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In Defense of the General: George Washington's Aides-de-Camp and Their Campaign to Protect
the Commander-in-Chief

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Introduction

At the start of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress gave General George Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, the authority to appoint a military secretary and three aides-de-camp. Washington's aides, devoted to the cause of independence, were evidence "that [it] is the actions, not the commission, that make the Officer – and that there is more expected from him than the *Title*."¹ Though this was penned by Washington during the French and Indian War, the general clearly applied this mantra to his aides, and the aides took those words to heart and became officers of great merit who worked side by side with Washington to win the Revolutionary War. They proved themselves worthy to be on Washington's staff by their dedication and loyalty, rather than letting their rank speak for them.

"In Defense of the General," based on a careful reading of letters by Washington's most important and longest-serving aides, seeks to understand the role the general's aides played in protecting their commander during the Revolution. Bound by their loyalty to both America and Washington himself, the aides became a military family with Washington as the patriarch. They applied themselves to their various duties with diligence, efficiently managing the war effort for eight years. Though they were kept busy by their official work as aides-de-camp, they took it upon themselves to create an unofficial duty: protecting Washington. Over the course of the war, these aides played a central role in shaping and defending their commander's image through their letters to and interactions with other army officers, their families, each other, and Congress. They also fiercely defended Washington during the Conway Cabal and after the Battle of Monmouth, attacking his enemies thoroughly to put the general above them. The aides saw the real man

¹ "Orders," January 8, 1756, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, ed. W.W. Abbot (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 2:257.

behind the image of a strong, eloquent general, yet still chose to praise him, knowing that his name could possibly be the only thing keeping men in the field. Their praise and defense ultimately laid the foundation to make Washington a key symbol of the American Revolution.

Chapter 1

Because Washington received little education in his youth, he developed the skill of being able to recruit men of “outstanding ability” in positions nearest him, who then managed the war effort and praised Washington’s performance as the commander in chief.¹ Washington selected each of his thirty-two aides-de-camp because of their intelligence and writing abilities, not because of political connections, pedigree, or battlefield experience. Almost all the aides had college degrees or went to college for at least a year, and seven aides were educated in Europe. Some aides did have the benefits of prestige and prominent family names. Washington’s nephew George Lewis was an aide, and Washington also hired the sons of major political leaders as well as the well-educated sons of his prewar acquaintances. Robert Hanson Harrison was Washington’s friend and lawyer in Virginia before becoming an aide. John and Jonathan Trumbull were the sons of Connecticut governor Jonathan Trumbull, the only colonial governor to side with the Americans. John Laurens’s father Henry Laurens was a well-known figure in Congress and later served as that body’s president.²

Unlike these men, sixteen, half, of Washington’s aides-de-camp did not have an extensive family pedigree or a direct prewar connection to Washington, which shows that the general did not hire aides based specifically on status. In a few cases, Washington’s aides had connections to overcome and sought Washington’s patronage to prove their loyalty to the new nation. Edmund Randolph’s father was a Loyalist, so he joined Washington’s staff to prove that

¹ Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the Military Tradition*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 76.

² For an overview of General Washington’s aides-de-camp and their experience in the Revolutionary War, see Arthur S. Lefkowitz, *George Washington’s Indispensable Men*, (Lanham, MD: Stackpole Books, 2003) and the Appendix. Unless otherwise cited, all following information on the aides can be found in Lefkowitz.

he was dedicated to America. Richard Varick had served as an aide to Benedict Arnold and being on Washington's staff served as his way of redeeming his reputation and reassuring the public that he was not a part of Arnold's treason.

The aides also came from across the colonies. Eight of the thirteen original colonies were represented on Washington's staff. Five aides were from Massachusetts; four each from New York, Connecticut, and Maryland each; three were from Pennsylvania; and one each from South Carolina and France. Ten aides hailed from Virginia alone. Washington gravitated toward Virginians because he was familiar with them, but there is no explicit evidence that the aides from Virginia significantly impacted work at headquarters. The aides' time on Washington's staff ranged from only nineteen days to over four years. As the war progressed, Washington's staff grew to include other positions such as extra aides-de-camp, assistant military secretaries, recording secretaries, and volunteer aides-de-camp, though there was never a true distinction between titles in the busy headquarters environment.

