

George Washington: The Commander In Chief

As the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army the services and achievements of George Washington are unique in the world's history. He was much more than the Commander in Chief. He was the one necessary person, whose calm, unswerving, determined sense of patriotic duty to country, and ability put real backbone into the Revolution and kept it from collapsing or merging into a civil conflict, under the hardships and unexpected privations encountered during the eight years of war. Without General Washington at its head it could never have succeeded. His faith in the cause and his devotion to the ideals it embodied made him the symbol of America — the spirit of the Revolution.

From boyhood on Washington lived in a military atmosphere much of his time. Under his brother's influence and direction he was trained in fencing, also probably in the manual of arms. He assumed service and responsibility in the Virginia militia; and by the time he was serving as an aide to General Braddock he made the assertion, "My inclinations are strongly bent to arms."

Each of the different tasks that fell to his hand seemed to contribute to the store of knowledge useful to him the next one to follow. His experience as a surveyor was a fine preparation for the dangerous mission to the Ohio with Governor Dinwiddie's letter to the French commander. These gave him a real insight into pioneer settlement conditions, the wary methods of Indian warfare, and the difficulties of travel through unbroken forests in midwinter. The Braddock campaign taught him many of the weaknesses in the military system of training British Regular officers and men. He also had tragic evidence of the uselessness and folly of the pomp and display, and the paraphernalia of the formal English movements and practices and learned some vastly important facts of the helplessness of the British soldier in unfamiliar environment where his former European battlefield training could not be employed.

Witnessing all of the horrors of Braddock's defeat, more of a massacre than a battle, George Washington's personal courage had its baptism of fire and bore the acid test of every experience with honor. With two horses shot beneath him and four bullets through his coat, he not only continued his duties as aide but when General Braddock was mortally wounded and most of the other officers either killed or wounded, it was the young provincial colonel who took command of the remnant of the brilliant English Army and brought it and the wounded leader out of the terrifying forest ambush of Indians to safety.

Following this, his experiences of the French and Indian War gave him additional knowledge of border warfare, invaluable experience in training, disciplining, and subsisting his men far from their base of supplies, meeting every emergency and through resourcefulness and initiative creating out of every emergency opportunity to turn to the advantage of his forces. In these early days is said that fear had no part in his make-up.

Through his 15 years in the House of Burgesses his opinions were solidifying into fixed standards and settled convictions that were to hold him fast and keep him true to the defense of the principles of representative government for the Colonies. He had felt the spell of Patrick Henry's ringing challenges to the spirit of free-born Englishmen: "If this be treason make the most of it — Give me liberty or give me death."

He had absorbed the ideals that prompted protests, petitions, debates, discussions, had a voice in the Resolves, in the denunciations of the Stamp Act and the Port Bill and call for a General Congress of the American Colonies to which he was a delegate. George Washington's power and personality must have been marked in this Congress, since Patrick Henry on being asked to name the greatest man in the Congress replied, "If you speak of eloquence, Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina is by far the greatest orator; but if you speak of solid information and sound judgment, Colonel Washington is unquestionably the greatest man on the floor."

In the Virginia Convention some time before he had expressed his stand on the closing of the port of Boston, thus: "I will raise one thousand men, subsist them at my own expense and march myself at their head to the relief of Boston."

Then came the news of April 18, 1775. Major Pitcairn of the British Army had fired upon the American militia, assembled on Lexington Common, shouting, "Dispense, ye rebels!" and thereby started the American Revolution. Washington at the second meeting of the Continental Congress, May 10, 1775, like his colleagues, realized that settling matters without conflict became impossible with the news of the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord. Americans from 23 towns were found among the dead and wounded, and as the word spread the almost hourly appearance of more companies of armed men from far and near soon resulted in the assemblage of a determined army around Boston. This siege of Boston by its suddenness and the overwhelming numbers put a changed aspect upon the entire situation. A royal governor was hemmed in, apparently with abundant naval and military forces to enforce his orders, but was unable to command a single bit of aid outside of Boston, where he was regarded merely as a military commander of a besieged town.

One of the first steps of the new Congress was to adopt the army gathered about Boston, calling it the Continental Army to distinguish it from that of England which they called the Ministerial Army. It then became necessary to give that body a leader — a commander in chief to handle it. Opinions varied; several were ambitious for the post. George Washington, who, it is alleged, arrived clad in his uniform as a Colonel of Virginia forces, was named but was opposed by some of the delegates. However John Adams, of Massachusetts, nominated him, recording in his diary afterward much of his comments:

"I had no hesitation to declare that I had but one gentleman in my mind for that important command and that was a gentleman from Virginia, who was among us and very well known to all of us; a gentleman, whose skill and experience as an officer, whose independent fortune, great talents and excellent universal character would command the approbation of all America, and unite the cordial exertions of all the colonies better than any other person in the Union."

