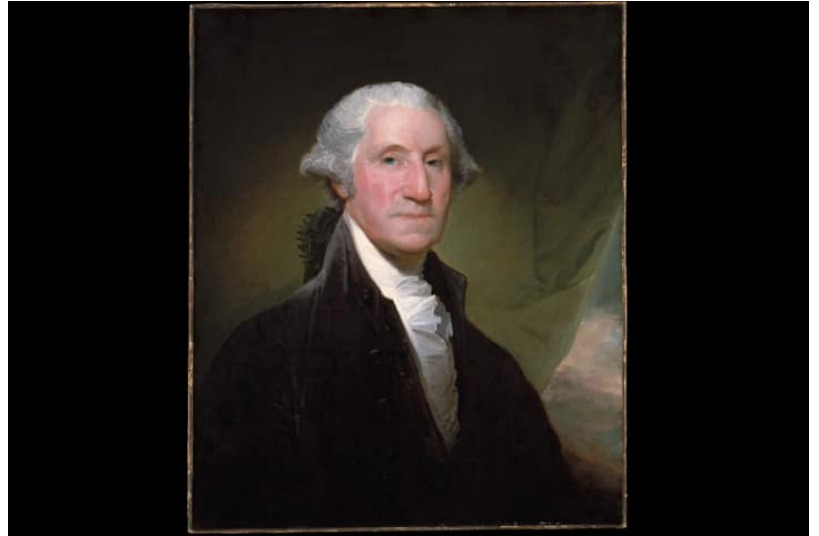




The Ides of March: George Washington Quells a Coup

It was the end of 1782 and the War for Independence was all but over, but the details of the official peace treaty had not yet been hammered out between the American delegation (John Jay, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams) and their British counterpart (David Hartley). The peace was uneasy, however, as British troops remained stationed in New York and various western outposts and American troops were ordered not to stand down until the British abandoned their posts. The lack of wartime duties gave way to boredom among the soldiers, fresh from victory over a tyrant.



In this atmosphere, the plan for a coup d'état developed, a plot known to history as the Newburgh Conspiracy.

Named for the town in New York where the Continental Army was camped, the Newburgh Conspiracy was not the first attempted revolt of soldiers experienced by the American military. There were insurrections in Connecticut in 1780 and in New Jersey and Pennsylvania in 1781. However, the Newburgh Conspiracy was the first mutiny headed by a cabal of officers. This mutiny was fomented by congressional inability to raise money from the states for the payment of the army's payroll.

While the origins of the conflict extended back several years, the initial phase kicked off toward the end of 1782. During December's final week, Major General Alexander McDougall, alongside Colonels John Brooks and Matthias Ogden, arrived in Philadelphia bearing a petition from the Army stationed at Newburgh to Congress. The petition expressed their dire situation: "We have borne all that men can bear — our property is expended — our private resources are at an end, and our friends are wearied out and disgusted with our incessant applications."

The primary complaint centered around unpaid wages. Both officers and enlisted men had been without pay for several months. Crucially, the officers were anxious about securing the half-pay pensions Congress had promised back in 1780. For them, this half pay represented "an honorable and just recompense for several years hard service," a period during which they saw their "health and fortunes" severely depleted. However, they also expressed legitimate concerns that the broad disapproval of this promise could lead Congress to renounce it. As a compromise, they proposed accepting a one-time lump sum as a substitute for the half-pay pension. Despite the petition's overall tone of restraint and its appeal for understanding, it contained implicit warnings: "Any further experiments on their [the Army's] patience may have fatal effects."