Washington described the aides, their dedication and their work environment as follows: "...persuaded I am that nothing but the zeal of those gentlemen who live with me and act in this capacity for the great American cause and personal attachment to me has induced them to undergo the trouble and confinement they have experienced since they have become members of my family."³ Though bombarded with a large workload, aides remained humorous at headquarters and in many of their letters to each other, and they were said to be "exceedingly witty... sensible, genteel, polite... modest [and] worthy... [and] good natured."⁴ Some of the aides were also enamored with the idea of honor and glory, especially Tench Tilghman,

³ George Washington to John Hancock, April 23, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 4:112-3.

⁴ Mrs. Theodorick Bland quoted in Arthur S. Lefkowitz, *George Washington's Indispensable Men*, 115.

Alexander Hamilton, and John Laurens. Tilghman served as a volunteer aide with no pay for four years, to show that he was honorable and not in the position for financial gain. Laurens and Hamilton, however, associated honor with military glory and even death. Laurens wrote his father that he would either die or have the honor of seeing “the triumph of the cause in which we are engaged.”⁵ Writing to his future bride, Hamilton said she had “given me a motive to outlive my pride, I had almost said my honor, but America must not be witness to my disgrace.”⁶ Aide Joseph Reed expressed the devotion of the aides at the start of the war: “I have no inclination to be hanged for half treason.”⁷ The aides were completely in and fulfilled their duties wholeheartedly with the common goal of promoting the cause of American liberty.

The military “family” was ironically a tradition from the British army, and Washington often referred to the aides as “the family.” The general completed their family as a father figure. Washington placed firm trust in each aide, but the military family of the commander in chief had a strained relationship at times, often because of Washington’s treatment of the aides, either too caring or too temperamental. Though he did not always show it, Washington was grateful that these intelligent men stayed with him in an almost invisible position, as he knew they were capable of holding higher offices or being involved on the civil side of the war. But they made clear their dedication to both Washington and the Revolution in staying on his staff.

Soon after Washington accepted command in 1775, he appointed Joseph Reed one of his first aide-de-camps. Reed’s correspondence with Washington while on his staff demonstrates the personal relationship Washington built with most of his aides as well as the trust he placed in

⁵ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, January 23, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens*, ed. William Gillmore Simms (New York, 1867), 111.

⁶ Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Schuyler, September 6, 1780, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 2:423.

⁷ Joseph Reed quoted in William B. Reed, *The Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1847), 1:1847.

them. In a confidential letter to Reed in 1775, Washington wrote, “Could I have foreseen what I have and am like to experience, no consideration upon earth should have induced me to accept this command.”⁸ These were Washington’s real feelings, and he trusted the aides not to share this information. Washington did not like to fraternize with his subordinates, but the aides seem to be the one exception to this rule. The aides, especially Reed at the start of the war and army organization process, knew the hardships the army faced and the doubt and weariness Washington felt as commander. Washington was the only one who truly saw the effort of his staff, and he sought to reward them by raising their pay, a great act of kindness and reciprocal loyalty:

“I take the liberty unsolicited by, and unknown to my aid de Camps to inform your Honorable body, that their pay is not, by any means, equal to their trouble and confinement... No person wishes more to save money to the public than I do – nor no person has aim’d more at it – but there are some cases in which parsimony may be ill placed; and to this I take to be one...”⁹

Washington took to some of the aides, including Hamilton, as surrogate sons of sorts, though some of them appreciated the sentiment more than others. That Washington even called his staff his “military family,” a term common in the British Army, greatly differed from his aloofness and stiffness with other officers to maintain distance between the commander and the subordinates. This bond of loyalty between Washington and his aides would prove vital later in the war as Washington’s supposed enemies came to the forefront.

Depending on the aide, Washington was more formal and reserved or more friendly and even paternalistic. Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens and Major James McHenry seemed to relish their closeness to Washington and were more open in their relationship. Washington’s letters to

⁸Washington to Joseph Reed, November 28, 1775, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, 2:448.

⁹ Washington to John Hancock, April 23, 1776, in *Ibid.*, 4:112-3.

McHenry showed “intimacy in the easy and playful style.”¹⁰ Laurens reciprocated Washington’s affection in their personal correspondence, and David Humphreys was called the “belov’d of Washington” for his dedication to the commander.¹¹

Hamilton was the aide who did not appreciate Washington’s fatherly attentions towards his staff, but he clearly sought Washington’s approval like a son would seek a father’s. When Washington displayed any kind of openness with Hamilton, Hamilton wrote back with stiff formality based on a footing of military confidence. In early 1781, being under Washington’s thumb finally pushed Hamilton to leave the headquarters staff. Washington asked Hamilton to meet with him, but before going to Washington’s office, Hamilton spoke with the Marquis de Lafayette and handed a letter to fellow aide Tench Tilghman, all of which he claimed took no more than two minutes. When he met Washington on the stairs, the general accused Hamilton of disrespecting him by being ten minutes late.

