



'King' George Washington

Much of the particulars we know about George Washington ~ the facts, anecdotes and legends that have come down to us through the two hundred years since his death ~ have often passed through the filter of sentimentality, and what we are left with is a "larger than life" caricature of the real man. Despite the fact that the popular image of George Washington is one of an almost god-like stature, the actual man

never, overtly at least, aspired to such heights.

George Washington, if anything can be truly said of him, was a rather modest and unassuming man. When the delegates assembled in Congress chose him to lead the newly formed Continental Army, he was at first embarrassed by the honor. According to John Adams, who nominated Washington to the position of commander of the Continental Army:

Full of anxieties concerning these confusions, and apprehending daily that we should hear very distressing news from Boston, I walked with Mr. Samuel Adams in the State House yard, for a little exercise and fresh air, before the hour of Congress, and there represented to him the various dangers that surrounded us. He agreed to them all, but said, 'What shall we do?' I answered him that he knew I had taken great pains to get our colleagues to agree upon some plan, that we might be unanimous; but he knew that they would pledge themselves to nothing; but I was determined to take a step which should compel them and all the other members of Congress to declare themselves for or against something. 'I am determined this morning to make a direct motion that Congress should adopt the army before Boston, and appoint Colonel Washington commander of it.' Mr. Adams seemed to think very seriously of it, but said nothing.

Accordingly, when Congress had assembled, I rose in my place, and in a short speech as the subject would admit, represented the state of the Colonies, the uncertainty in the minds of the people, their great expectation and anxiety, the distresses of the army, the danger of its dissolution, the difficulty of collecting another, and the probability that the Boston army would take advantage of our delays, march out of Boston, and spread desolation as far as they could go. I concluded with a motion, in form, that Congress would adopt the army at Cambridge, and appoint a General; that though this was not the proper time to nominate a General, yet, as I had reason to believe this was a point of the greatest difficulty, 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.

Mr. Washington, who happened to fit near the door, as soon as he heard me allude to him, from his usual modesty darted into the library-room.

With humble respect, Colonel George Washington accepted the honor that the Congress had bestowed on him. In his

acceptance speech, delivered to Mr. Hancock on 16 June, 1775, he stated that:

Mr. President: Tho' I am truly sensible of the high Honour done me in this Appointment, yet I feel great diffirences from a confidence that my abilities and Military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important Trust: However, as the Congress desires I will enter upon the momentous duty, and exert every power I possess In their Service for the Support of the glorious Cause: I beg they will accept my most cordial thanks for this distinguished testimony of their Approbation.

But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavourable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every Gent. in the room, that I this day declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the Command I am honoured with.

As to pay, Sir, I beg leave to assure the Congress that as no pecuniary consideration could have tempted me to have accepted this Arduous employment (at the expence of my domestic ease and happiness) I do not wish to make and profit from it: I will keep an exact Account of my expences; those I doubt not they will discharge and that is all I desire.

In a letter Mr. Washington wrote to his wife, Martha, two days later, while in Philadelphia preparing to leave for Boston, he stated

his reluctance to take on the task thrust on him. To Martha he confided his fear of not being able to meet the challenge.

...It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defence of the American cause shall be put under my care, and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the command of it.

You may believe me, my dear Paty, 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 confidence of its being a trust too great for my capacity...

In 1782 he was once more approached with a suggestion that he deemed an embarrassment. A number of officers of the Continental Line, fearing that the Congress will not be able to come through with promised payment for the troops, hatch an idea to establish a monarchy in America. They approached General Washington via an unsigned letter drafted by the hand of Colonel Lewis Nicola, a supply officer. The

letter noted the disgraceful condition of the army and the lack of compensation by the Congress. It then commented on the different forms of government, and concluded that a republic would be the least stable of them all, and least capable of fulfilling the needs of the people. According to the letter, it therefore followed that the monarchical type of government practiced in England was the ideal.

This war must have shewn to all, but to military men in particular the weakness of republics, and the exertions the army has been able to make by being under a proper head... it will I believe, be uncontroverted that the same abilities which have led us, through difficulties apparently unfurmoutable by human power, to victory and glory, those qualities that have merited and obtained the univerfal esteem and veneration of an army, would be most likely to conduct and direct us in the smoother paths of peace. Some people have

fo connected the ideas of tyranny and monarchy as to find it very difficult to separate them, it may therefore be requisite to give the head of such a constitution as I propose, some title apparently more moderate, but if all things are once adjusted I believe strong arguments might be produced for admitting the title king, which I conceive would be attended with some material advantage...

The letter from Lewis Nicola, et al, was dated 22 May, 1782. General Washington lost no time in sending a reply. Dated the same

date, 22 May, 1782, Washington's response was simple and directly to the point:

Sir: With a mixture of great surprize and astonishment I have read with attention the Sentiments you have submitted to my perusal. Be assured Sir, no occurrence in the course of the War, has given me more painful sensations than your information of there being such ideas existing in the Army as you have expressed, and I must view with abhorrence, and reprehend with feverety. For the present, the communication of them will rest in my own bosom, unless some further agitations of the matter, shall make a disclosure necessary.

