, and that politically, the American Revolution simply replaced the distant rule of parliamentary Britain with local rule designed in the same fashion.³

What is missed in such discussions is that following the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the Europeans living in the thirteen colonies began to find a collective self. When that sense of self was infringed upon (either imagined or in actuality) they began to unite, take up arms, mobilize, and as a result the year which marks when "The wars of kings were over; the wars of peoples had begun,"⁴ is 1775 and not 1789.

So which view is more accurate, the mass mobilization of a new nation's people, or the more critical view of a revolution driven only by a relatively small upper class elite in the colonies? This paper will contend that it was the former and will investigate why each American involved in the War for American Independence chose to do his or her part.

PRE-WAR AMERICA

Despite comments that little changed politically in America between 1763 and 1789, there are several aspects of the political systems in 1763 that must be mentioned. British governors were sent to the colonies in the King's name, the Privy Council of Parliament reviewed all actions of the colonial assemblies, and the British King maintained the veto. Coupled with this authority was a perception among the British that their relationship to the colonies was one of senior to subordinate or parent to child. Colonies existed to support and benefit the British Empire and America was thought to be no different. Taken together, Britain maintained the right and the ability to control the law of the land in the American Colonies and had no reason to believe that it was not entitled to do so.⁵

However, by 1763, the colonists had become more than just British colonists in a far away land to support the empire. The British may have been the majority and the culture and language of the colonies was primarily English, but over a century of immigration had altered the society and the free men of America also included Scots, Irish, French Huguenots, Germans, and other nationalities.⁶ The great expanse of the North American continent and its seemingly unending supply of raw materials resulted in a higher percentage of landowners. With land ownership often being the sole requirement for a vote, the American colonist, as opposed the British citizen, had greater access to the political franchise. Some historians have argued that this led to a democratic spirit in America that was directly opposed to the British aristocracy

leading to inevitable conflict. Others argue that to call the American colonies democratic in 1763 is an overstatement, and in his review of the American colonies, Carl Ubbelohde states that historians have come to no conclusion.⁷ For the purposes of this argument, it is only important to point out that it is generally agreed that the American colonists had greater influence in local and regional issues than their British counterparts and hence greater sensitivity to anything perceived as an infringement upon their rights.

The end of the Seven Years' War is the time typically given as the beginning of the troubles that led to the American Revolution. At that time, Britain, victorious in a long but costly war, began looking for additional revenue sources to manage the large debt following the war. In light of the common perceptions described, it is not surprising that it turned to its colonies. Of note, one of the first major British policies was the Sugar Act or, more appropriately the Revenue Act in 1764, which was designed to enforce the Sugar and Molasses Act, passed in 1733. Realistically, the effect these acts had on the colonists in 1764 was truly minimal. The tax itself was not exorbitant and for the most part only affected the upper echelons in America who tended to make greater use of sugar.⁸ Additionally, in an attempt to stem the tide of settler expansion west and partially in response to Pontiac's Rebellion, an Indian uprising across much of the western frontier, Britain established the proclamation line of 1763. This closed the area from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River to white occupation.⁹ Regardless of Britain's intentions that this would help to reduce Indian tensions, the common perception for those affected was that British policy makers were arbitrarily passing laws without a proper understanding of the region. An opinion that Britain "just did not get it" began to emerge.¹⁰ Further, there was a firm opinion in the colonies that they should maintain the ability to tax themselves, which is not a sustainable option when also being taxed externally.¹¹

The agents sent to London from the colonies to argue against the Stamp Act, most notable of these agents being Benjamin Franklin, echoed this sentiment again. As they had done with the Revenue Act, they argued for the right for the colonies to tax themselves. What is missing from their arguments with Prime Minister George Grenville was a desire for representation within Parliament in London. Although it is doubtful that such a recommendation would be entertained, it is interesting to see that American colonists were not arguing for their fair share of influence in the British government; they were arguing for the ability to self govern.¹²