The following day from his place in the assembly he accepted the appointment in a brief speech, in which he said:

"I beg they will accept my cordial thanks for this distinguished testimony of their approbation. But lest some unlucky event should happen, unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with. As to pay, Sir, I beg leave to assure the Congress that as no pecuniary consideration could have tempted me to accept this arduous employment at the expense of my domestic ease and happiness, I do not wish to make any profit

from it. I will keep an exact account of my expenses. Those I doubt not they will discharge, and that is all I desire."

General Washington, with his instructions and a packet of commissions for his staff of officers, made preparations to leave for Boston. Those to serve under him were Major Generals Artemus Ward, Charles Lee, Phillip Schuyler and Israel Putnam. Eight brigadier generals were also commissioned. These were Seth Pomeroy, Richard Montgomery, David Wooster, William Heath, Joseph Spencer, John Thomas, John Sullivan, Nathanael Greene. At the General's request, Horatio Gates was appointed Adjutant General and given the rank of brigadier.

Before departing he wrote to Mrs. Washington, and among other things he said:

"You may believe me, my dear Patsy, when I assure you, in the most solemn manner, that, so far from seeking this appointment, I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too great for my capacity, and that I should enjoy more happiness in one month with you at home than I have the most distant prospect of finding abroad."

His anxiety for her was great. He was worried and anxious over her loneliness and uneasiness. He wrote to his stepson and desired that he and Nelly would stay at Mount Vernon with their mother. He wrote to his wife's relatives and friends asking them to visit her and keep up her spirits. "My departure, will, I know be a cutting stroke upon her; and on this account alone I have many very disagreeable sensations."

This done he set out for Boston, and en route the new Commander in Chief heard of the Battle of Bunker Hill which acquainted him with the spirit of his new force, and also with its problems. Twenty thousand minutemen and militia had gathered, made up of the farmers, fishermen, sailors, merchants, artisans of New England, with very little discipline and much confusion.

In taking over the command on July 3, 1775, from the temporary directions of General Artemus Ward, the Commander in Chief endeavored to infuse into his new Army something of the spirit of the task before them. He said:

"The Continental Congress having now taken all the Troops of the several Colonies, which have been raised, or which may be hereafter raised, for the support and defense of the Liberties of America; into their Pay and Service: They are now the Troops of the United Provinces of North America; and it is hoped that all Distinctions of Colonies will 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 in which we are all engaged."

To his utter dismay, he found that withal the imposing numbers of men before him there was not enough powder among them or available to put up even the feeblest resistance to an attack; and had the English not been so thoroughly astonished at the results of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, they probably could have driven the provincial army from Boston, since they had abundant military and naval forces at their command. However, they did not know the weaknesses of the colonial troops and one of General Washington's greatest policies of military strategy grew out of this crisis when he managed to keep his enemy in ignorance of his real strength by being apparently constantly preparing to attack.

Sending Colonel Henry Knox in midwinter to bring on 42 oxen-drawn sleds and 59 cannon from Ticonderoga, Washington fortified Dorchester heights, which compelled General Howe to evacuate Boston, embarking his force for Halifax. Howe left a supply of cannon, small arms, powder, and other important military stores to the value of forty to fifty thousand pounds, very welcome to an army that had been watchfully waiting for weary months without sufficient powder for each soldier. This first score for the Americans in putting the enemy to flight was a bitter blow to British pride and a great encouragement to the Americans, and it placed the war on a different basis.

Never has New York seen a more brilliant military pageant than assembled off Gravesend during July and August, 1776, when General Howe and his forces arrived from Halifax and was joined by his brother, Lord Howe, admiral of the British fleet, with between three and four hundred ships, with the Germans hired to aid the British in subduing the colonists. Sir Henry Clinton also arrived with troops from the south, and fully 30,000 veteran soldiers stood ready to annihilate the American Army, which never attained greater numbers than 18,000 men. The English planned to seize New York and then the rest of the country, quickly subdue the Colonials, and bring the war to a speedy end. As they landed and established themselves in and around New York, General Washington kept close watch upon their movements. He had 9,000 men in a fortified camp at Brooklyn, and on August 22, when he learned that the enemy had landed 10,000 men and 40 cannon at the lower end of Long Island, he endeavored to encourage his men in the following brief address:

"The enemy have now landed on Long Island and the hour is fast approaching on which the honor and success of his army and the safety of our bleeding country depend. Remember, officers and soldiers, that you are freemen fighting for the blessings of liberty — that slavery will be your portion and that of your posterity if you do not acquit yourselves like men."