I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country. If I am not deceived in the knowledge of myself, you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable; at the same time in justice to my own feelings I must add, that no Man possesses a more sincere wish to see ample justice done to the Army than I do, and as far as my powers and influence, in a constitutional way extend, they shall be employed to the utmost of my abilities to effect it, should there be any occasion. Let me conjure you then, if you have any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your Mind, and never communicate, as from yourself, or any one else, a sentiment of the like Nature.

Whether or not Mr. Nicola was the sole author of, or even the instigating force behind, the letter sent to General Washington has never been revealed. What has been revealed is that Lewis Nicola deeply regretted his participation in the scheme which General Washington took such great offense toward. After receiving the General's rebuke, he wrote three letters, dated 23, 24 and 28 May, in which he attempted to apologize for the offending suggestion. Nicola most certainly must have communicated the

General's response to the idea to the other officers who were in on the plot. It was the last instance in which the officers of the Continental Army would propose such an idea to their beloved General.

Later, in 1786, in a letter to the Secretary For Foreign Affairs, then private citizen, George Washington expressed his fear of the growing general trend of complacency toward a monarchical form of government.

What astonishing changes a few years are capable of producing. I am told that even respectable characters speak of a monarchical form of Government without horror. From thinking proceeds speaking, thence to acting is often but a single step. But how irrevocable and tremendous! what a triumph for our enemies to verify their predictions! what a triumph for the advocates of despotism to find that we are incapable of governing ourselves, and that systems founded on the basis of equal liberty are merely ideal and fallacious! Would to God that wise measures may be taken in time to avert the consequences we have but too much reason to apprehend.

But, should one think that Washington's statements were composed for the purpose of bravado and fame, a letter he wrote to the Reverend William Gordon in 1788 should

confirm the contrary. Reverend Gordon had written to Washington as early as 1782 to request access to the General's personal correspondence for the purpose of writing an

history of the War. General Washington had been receptive to the idea. Over the years he provided the Reverend Gordon with information. In the Fall of 1788 Gordon had written to Washington on the eve of his election to the Presidency (*i.e.* the election of 1789). He mentioned Washington's letter to Lewis Nicola

in a roundabout way, but gave the assurance that "*This is a secret which will remain till you are dead, unless I could be certain of not offending through the publication of your letter, with the suppression of the party to whom it was addressed.*" George Washington, in characteristic humility replied to the Reverend:

I had quite forgotten the private transaction to which you allude: nor could I recall it to mind without much difficulty. If I now recollect rightly, and I believe I do (though there were several applications made to me) I am conscious of only having done my duty. As no particular credit is due for that, and as no good but some harm might result from the publication, the letter, in my judgement, had better remain in concealment.



Mother Bedford And The American Revolutionary War

I am pleased to announce that the book I worked on for the past few years, detailing the history of Bedford County during the American Revolutionary War along with histories of the Blair County Chapter and the Somerset-Cambria Chapter, is finally completed and available for purchase from the publisher, Closson Press. The 658-page, hardbound book is the most complete compendium of information on the subject of Bedford County during the Revolution published to date. Of special interest to the researcher might be the exhaustive list of service records of the Patriots buried within the six-county region that was Bedford County in the 1770s-80s. Also of interest might be the verbatim transcriptions of all documents pertaining to, or mentioning Bedford County during the Revolutionary War period, or the unabridged collection of rosters of companies of the Militia, Continental Line and Public Officers of, or raised in Bedford County.

The book is available from Closson Press. The regular price is \$65.00 plus \$5.00 shipping/handling. (PA residents please add 6% sales tax). **NOTE:** A special price of \$55.00 (plus \$5.00 s/h and sales tax) is being offered to members of historical societies, the SAR and the DAR until September 1, 1999. Send orders to: Closson Press, 1935 Sampson Drive, Apollo, PA 15613-9208. Or, if you have Internet access, you may visit the Closson Press website at www.clossonpress.com (E-mail address: rclosson@nb.net).

3rd Quarterly Meeting ~ Blair County Chapter

The 3rd Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter, SAR will be held on Saturday, June 26, 1999 at the Kings Family Restaurant in downtown Altoona. The meeting will begin at 12:00 noon. Please plan to attend.

INTERNET NOTICE

You may have already visited my website (www.motherbedford.com) and/or the Blair County Chapter's homepage (www.motherbedford.com/BlairSAR.htm) once. I would like to invite you to come back again. I am continuing to add pages and features to the site. I currently have been working on an extensive history of the emigration of Germans and Swiss from the Palatine/Rhineland region to America. I have received permission from the Board of directors of the Fort Bedford Museum and the Borough of Bedford to display an image of the Fort Bedford Flag on the site. I am also adding transcripts of tax assessments (such as the 1782 Class Tax) which might aid researchers who can't visit the county court houses. A page on the Chapter site is devoted to news and announcements of upcoming events.