A final observation in regards to the growing changes in American thought is a look back over the previous 150 years in terms of unrest. Rebellions were not new or uncommon in this era and North America was no different. Prior to 1763 there had been many debates, disputes, and rebellions over many of the same issues already discussed, but in all of those events, none broke out into fighting across the continent.¹³ By 1774, however, the colonists were beginning to see themselves as Americans and a unified mindset was growing. In that year, there were many differing opinions among the colonists in regards to what was to be done, but there was significant agreement that Britain's policies were unjust and a threat to liberty.¹⁴ This growing pre-war unity in the colonies culminated in September of 1774 when twelve colonies sent delegates to the First Continental Congress in order to "unite the thirteen into a semblance of unity so that an attack from outside on one would be regarded as an attack on all."¹⁵ Georgia may not have sent delegates, but it was not out of lack of unity or due to any loyalty to the crown; it was more so out of a fear of losing British troops with a local uprising of Creek Indians.¹⁶

CANADA

By way of contrast to the unity of American colonists in the 1770's, the North American Province of Quebec followed a different path. The colonists in the north shared many of the opinions and grievances of American colonists, but when invited to be part of the First Continental Congress, they chose not to send delegates and maintained their loyalty to the crown. The reasons why Quebec did not find unity with the other British possessions in North America included the fact that the Quebec Act of 1774 (denoted by some as one of the "intolerable acts") went a long way to appease Quebec, especially in terms of granting the freedom to practice the Roman Catholicism that was the religion of the vast majority of Quebec inhabitants. Additionally, its demographics were a mix of British and French colonists, and the process of the settlement of French Canada over the last 100 years had been quite different from that of the thirteen British colonies. As such, Canada would not become the fourteenth colony and when invaded, would assist British troops against the Americans.¹⁷

LEXINGTON AND CONCORD

The passage of the Revenue Act and the Stamp Act had each created a crisis to some (steadily increasing) level and as each act was repealed, the tempers of American colonists somewhat cooled. The passage of the Townshend Acts in 1767, the Intolerable Acts, and the closing of Boston remained great sources of contention, gave rebellion leaders like Sam Adams ample fuel for their rhetoric, and ultimately increased the gap between British and American thinking, leading to events such as the Boston "Massacre" and Tea Party.¹⁸

By the spring of 1775, the British forces in Boston were widely disliked and protests and violence against British soldiers was commonplace.¹⁹ The actions, plans, and coordination of the British Army in Boston on the night of 18 April 1775 were not unusual. General Gage had made

a habit of sending out his troops on patrol in order to maintain stability in the region and lull the colonists into a feeling that troops in the countryside were normal. He had even conducted similar missions to capture arms and supplies being stocked by the growing colonial resistance.²⁰ The details of 19 April in Lexington and Concord do not need to be recited here, but the event sheds light on the mindset of the Massachusetts colonist of the day. Thomas Fleming describes the scene on the Lexington Common as "one of those unreal moments when two nations are moving towards war, yet neither wishes to strike the first blow." A sudden breakout of violence in Lexington would have been but a confined local event just ten years prior, but that day there was a mobilization from all over the Boston area. The 1800 British troops that were deployed inland from Boston that day fought a militia that grew by the hour, from the original seventy men in Lexington at around 4:30 in the morning to several thousand men fighting from Concord to Boston, commanded by a militia general.²¹

Not only was there a mobilization of the militia and others who fought that day, but there was a unity of purpose as the colonists in Concord worked to hide their supplies of munitions, arms, and sustenance, stocked to support a military force.²² Also, there is evidence that Major John Pitcairn and the advanced guard of British Marines that he led into Lexington were already on edge from stories of Paul Revere and other colonists encountered that morning. Each colonist described a scene of hundreds and possibly thousands of men already formed and ready for a fight.²³ It seems that even the most random person in the region had a mind to create problems for the unwanted British soldiers, and these stories were believable enough to the British officers on the ground, with many months experience in the region.