Despite his instructions and watchfulness, a road or pass was left unguarded, and the British discovering this, overwhelmed and defeated the Americans, driving them to their entrenchments before General Washington arrived on the scene. However, it cost the British such heavy losses that General Howe delayed following his advantage. This Battle of Long Island, one of the most spectacular engagements of the Revolution, although a defeat for the American Army, was also a defeat of the main object of General Howe's plans — to get the entire American Army in combat at one time after the methods of European warfare, in which event he felt assured of a complete victory that would at once settle the status of the rebellious Americans. This purpose General Washington had divined and thwarted. While General Howe was deliberating his next move General Washington quietly secured all available boats of every kind and had them sent to him at Brooklyn, where he personally directed the removal of the soldiers with their arms, ammunition, baggage, supplies, horses, carts, etc., out of reach of the enemy under cover of night and a dense fog, and put a river between them before morning without the loss of a man or their departure being prematurely discovered.

By the time Washington had withdrawn his forces from Manhattan Island and established them at White Plains, he had learned enough of the British methods of fighting to realize thoroughly that unless the British soldiers could fight according to their long and rigid European training, after the method of Frederick the Great, they were at great disadvantage. He, therefore, endeavored at all times to defeat the attempts to get his Army as a whole in a battle line. He also early learned the value of camouflage. The breastworks thrown up overnight and covered with hastily pulled cornstalks with the dirt clinging to their roots would not have offered much

resistance to an attacking enemy, but this deception helped to rob the British victory at White Plains, on October 28, of the full measure of advantage, by inspiring General Howe with such a dread of the possible American strength that he deliberated two days before following up his advantage and awoke to find that General Washington had again slipped his entire Army from beneath his grasp. But shortly after this the capture of Forts Mifflin and Red Bank, which guarded the Hudson, compelled Washington to retreat across New Jersey, and on December 8, 1776, he crossed the Delaware into Pennsylvania, with Cornwallis close upon his heels. The American General avoided pursuit only by securing all of the boats on the river. Cornwallis regarded the Continental Army with such contempt that he did not feel the necessity of putting forth any extra effort to catch up with the Americans or to push on to take Philadelphia, and after stationing his troops in various places in New Jersey he returned to New York. At Trenton he had left a body of Hessians under Colonel Rahl. When this officer asked General Grant for reinforcements the latter replied, "I will undertake to keep the peace in New Jersey with a corporal's guard."

General Washington, feeling the importance of some decisive activity on the part of his army so soon to be depleted by the termination of the short time enlistments, staged a desperate venture at a time when the tide of public opinion and the morale of the Army was at its lowest ebb, and when he knew the British least expected it. He resolved to surprise the Hessians and seize Trenton while they were lulled to security and absorbed in Christmas festivities.

The story of the crossing of the ice-filled Delaware on a dark and stormy night is family history. So also the gallant courage of his men, marching 9 miles in the teeth of a sleet and snowstorm which disabled their muskets. Under the bitter cold two men died, but the surprise and the complete victory all came to pass just as General Washington planned and expected. Hope was revived, and under the inspiration of the hour money and men materialized.

Cornwallis, appalled at the American victory of Trenton, returned to resume charge of New Jersey activities. On January 2, 1777, General Washington awaited him across the Assumpink River with 5,000 troops and repulsed his attempts to cross. Arriving in the afternoon he decided to await making the attack until morning, saying, "We may easily bag the fox in the morning." During the night General Washington executed another of his brilliant moves and made his way to Princeton and engaged the troops left there. In the conflict that followed General Washington by his example and presence inspired his men to victory and then marched them to Morristown, where they went into winter quarters. During this period he pledged his own private fortune for the pay of the soldiers, and his example was followed by some of his officers.

The result of this short campaign of only three weeks has been expressed by a modern British historian:

"As things fell out, the whole cause of the revolution in America was saved by Washington's bold and skillful action. The spirits of the revolutionary party revived; and an advance of 5,000 militia upon Kingsbridge showed Howe that enemies were ready to swarm upon him from every side at the first sign of a British reverse . . . the whole of the work excepting the capture of New York required to be done again."

The struggle to keep and increase the American Army during the winter at Morristown is expressed forcefully by this British writer:

"The military force which Washington brought into shape at Morristown — waxing or waning in numbers but constantly improving in quality — followed him obediently, resolutely, and devotedly as long as their country had occasion for a general and an Army."