Hamilton wrote to his father-in-law, former general Philip Schuyler, about his break with Washington, telling him to keep the incident secret. Hamilton told him that he “always disliked the office of an Aide-de-camp as having in it a kind of personal dependence.”¹² Hamilton’s words were true: Washington benefitted from the labor and intelligence of his aides, and those aides benefitted from his elevated status and their position under his direct supervision. Washington endorsed the aides for promotion, and even wrote letters of recommendation for them himself. John Trumbull was on Washington’s staff for only nineteen days, yet he used that position for advancement for the rest of his life, and his brother Jonathan Trumbull, Jr. said that

¹⁰ Bernard C. Steiner, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry*, (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1907), 19.

¹¹ Gerald Edward Kahler, “Gentlemen of the Family: General George Washington’s Aides-de-camp and Military Secretaries,” (Master’s thesis, University of Richmond, 1997), 112.

¹² Hamilton to Philip Schuyler, February 18, 1781, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 2:565.

“my ambition would be highly gratified by so near an admission to the person and confidence of General Washington” when Washington invited him to join his staff.¹³ Hamilton, though he disliked this dependence, used it to his advantage as much as any other aide that accepted Washington’s fatherly treatment. “Indeed when advances of this kind have been made to me on his part, they were received in a manner that showed... I had no inclination to court them,” Hamilton claimed.¹⁴ Hamilton was prepared to leave Washington’s staff, and though Washington wanted to speak with him to heal the rift, Hamilton declined the offer. Illustrating the importance of the aides to the war effort, he did stay at headquarters until another aide returned from an assignment, knowing how heavy the workload was at headquarters and not wanting “to distress him or the public business, by quitting him before he could derive other assistance.”¹⁵

With Washington as the aides’ father-figure in their military family, the aides became a band of brothers. Their job required them to constantly be in each other’s company; they became fast friends. Many of the aides’ letters to each other contain sentiments like, “All the Lads embrace you. The General sends his love.”¹⁶ Nicknames were common among them: “Hammie” for Hamilton, “Mac” for McHenry, and the “ancient secretary” for Harrison. Affection between them was also shown through gifts and other small acts of service. On an errand, Caleb Gibbs “sent a keg of the old wine and two loaves of sugar,” and checked on a horse for Harrison.¹⁷ Though they were managing an entire revolution, the aides still found time for fun and writing about it to aides who missed the antics. When aide John Laurens was away from headquarters, Hamilton wrote him with news that “McHenry would write you; but besides public business he

¹³ Jonathan Trumbull, Jr to Washington, April 27, 1781, in *Founders Online* (National Archives), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05553>.

¹⁴ Hamilton to Philip Schuyler, February 18, 1781, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 2:566.

¹⁵ Hamilton quoted in Lefkowitz, *George Washington’s Indispensable Men*, 228.

¹⁶ Hamilton to John Laurens, January 8, 1780, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 2:255.

¹⁷ Caleb Gibbs to Samuel Blachley Webb, January 7, 1777, in *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Lancaster, PA: Wickersham Press, 1893), 179.

pleads his being engaged in writing a heroic poem of which the family are the subject... He celebrates our usual [morning] entertainment.”¹⁸ Harrison had come to wake his fellow aides with the day’s work: “on Ham [Hamilton] and Henry [McHenry] call; congenial pair/ who in rough blankets wrapped snor’d loud defiance/ to packets huge, to morning gun & Gibbs!/ For oft in gamesome mood, these twain combin’d/ to tease Secretarius [Harrison] through him they pris’d/ next to the chief [Washington] who holds the reigns of War.”¹⁹ Aide Richard Kidder Meade once climbed up a chimney to read a letter from Hamilton, according to McHenry. After all the time they spent together, the goodbyes when they left the staff were filled with love and sadness. Harrison arrived at headquarters after resigning from the army to say goodbye to his fellow aides, but found Hamilton gone. Harrison wrote Hamilton later in a personal farewell, saying “...for as to affection, mine for You will continue to my latest breath...let me have the next pleasure to the favor of a Letter now & then, in which write of matters personally interesting to yourself, as they will be so to me.”²⁰ This affection lasted beyond the war and carried into the early republic.