Nevertheless, the unity and mobilization within the Boston area did not a nation make. Beyond the precise day that fighting began, is the spirit to arms that seems to have engulfed the colonies from late 1774 to the summer of 1776.

RAGE MILITAIRE

The description given to the colonists' mind of the early 1770s is one of growing unity in terms of derision towards British policy and the physical embodiment of that policy: the troops garrisoned in North America. However, as united as they were, there was little agreement in regards to what to do. Following the events of Lexington and Concord, word of it spread throughout the colonies as fast as the horses could carry the messages resulting in a fervent call for a response from everyone.²⁴ Charles Royster refers to the period prior to and immediately following Lexington by the French term *rage militaire*. This period is characterized as a call to arms for all able-bodied men and a call for all others to support those fighting in whatever way they could.²⁵ Thomas Jefferson stated of the period that a "phrensy [sic] of revenge seems to have seized all ranks of the people."²⁶

Even prior to Lexington, militias throughout the colonies were being reinvigorated, assigning new officers in order to remove those who still supported the British crown, and drilling on a far more regular basis than in the 1760s.²⁷ Following Lexington, there was little shortage for volunteers. In New England alone, nearly 20,000 men in militia units rushed to the Boston area and there successfully blockaded the British into the city of Boston.²⁸

This period is replete with stories of pro-American and anti-British vigor, public humiliation of loyalists, organized companies of women to support the call to arms, and men in droves leaving their homes to fight for liberty.²⁹ The iconic figure of the period was the citizen-soldier, acting in defense of liberty. A great example is the story of soon to be general in the

Continental Army, Israel Putnam, who was said to have stopped plowing on the spot and armed himself and his servants to fight against Britain, reminiscent of the story of Cincinnatus of Rome.³⁰

A string of American "successes," or at least events that could be used by propagandists as successes maintained the highs of the *rage militaire*. The events at Lexington, Concord, Breed's Hill, Fort Ticonderoga, where heavy artillery was seized, and the withdrawal of British troops from Boston on 17 March 1776 further boosted the glamorized perception of the citizen-soldier, driven by liberty and thus an unstoppable force against which Britain could not contend. In and of themselves, these victories were modest or not even victories, but by the summer of 1776 as the Declaration of Independence was drafted, approved, and signed, American colonists had remained on the offensive throughout and had yet to experience much in the way of setbacks.³¹

The *rage militaire* merits discussion as it embodies the common perception of the American Revolution: men and women of all walks of life finding themselves united and in arms in the collective cause against Britain. Granted there is a hint of exaggeration in all of this, but it remains as the high water mark for this passion of arms during the American Revolution. It is important to note that it is not just the historians of today who denote this highpoint; even the writers of the day would discuss the same for the duration of the war. Many leaders in support of American independence often would call for a revitalization of the spirit of 1775.³²

Opposite to the highs of 1776 and the *rage militaire*, the year also consisted of the lowest moments of the American Revolution for the colonists. When the British sailed out of Boston, it was far from the end, and in August of 1776, the British counterattacks began. Subsequent American mistakes, resulted in huge losses in New York and Quebec, were nearly decisive for

British victory, and were just the beginning in what would be a very long war.³³ Thus, the discussion can now turn to the two primary organizations that would see to the end of the war: the militia and the Continental Army.

THE AMERICAN MILITIA

In the late 18th century, the design and use of the militia in the American colonies was unique as it had been the primary defender of the colonies dating back to the 1607 settlement in Jamestown, Virginia and had developed differently in each colony according to local needs and experiences.³⁴ Following the War for American Independence, the militia's importance, capabilities, and hand in the American victory have been contested widely. The militia's most commonly quoted (and often misrepresented) opponent was none other than the Commander in Chief, General George Washington, who strove for a traditional standing army on a European model and often spoke poorly of the various militias he encountered.³⁵ However, many historians would call the above statement regarding Washington's opinion an overgeneralization.