During the months of anxious watching of Howe he kept his army ready to proceed northward or to Philadelphia. The British forces outnumbered his own three to two and were equipped to the highest efficiency, while the Americans were but poorly supplied. When Howe finally made his approach to Philadelphia through Chesapeake Bay, Washington confronted him at Brandywine Creek September 11, but was defeated through the frustration of General Sullivan's part of the plan.

General Howe took possession of Philadelphia, and General Washington watched for the opportune moment to make an attack upon the troops. This he did near Germantown on October 5, 1777, and there was early promise of a victory, but the whole plan was spoiled by the confusion due to a thick fog, which prevented coordination. The Americans even made the mistake of attacking each other. It is said that General Washington always believed that the Americans had retreated at the instant when victory was near. Although unsuccessful, the battle showed that the Americans possessed a spirit that the defeat at Brandywine had not impaired, and its general effect was favorable.

October 17, 1777, Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga to the army under Gates; and this fact, aided by the influence of Lafayette and Benjamin Franklin eventually secured the French alliance with the aid of money, men and ships. Meanwhile, General Howe went into winter quarters in Philadelphia, and General Washington and his army went to Valley Forge December 19, 1777, where he could watch Howe's army and guard the country about Philadelphia. Howe's admission that he had no hope of ending the war without 10,000 more troops proved that the Americans had scored beyond their hopes in 1777.

The rigor and hardships of Valley Forge would have vanquished any other man but General Washington. Owing to the inefficiency of the commissary departments fully 2,898 soldiers in camp in Valley Forge were unfit for duty because they were barefoot and destitute of clothing. At times there was not three days provisions for men or horses in camp and often not sufficient for one day. It was in the midst of this poverty and privation that Baron von Steuben began his work of drill and discipline. He aroused the enthusiasm of the officers, and they imbibed his zeal, with a result in morale and efficiency that was astonishing and which continued in spite of Washington's failure to convince Congress and the States of the futility of short-term enlistments. Within a few months von Steuben was a witness to the effect of his training in the turning of the tide at Monmouth.

The year 1778 brought the departure of Howe, and Sir Henry Clinton succeeded him. Clinton soon decided to evacuate Philadelphia and move his forces to New York. This they did by such slow marches that the Americans came upon them at Monmouth on June 28, led by Major General Lee, who for no cause whatever ordered a retreat, to the astonishment of Wayne and Lafayette. However, General Washington came riding out to meet Lee and, seeing his men in retreat, severely reprimanded Lee, took command of the situation, and turned the tide against the enemy so strongly that after nightfall they slipped away to New York. After two years of war the British were again confined to the city, and Washington was again at White Plains. There was no further attempt to conquer the Northern States; and the military situation was such as to be proof positive that General Washington had accomplished his entire object against the British, whose

attempt to overrun the country he had entirely defeated; baffling and outwitting a superior army still huddled on the coast.

The British then attempted to subjugate the South, while continuing to hold New York against Washington's immediate army. Watching the ebb and flow of conflict in the South, minor engagements along the Hudson, the problem of cooperative movement with the French Army and fleet, the ever-present financial deficiency, the treason of Arnold, with many lesser vicissitudes, kept the Commander in Chief of the American Army constantly alert and watchful of the next move in the conflict, until the exciting close of hostilities at Yorktown in 1781.

When the Revolution began and General Washington, unlike the British generals against whom he was fighting and the French generals with whom he became associated, had no powerful organized central government back of him to keep him supplied with the sinews and munitions of war, with its bureaus and departments to facilitate the conduct of military campaigns. Instead, only an elective committee represented all the Colonies. To secure supplies became the all-important issue and the never-ending struggle. Jealousies between the States north and south and the personal jealousy not only of ambitious officers, but of Congress, lest General Washington become too popular, brought upon his head petty slights and indifference from the very agencies that should have given him the utmost support in their power. Criticism of every act also hampered him, and his military skill was even disputed and belittled. He was criticized for inactivity, though in most cases when a council of officers was called to decide upon an attack the General's opinion was outvoted. However, it is noticeable that when he did decide to follow his own judgment for action brilliant victories were usually the result.

He was a past master at strategy and planned strategy for each campaign and for the war as a whole. He had to be commander, chief engineer, chief of intelligence, soldier, judge, statesman, quartermaster, commissary head, sanitary head, and not only take orders from Congress but also to advise Congress on legislative matters. He had to pledge his own fortune to keep soldiers in the service, which the short-time enlistment policy of Congress kept in a constantly moving procession of partly trained men going through the ranks, many of them remaining less than three months.

