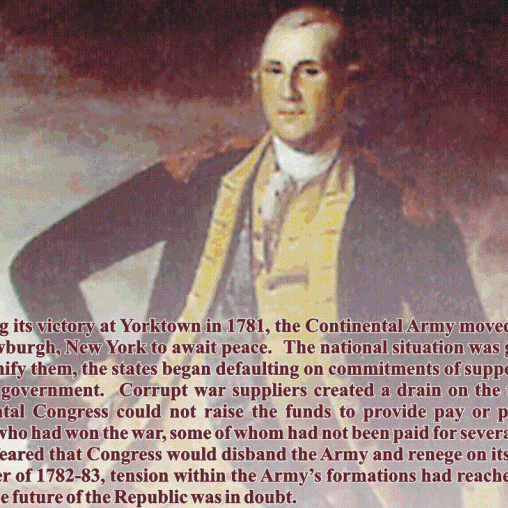


Washington at Newburgh

(Establishing the Role of the Military in a Democracy)



Following its victory at Yorktown in 1781, the Continental Army moved into quarters near Newburgh, New York to await peace. The national situation was grim. With no war to unify them, the states began defaulting on commitments of support to the weak national government. Corrupt war suppliers created a drain on the treasury. The Continental Congress could not raise the funds to provide pay or pensions to the soldiers who had won the war, some of whom had not been paid for several years. Many officers feared that Congress would disband the Army and renege on its promises. By the winter of 1782-83, tension within the Army's formations had reached a dangerous level. The future of the Republic was in doubt.

A group of officers in the teeming camp determined to compel Congress to settle its debts with the threat of military action. They attempted to enlist their victorious commander, General George Washington, to lead their plot. Many other citizens throughout the country hoped Washington would set up a monarchy in place of the ailing government. He refused every appeal, and the rebellious officers made ready to take action without him. On March 15, 1783, Washington entered the officers' assembly and warned them of the grave danger inherent in their scheme. He was having little effect until he retrieved a pair of spectacles from his pocket to read.

The officers were astonished. None of them had seen their hero in his eyeglasses, and he seemed to age before them. But his off-hand comment, intended to put them at ease, demonstrated once again the depth of the character that had sustained a revolution. "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country." The act, the statement, and the power of a leader's example quelled an incipient rebellion. As Jefferson later commented, "The moderation and virtue of a single character probably prevented this revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that Liberty it was intended to establish."

Washington's selfless leadership instituted the tradition of civilian control of the military in America. His willing subordination, of himself and the Army he commanded, to civilian authority established the fundamental tenet of our professional ethos. For the first time in history, a professional military force began to flourish in a democratic society. The United States Army is heir to that legacy.