When discussing those who fought the War for American Independence, the average American today still thinks of the minutemen of Lexington and Bunker Hill, and the actions and spirit of the previously discussed *rage militaire*. The minutemen, of course were only a subset of the militia, prepared to deploy "on a minute's notice" and not the bulk of a colony's militia.³⁶ The militia's critics have since described a poorly organized group of selfish individuals with an extremely poor record on the battlefield. This mirrors an opinion that goes back to the British Army serving in North America during the Seven Years' War.³⁷

Pre-Revolution Militia

The American militia was based on an Elizabethan English system and consisted primarily of landowners, that is to say, men with a vote and some voice in local/regional politics.

American colonists were proud of their militia tradition that had matured out of the need to defend themselves, most commonly against Native Indian and slave uprisings.³⁸ This need was because for nearly 150 years, Britain had never committed any force of consequence to the American colonies. That changed in 1754 due to the start of the North American fighting of the Seven Year's War.³⁹

During the Seven Years' War, many of the militia forces were men pressed into service to fight a war conducted by European monarchs. For the most part, they were part-time soldiers who had farms to care for and tend and could not campaign like a professional soldier. As a result, most of the militia forces were created with drafts or of volunteers from the lowest strata of society. Thus, the militia that operated during the Seven Years' War was not of the same caliber that the British would fight after 1775.⁴⁰

Militias varied widely from state to state and any fact of one militia rarely holds true for another.⁴¹ In contrast to the militias for which every adult male was to be a member and conduct drills on a weekly, monthly, or yearly basis, are the provincial units established by some of the colonies. In the 1750s in Pennsylvania, two militia bills were passed to establish a volunteer standing force to man and maintain frontier forts. Unlike the semi-organized militiamen, the First and Second Pennsylvania Regiments recruited men and provided that colony with standing forces available to defend against French and Indian forces.⁴² In Virginia, the Virginia Regiment stood as a close resemblance to a standing army. Washington's experience in recruiting, training, and leading this Regiment would result in what has been called an elite unit on the frontier, and would also shape the general's future opinions and actions.⁴³

Patriots of the Revolution

"Unlike English, Irish, and Scots, the Americans were armed and were more or less trained for war. Perhaps these militiamen were not very impressive when enlisted or drafted to fight the French or Indians, but they were at their best when fending off what they took to be an immediate threat to their liberty or property."⁴⁴ There are early examples of militia success, beyond Boston, to include Ethan Allen's Connecticut militia operating with Benedict Arnold to capture Fort Ticonderoga and provide the Continental Army with desperately needed artillery.⁴⁵ Further, there are examples of militia filling many needs throughout the war: securing lines of communications, defending forts or conducting limited raids.⁴⁶ Finally, in the latter stages of the war, militia successes helped to push Cornwallis out of the southern colonies and north into Virginia.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the militia owned both ends of the spectrum; some of the most notable American successes and greatest examples of personal fortitude in the War for American Independence can be credited to the Colonial Militia, but also some of the most abhorrent behaviors and cowardly retreats.⁴⁸

As stated earlier, the common perception of Washington was that he preferred a conventional army and consistently lobbied the Continental Congress for one.⁴⁹ While this is essentially true, he was primarily committed to victory and, his personal opinion aside, he was a commander who would work with what he was given. Whereas he constantly worked to reduce his reliance on militia forces, the fact that militias remained separate from the Continental Army meant that additional forces were available in just about any location in which the fight against Britain took him. They were usually less than successful in large scale, force on force actions against professional troops, but Washington conceded that their use in defensive operations, small unit raids, and other similar actions was invaluable.⁵⁰