Incapable of fear, the same indifference to his own personal safety which characterized his actions through the Braddock Expedition and the French and Indian War, was the source of great uneasiness to his men. One of his officers wrote:

"Our army love their General very much, but they have one thing against him which is the little care he takes of himself in any action. His personal bravery and the desire he has of animating his troops by example, make him fearless of danger. This occasions much uneasiness."

Although considered stern, cold, and remote, commanding the respect of the rank and file and the public by the forcefulness of his personality and his high character, he was not a hard man or a martinet. He suffered in sympathy for his ragged, half-starved, poorly-fed soldiers and shared every privation with them. For more than six years, although often within a couple of hundred miles of his own home of ease and plenty, he did not visit it. Despite his formal and austere manner, every man in the ranks knew that he had the complete sympathy of his Commander and rested in the assurance of his justice.

Through the long struggle when every victory seemed to be checked by a defeat, when disloyalty, indifference, and treason in his own official family added to the burden of that which he carried, he never faltered at the rigors imposed not for a moment let go of the conviction that ultimate victory was to come. Washington's constant retreating before the British Army brought upon him much severe criticism, but in the end those who so bitterly assailed him for this seeming lack of success were forced to admit that an open fight would have crushed the Continental Army.

General Washington considered the Revolution as a war of posts. He urged against the danger of dividing and subdividing forces, so that no one would be sufficiently guarded, saying "it is a military observation strongly supported by experience that a superior force may fall a sacrifice to an inferior by an injudicious division." General Washington, observing this weakness in operation of the English forces, said before the Revolution was even a third of its way, "I am well convinced myself, that the enemy long ere this, are perfectly satisfied that the possession of our towns while we have an army in the field will avail them little."

The English had not been able to keep to the field against the Americans. They seemed unable to occupy American territory away from the sea. At the end of the year 1778 they were held on the defensive in New York and in Newport where they could be supplied by the navy. Although they had unlimited resources, they conceded themselves defeated in their effort to subdue the Northern States. This very fact is the greatest praise of General Washington's military skill — he outgeneraled them — and is the incontestable proof of General Washington's greatness as a military leader.

The greatest task that fell so heavily on the Commander was that of keeping his army actually in existence. Here his great business training and ability showed itself. The British could and did repeatedly beat the Continental Army, but they could not beat General Washington. Neither abuse, attack, defeat, nor discontentment could make him resign, and as long as he was in the field he was the rallying point for whatever fighting spirit could still be aroused.

General Washington had early formulated a set of six rules for his military guidance, by which he measured and directed the actions of his Army and followed to the letter himself. They are:

1. Never attack a position in front which you can gain by turning.
2. Charges of Cavalry should be made if possible on the flanks of infantry.
3. The first qualification of a soldier is fortitude under fatigue and privation. Courage is only the second. Hardship, poverty and actual want are the soldier's best school.
4. Nothing is so important in war as an undivided command.
5. Never do what the enemy wishes you to do.
6. A General of ordinary talent, occupying a bad position and surprised by superior force, seeks safety in retreat; but a great captain supplies all deficiencies by his courage and marches boldly to meet the attack.

While the Conway Cabal was exercising its spell over Congress the Commander in Chief, stung to retort by the criticism of lack of activity of the military under such conditions, wrote that body:

"I am informed that it is a matter of amazement and that reflections have been thrown out against this army for not being more active and enterprising. In the opinion of some they ought to have been. If the charge is just, the best way to account for it will be to refer you to the returns of our strength and those I can produce of the enemy and to the enclosed abstract of the clothing now actually wanting for the army. I can assure these gentleman [he said in reply to political criticism] that it is much easier and less distressing a thing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fireside than to occupy a cold bleak hillside and sleep under snow, without clothes or blankets."

The soldiers felt perfect confidence in the wise leadership of the Commander in Chief, and his splendid courage, foresight, and marvelous ability to endure won the final liberty of the long-suffering Colonies. He held the Army together and through his letters to Congress prevented that body from doing too many unwise things that would have spoiled completely his carefully laid plans. The end of the long struggle for liberty came on October 19, 1781, with the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. On November 20, 1782, Great Britain acknowledged the independence of the United States, and on September 3, 1783, a treaty of peace was signed at Versailles in France, and America was free.

General Washington, wise and unselfish Commander of a tattered citizen soldiery, wrung victory from the seasoned legions of Europe under discouragements that would have crushed any save an indomitable spirit. Of his leadership and skill Von Moltke is quoted as saying in Berlin in 1974:

"You have in American history one of the great captains of all times. It might be said of him, as it was of William the Silent that he seldom won a battle but he never lost a campaign."

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<http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/washington/george2.html>