The petition was the climax of nearly half a year of ongoing unrest within the northern encampments. Previous attempts to resolve the pay disputes through engagements with state authorities had been unsuccessful, and the revisitation of the half-pay issue by Congress in the summer of 1782 only served to rekindle all the former counterarguments, amplifying the officers' sense of despair. Nonetheless, the



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concerns over pay and pensions were merely indicators of a more profound disquietude permeating Newburgh. A significant number of officers were filled with trepidation at the thought of reintegrating into civilian life. The war had rendered many financially destitute, in stark contrast to their compatriots who had prospered during the conflict. The prospect of re-entering a society that had grown accustomed to their absence posed a daunting challenge, especially in the traditionally anti-military environs of New England, where returning servicemen were often deprived of the recognition and benefits usually bestowed upon veterans. Throughout the tedious months of 1782, a sense of sacrificial suffering, compounded by uncertainty and the grim acknowledgment that years of dedicated service might end up unrecognized — or worse, detrimental to their future prospects — rendered the atmosphere increasingly volatile.

The expediency of war spurred a reluctant Congress to make these promises, but it was unwilling and constitutionally unable to keep them in the peace that followed the war.

Incredibly, debtor's prisons awaited retiring officers because of their magnanimous sacrifice of personal financial management during the War for Independence and the systematic and repeated breaking of illusory promises of back pay on the part of state and national legislatures. Washington wisely feared that an exasperated corps of officers might vacate the position they had traditionally occupied between mutinous soldiers and the civil government and that the result would be a bloody civil war.

By mid-November, having reached the end of their tether, the officers resolved to once again bring their grievances before Congress. General Henry Knox, formerly a bookseller from Massachusetts who had earned acclaim as the chief of artillery and as one of Washington's favored pupils, was entrusted with composing the petition. In his communications with Secretary of War Benjamin Lincoln, Knox meticulously prepared for the petition's presentation in Philadelphia. Lincoln, in turn, diligently endeavored to convey the gravity of the circumstances to the congressional delegates. General Arthur St. Clair from Philadelphia clarified the political dynamics to McDougall's committee and counseled the officers to communicate to Congress "in the most express and positive terms" the urgency of their situation, cautioning that without prompt action, they might face "a convulsion of the most dreadful nature and fatal consequences." The situation was quickly reaching a boiling point. As articulated by one officer, "the Event of the Embassy must be agreeable," otherwise, the implications for the future were indeterminable.

General Washington's comprehensive knowledge of the histories of the ancient republics of Athens and Rome taught him that the inevitable result of such a violent revolt would be a disdainful tyranny of armed despots that would not be removed but through the shedding of much blood. Such a prospect led Washington to send an envoy of officers to try to persuade friends of liberty in that body that the situation was dire and immediate action was necessary.

"In this situation what was to be done?" Alexander Hamilton said in a letter sent to Washington days later, recounting his memory of those dangerous days when the nationalists were willing to go to extreme ends to get their program moving forward. "It was essential to our cause that vigorous efforts should be made to restore public credit — it was necessary to combine all the motives to this end, that could operate upon different descriptions of different persons in different states. The necessity and discontents of the army presented themselves as a powerful engine."

Hamilton was one of those nationalists, and his desire to see his economic vision become reality would be a hallmark of his political career for years afterward.



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Within these swirling — and, some would argue, seditious — circumstances, the plot began to take shape. Within a day of their arrival, McDougall and his fellow officers had discussions with Robert Morris. By the end of the following week, the leaders of the nationalist faction had persuaded McDougall and his team that the solution resided in establishing a new mechanism for funding. However, they also issued a warning: Without the full cooperation of McDougall and the Army, they would relegate Army compensation claims to the state level “till all prospect of obtaining continental funds was at an end.” McDougall’s marching orders were clear: secure the backing of the entire officer corps. On January 9, he reached out to Knox regarding the strategy to align “the influence of Congress with that of the army and the public creditors to obtain permanent funds for the United States.” He suggested that this approach would “promise [the] most ultimate security to the Army.”

Next, McDougall was tasked with engaging directly and personally with members of Congress, initiating a whisper campaign aimed at subtly but clearly communicating concerns about the Army’s restlessness and the grim prospects if Congress did not dance to the tune being called by the conspirators.

Now, to Newburgh and the officers.

Friends of General Washington in Congress who heard of the plot — and other influential men who would avoid seeing the government created by the Articles of Confederation converted into rule by military junta — informed the commander of the conspiracy.