When discussing the value of the militia, it may serve to look beyond their actual conduct on the battlefield. Regardless of what the militia did or failed to do in combat, there are two points of consequence. First, the militia did make an overall difference in the fight against Britain. From the British perspective, the militia really did swing the tide of the war as they were everywhere that the Continental Army was not, "A reservoir, sand in the gears, the militia also looked like a great spongy mass that could be pushed aside or maimed temporarily but that had no vital center and could not be destroyed."⁵¹ In fact, in 1778, Lord George Germain went so far as to say that Britain needed to employ the militias much like the Americans did if Britain was to find success.⁵² Second, militiamen were not pressed into arms and those that presented themselves on the battlefield do fit the description of the citizen-soldier. The essence of the citizen-soldier can therefore be found in the American militias, and it is these men that exemplify the ideals of the revolution.⁵³ Their abilities in a fight always bring into question their validity, but the fact that they fight at all, acquits them as American patriots in the war.

Alas, such an opinion is exactly that which shaped many of the politicians of the day. In many ways, the calls for the citizen-soldier and the belief in the fighting spirit of a man defending his own liberty and home gave the militia its overstated reputation during and immediately following the revolution. This opinion results in one of the greatest hindrances to Washington in his drive to create a professionally trained standing army.⁵⁴

THE CONTINENTAL ARMY

At its conclusion, the First Continental Congress agreed to meet again should the need present itself. With the events of Lexington and Concord, the Second Continental Congress met in May of 1775 and on 14 June established the Continental Army. Hoping to further capture and engender the growing feeling of unity in all of the colonies, not just New England, a southern

gentleman was chosen to be the commander in chief. The fact that Washington was selected due to his residence is an interesting side note as the leaders of the day unwittingly selected a man whose resolution for victory and traditional/conservative nature would shape the events of the American Revolution more than anyone could have predicted.⁵⁵

In the early stages (during the *rage militaire*), the Continental Army saw a high enrollment of 48,000, yet by the end of 1776 only 1,000 men reenlisted.⁵⁶ One result was that the campaigns of early 1777 were fought with an essentially brand new force. Through 1776, the small size authorized by the Continental Congress and its short enlistments were the bane of Washington and he fought tirelessly against it. With the knowledge of failure in Quebec, and short enlistments being one of the most notable contributing factors to failure there, Washington was able to sway the Continental Congress to provide him a more robust force with three-year enlistments or for the duration of the war, whichever was longer.⁵⁷

Composition

If the militia consisted of primarily the landowners, that is, the middle class, than the demographics of the Continental Army were essentially the other two classes: upper and lower. Much like that in Europe, the majority of the officers of the Continental Army consisted of men of the upper class of America, or at least service therein elevated one to a higher standing. Interestingly enough, the commissions conferred by the Continental Congress received some ridicule from loyalist writers, but their comments aside, these men were immediately recognized for their positions.⁵⁸

The enlisted men of the Continental Army are far more fascinating, primarily for their diversity. The "typical Continental soldier was not the 'yeoman' farmer...In reality...African Americans, ethnic minorities, and 'free white men on the move' eventually formed the bulk of

the Continental army.”⁵⁹ With the short enlistments early on, the end of the *rage militaire*, and several hard winters, the size of the Continental Army remained in a constant state of fluctuation; but within that irregularity, there is a core group of men that become the common thread throughout the Continental Army’s existence. John Shy proposes that this core group consists of the poorest of the poor and proposes that their enlistment was out of personal necessity in order to earn land, money, and/or prestige, not out of a heightened sense of American unity.⁶⁰ This point does not bode well for an argument of the mobilization of the people, but it seems that most share Shy’s opinion. The ranks of the Continental Army are not filled with patriotic men defending their homeland; they are enlisted out of need.⁶¹ However, the description of the men who joined and remained in service does not adequately paint the picture of the men who came out of the service at the end of the war. By 1783, the men of the Continental Army had developed a sense of class-consciousness, a sense of duty, and were a unified brotherhood within the army. After several years of fighting for a cause, these men took stock in that cause and were as invested in the desire for liberty as anyone.⁶²

The hardened core group of the Continental Army under the leadership of Washington began to look more and more like European regulars as the war progressed. This brings the discussion to one of the biggest quandaries for the American leaders of the day, and an obstacle to Washington fielding a large and credible force: the fears that a standing army was as much of a threat to liberty as Britain itself.⁶³

A Standing Army = Tyranny

The Continental Congress faced quite a dilemma through the conduct of the war. The uniting factor for Americans was the fact that Britain’s actions infringed upon each American’s liberty, and to allow it to continue was intolerable. The dilemma is that the means to fight the

tyranny of Britain was also an instrument of tyranny itself in the wrong hands. A strong standing American army was necessary to fight the British forces and provide freedom, but that very same army could be the one to take freedom away.⁶⁴

The danger of a standing army and the ability for its leaders take control and rule as dictators was at the forefront of American leaders' minds. The experience of the English Civil War, 1642-1649, loomed large. The power of Oliver Cromwell, enabled by his army, just over 100 years prior served as a warning to many. Most famously, Samuel Adams remarked that a standing army gave its officers a great deal of power which, "should be watched with a jealous Eye."⁶⁵ This caution against a robust, well-trained force is one of the primary reasons for the Continental Army's relatively small numbers throughout the war, the original one-year enlistments, and the constant propaganda in support of the militia.⁶⁶ Additionally, individual colonies worked to ensure that they maintained civil control over the military that they feared, and thus made their own defense their priority.⁶⁷

As a result, Washington's army was poorly outfitted, hardly paid, and minimally supplied. Some have stated that this lack of support validates the argument that the average American did not really want a revolution. However, the lack of robust support for the Continental Army or the struggles of congress should not be attributed strictly to a lack of patriotism or unity. The unifying theme for the American colonists is defense against tyranny and support of American liberties; which held true in limiting the Continental Army as much as it did for fighting against overseas control.

Ultimately, it was conceded by almost everyone that a standing army was necessary. Regardless of all of the commentary and opinions in support of the colonial militias and its

citizen-soldiers, nearly every leader was unable to deny the sheer fact that a standing army was necessary if the American colonies were to find victory.⁶⁸

That Which Won the War

His military prowess aside (for good or bad), Washington seemed to have a great understanding of what it was he was fighting for and what it would take to win such a war. Even before the ratification of the Articles of Confederation, Washington mandated that he remain under civil authority, but not subordinate to any individual state's desires. Washington only took direction from the Continental Congress and in many ways, his actions and the existence of his army gave the congress additional authority.⁶⁹

Like the militia, the battle record of the Continental Army is spotty and the true reasons for victory are clouded in two hundred plus years of exaggeration on the part of Americans. Despite one's opinion of its conduct on the battlefield, its possible threat to liberty, or even its demographics from the most downtrodden of Americans, it is apparent that all involved agreed upon the fact that the war was to be won or lost by the Continental Army.⁷⁰

Witness the example of New Jersey at the end of 1776. After the bitter defeats near New York that year, Washington took the Continental Army in its entirety into Pennsylvania for the winter. The effect of the removal of the army from New Jersey empowered local loyalists and weakened American resolve. Such examples in America appear all over the country as the presence of the Continental Army engendered the support of the local populace.⁷¹

Finally, it is important to remember the temperament of the men who served in the Continental Army, not as they enlisted into it, but as they evolved within it, "Thus the Continentals in the last four years of the active war...had advanced further in making American

purposes in the Revolution their own. They had in their sense of isolation and neglect probably come to be more nationalistic than the militia---though surely no more American."⁷²

CAMP FOLLOWERS

In 1775, armies consisted of far more than just the line soldiers and their officers, and the Continental Army was no different. In addition to those who actually did the fighting, a train of men, women, and supplies, necessary to support that army followed it. Beyond those staff officers and supporting sections actually within the army, there were private enterprising men who provided supplies and support (of both noble and selfish purposes), families of officers and soldiers, and other various strap hangers who would join the campaigns throughout the war. The Continental Army when taken as a whole has been described as a military community, which "included civilian personnel and dependents. Some of these civilians joined the community in order to contribute to the American cause; others were there only to make a living."⁷³ As a traditional officer, Washington would have preferred not to have a rag-tag group of followers. As a realist first, he understood the support they all provided (salesman, laborers, and soldiers' lovers alike), and made no efforts to remove them.⁷⁴