Upon receipt of this disturbing intelligence, General Washington initiated his own internal investigation of the matter, and what he discovered was a plot deeper, broader, and more nefarious than he ever suspected.

On March 10, 1783, an anonymous notice calling officers to a meeting to discuss the present predicament was distributed among the corps of officers at Newburgh. General Horatio Gates (one of Washington’s longtime rivals), who undoubtedly either wrote or dictated the note, was informed by several civilian fellow travelers that the wheels of revolution were now in motion and that the time for action was imminent. The body of the notice promised justice and even went so far as to imply that Washington backed, albeit tacitly, the rumored plans devised to exact this justice. The letter’s message was not subtle:

If you have sense enough to discover and spirit to oppose tyranny, whatever garb it may assume, awake to your situation. If the present moment be lost, your threats hereafter will be as empty as your entreaties now. Appeal from the justice to the fears of government, and suspect the man who would advise to longer forbearance.

Washington’s horror that such a scheme was gaining adherents within and without the ranks of the armed services motivated him to act with amazing dispatch. First, he employed his friend General Knox and other allies within the army to keep him apprised of any further movements toward revolt inside the corps of officers.

Second, he communicated his desire that the meeting be postponed for five days. This tactic was designed to afford him sufficient time to draft a communique to the body of officers.

Then, he occupied himself in the intervening days with drafting and perfecting an address to his army.

To Washington, this speech was critically important and would be the means of diffusing the proposed



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attack on Congress. The revised date proposed by Washington for delivery of this momentous discourse was the 15th of March, known in the ancient Roman calendar as the Ides of March.

This date was likely chosen purposely by Washington because of its historic significance, a significance that would be understood by anyone with even a casual knowledge of the history of ancient Rome and the assassination of Julius Caesar masterminded by one of his former friends that occurred on that now-auspicious date some 1,800 years earlier.

Under the direction of General Gates, the meeting began. The venue was a small structure called the Public Building, and it was filled to capacity. As Gates rose to speak to the assembly of officers, Washington quietly entered through a side door and requested permission to address his men.

Stunned by the attendance of his hated superior, Gates grudgingly acquiesced and ceded the floor to General Washington.

The crowd was hostile, impatient, and prepared to reject any unsatisfactory remedy, even one from Washington himself, particularly if he advocated any further sacrifice or delay in accomplishing the goal of getting recompense from the country they had recently liberated at the cost of so much blood and fortune.

Washington began boldly, chastising the officers for violating military “propriety,” including the anonymity (cowardice) of the organizers of this meeting. Washington continued by reminding his men of the code of honor by which a military man must live and how many among their ranks violated that code in a most vulgar manner.

Major Samuel Shaw reports that at about this point in the delivery, General Washington reached into his pocket, retrieved his recently purchased spectacles, and offered his now-famous plea for pardon, an apology that to this very day brings tears to the eyes of grown men now centuries removed from the remarkable scene.

“Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles for I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in my country’s service,” the always self-conscious commander said softly.

The point of this message plunged deeply into the hearts of the misled and misguided patriots in attendance, and tears flowed freely.

There before them stood their bespectacled and still beloved commander. He had suffered right along side them, and like Cato, the renowned Roman hero so much admired by American republicans, he refused to sacrifice virtue and propriety on the altar of personal attainment. The same could not be said of Gates and the other co-conspirators, willing to wring power from the pain and frustration of the soldiers.

Upon finishing his remarks, Washington turned on his heel and quickly, resolutely left the tent, and in his wake all the flames of sedition were doused and resolutions were offered to reaffirm the congregation’s dedication to the cause of a united America and its constitutional confederation of republican states.

Here, as in countless other moments of equal gravity, the “indispensable man” once again proved his inestimable worth to the cause of American freedom. He, as all other soldiers, had suffered personal and permanent loss as a result of his service, but he understood that the American cause was more than the cause of George Washington, Horatio Gates, or any individual man or army. This, their common cause — the Good Old Cause — was the cause of liberty.



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