The men who served in the Continental Army as quartermasters, administrators, or in other supporting staff roles were a mix of both military and civilian, and to further complicate the matter, the conferring of commissions on support personnel by the Continental Congress was without standardization. Further, these men were not enlisted as the soldier was, and even though they lived under the rule and discipline of the Continental Army, they held a few additional freedoms than the average enlisted man, such as the ability to leave when they wished.⁷⁵ In many ways, the staff officers and the laborers working for them are seen as the

most altruistic in the army ensuring that supplies are provided, coordinating the transportation, and caring for the wounded.⁷⁶

Another group of men who engaged in the war for unselfish reasons were the individual volunteers, or irregular soldiers, who served the continental army without pay or, in the case of officers, without commission.⁷⁷ These men were not members of the army so they were not required to answer to the commands of the commissioned officers and could come and go as they pleased. Their training and abilities varied widely and they were often undisciplined, but these men thought of themselves as the highest sort since they risked their lives for the American Revolution without compensation.⁷⁸ Again putting aside their combat abilities, herein is another group of men doing what they can as Americans united against Britain.

How many camp followers and other volunteers existed at any one time is impossible to discern. Some attempts to account for these men and women were made, but it was not standard practice and who was counted and who was not remains unknown. This group, however, is important in the discussion of an American mobilization and the camp followers must be counted. "There were thousands of men and women with the Continental Army who did as much to win the war as those who served in it. They all belonged to the army, but when those 'citizen-soldiers' marched off into history, somehow most of the followers got left behind."⁷⁹

INSURRECTION

In some respects, the War for American Independence was a far cry from what is thought of a typical war of its era. As has already been discussed there were several participants in various organizations, some formal, others not. In addition to the fighting of the militia, the Continental Army, and others in support of those forces, many men and militia units formed outside the purview of Washington or the Continental Congress and engaged British troops. In a

few cases, these “stirred-up” militias inflicted significant defeats such as the “frontier militia” at King’s Mountain, South Carolina in 1780.⁸⁰ Throughout, there was a sense that Britain would be unable to control the entire North American continent and despite battle losses, Americans would be victorious through constant and vigilant resistance to British control.⁸¹ Many have referred to these aspects of the American Revolution as an insurrection, especially the southern campaigns towards the end of the war; even Nathanael Greene referred to his time in the southern states as the “fugitive war.”⁸²

Even in the early stages of the war, military minds were turning to the viability of victory thought resistance and harassment. Charles Lee, captured by the British in December of 1776, argued after his release in 1778 that, “a plan of Defense, harassing and impeding can alone Succeed.” Although Washington and the congress discounted his recommendations, some of his opinions were confirmed by the later events in the south.⁸³

Further, the term “hybrid-war” has been used in regards to the American Revolution. The reasons it was fought as such harkens back to Washington’s style: one of necessity. Americans continued to maintain their homesteads and fought when necessary with whatever means they felt best. Sometimes the conflict resembled a typical European battlefield of British regulars versus the Continental Army, while at other points the conflict saw only militia forces engaging the British. Often there was a mixture of both. As mentioned earlier, the militia was quite effective in small raids and defensive positions to prevent certain enemy movements. Additionally, Americans resisted and agitated British soldiers and supported American soldiers as best they could, often living under the threat of arrest in captured cities such as New York and Philadelphia. Regardless of British actions, they were rarely safe in rear areas.⁸⁴

Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis, the man charged with the British mission in the southern states was unable to find a strategic victory as envisioned by Britain for that campaign. With American victories like that at Kings Mountain and the less than charitable actions of British troops, Cornwallis was unable to generate or sustain any significant loyalist support.⁸⁵ Further, not only was it the formed militias and Greene's portion of the Continental Army that fought Cornwallis, but it was this insurgency fighting that helped to push British forces out of Georgia, North, and South Carolina into Petersburg, Virginia. This of course was the beginning of the end leading to the siege at Yorktown in October of 1781.⁸⁶

LOYALISTS

No revolution in history has been unanimous, and some have argued that in the case of the American Revolution, the loyalists were the "silenced majority" and that the average American colonist had no interest in independence from Britain.⁸⁷ The most famous statement in regards to how many men and women were in support or against the revolution was made by John Adams who asserted that a third of America was revolutionary, a third was neutral, and a third was loyalist.⁸⁸ Generally, the agreed figure of loyalists is estimated around 500,000 which, in respect to the two to three million American colonists of the day could equal up to a quarter of the population.⁸⁹

Like the Continental Army, the composition of the loyalists in 1775 is very different from the composition of the same group in 1783. As previously discussed, Britain attempted to capitalize on such a loyalist majority in the South and failed. In most cases, the actions of the most vociferous of loyalists, the conduct of the British troops, and the knowledge that British control of the entire continent was less than likely turned the opinions of neutrals in the favor of revolutionaries.⁹⁰

Ultimately, most historians agree that the War for American Independence was not a victory solely won by the Continental Army, or the state militias, but a combination of them both plus the various men and women who did some part in the victory. It is difficult to conceive that beyond all that has already been discussed, for which there is appreciable agreement, there is another segment of society that not only consists of the majority, but remains contrary to the desires of all of the above. In his study of the loyalists, Claude H. Van Tyne described loyalists as "the prosperous and contented men, the men without a grievance,"⁹¹ which does not seem to describe a majority.

Thousands of loyalists left America before and after the Treaty of Paris at war's end, and it is safe to say that many thousands chose to remain. It seems unrealistic to refer to them as a majority in America, for there were several opportunities for loyalists to attempt change, yet nothing ever materialized.

CONCLUSIONS

Before Lexington, there was a unity of American thinking that British policy was out of line and that the American colonies should be left alone to prosper and govern themselves. From these unified thoughts, patriots began to take up arms and fight for their cause. America was not a singular consciousness in 1775, but the thoughts of discontent were there and it was the *rage militaire* and the war itself that generated a unity of purposes in the colonies so that by the 1780s the British were fighting mobilized Americans.⁹²

There are always radicals, extremists, or advocates of the far left or right in every conflict, but it is most commonly the opinions and desires of the middle neutral group that, once decided, will make the difference. By mid 1776, after a year and a half of the *rage militaire*, this group in America supported independence from Britain.⁹³ In viewing the United States of

America in 1783 as compared to the thirteen colonies in 1763, it is difficult to deny that a revolution has occurred.

The men who fought from 1775 to 1783 were essentially fighting of their own accord. It is true that selfish ideals drove many men, but there is a larger group of men and women volunteering in all sorts of capacities, be it the Continental Army, a formally organized or otherwise militia, or those engaged in providing the combatants a variety of required support. An interesting irony is found here. The organization that is probably most responsible for American victory, the Continental Army, was manned with those who were initially the least committed to an American cause and most disenfranchised. Conversely, the best examples of a unified people mobilizing for a cause, the militias and volunteers, were usually the most miserable on the battlefield. Men like Washington and Greene would skillfully use all of these assets and find victory.

To say that the revolution was very conservative may very well be an embracement of what made it so successful. General Washington, while utilizing all assets available, retained his conservative style and always worked to keep the fighting in the traditional pattern of the day. Additionally, there was not a major change of the leadership in America. The men who governed at the behest of Britain before were now governing at the behest of the American people. Quite possibly, these actions and events prevented the mass blood letting that other countries have endured in their revolutions.⁹⁴ Over the previous nine years, the people of the American colonies had mobilized their efforts in a plethora of ways and through that mobilization, created their new country.

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