The aides all experienced the same things as soldiers in the Continental Army, and they depended on each other at headquarters and in battle, sharing the same work and the same commander. Working with the commander meant little to no breaks for the aides, for they tended to use Washington as their example. If he did not stop working, the aides did not stop working. Washington said, “It requires Men of abilities to execute the duties with propriety and dispatch where there is such a multiplicity of business as must attend the Commander in chief of such an army as our’s.... I give into no kind of amusements myself; consequently those about me can

¹⁸ Hamilton to John Laurens, May 22, 1779, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 2:53-4.

¹⁹ McHenry quoted in Lefkowitz, *George Washington’s Indispensable Men*, 198.

²⁰ Robert Hanson Harrison to Hamilton, March 26, 1781, in *Ibid.*, 2:584-86.

have none, but are confined from morn till Eve.”²¹ James McHenry, who was a doctor as well as an aide, wrote: “When I joined His Excellency’s suite, I gave up soft beds, undisturbed repose, and the habits of ease... for... the hard floor or the softer sod of the fields, early rising, and almost perpetual duty.”²² Depending on where Washington camped, aides slept in tents or on floors or thin cots, sometimes even multiple aides cramped in one bed, and they slept in open fields if they were on the march with the army. Between the strenuous activity of headquarters, little sleep, and traveling through nights and through bad weather on missions and marches, some aides even worked themselves to the point of severe illness.

No matter their personal relationship with Washington or with one another, the aides-de-camp had essential duties to fulfill. Aides-de-camp to the commander-in-chief handled every aspect of the Revolution, including battle plans, supply statistics, war finances, army organization, mutinies, managing the Northern and Southern armies, and relations with potential foreign allies. Writing endless letters was not their only assignment. The aides were also expected to be men of “social ease”; they were the ones called to speak with foreign dignitaries and Congressional delegations, to leave them with a good impression of the Continental Army. They also encouraged their guests to give information, and other officers invited to headquarters often brought records of their troops. Aides attended councils of war, taking minutes and writing reports afterwards. Washington also sent them to handle prisoner exchanges, as well as to deliver messages and orders to generals in both the Southern and Northern departments and write reports to Congress. Aides’ reports to Congress from the front were that body’s primary sources during battles. On missions away from headquarters, Washington’s aides negotiated purchases for

²¹ Washington to John Hancock, April 23, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series., 4:112-3.

²² James McHenry to his father, date unknown, in Steiner, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry*, 24.

supplies, including gunpowder, arms, bullets, blankets, food, and clothing, arranged troop transfers with other general officers, and met with Congressional delegations or diplomats. They continuously worked behind the scenes to ensure that the soldiers' conditions would improve.

When the French allied with the Continentals, aides Tench Tilghman, Alexander Hamilton, and John Laurens, communicated with French officers and officials, making them instrumental in the Franco-American alliance. In the midst of battle, aides needed to be quick-thinking and calm under pressure. Washington rode into battle with one or two aides, and they delivered express orders on the field when enemy movements changed and even rallied troops if necessary. Aides Laurens, Hamilton, Fitzgerald, and Webb were wounded in battle, Laurens and Hamilton more than once, and they acted "as military men... and proved themselves as worthy to wield the sword as the pen."²³ Some aides even led troops in battle as regularly commissioned officers, either before or after being on Washington's staff.

The commander in chief had high expectations, and when aides left headquarters on business, they carried the weight of the commander's word as well as an inherent desire for his approval. Colonel Samuel Blachley Webb said that if Washington were to ever accuse him of disobeying his orders, "it would make me one of the most wretched beings in the World – even to receive a reprimand from him would be next to Death."²⁴ In late 1777, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton traveled to upstate New York to collect troops from General Horatio Gates, who did not want to give up his men, according to what Hamilton wrote Washington.

"...all I could effect was to have one Brigade dispatched... I found myself infinitely embarrassed [and] was at a loss how to act. I felt the importance of strengthening you as much as possible... I am afraid what I have done may not meet with your approbation as not being perhaps fully warranted by your instructions; but I ventured to do what I

²³ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, July 2, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of John Laurens*, 202.

²⁴ Samuel Blachley Webb to Major General Parsons, March 7, 1781, in *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb*, 327-28.

thought right, hoping that at least the goodness of my intention will excuse the error of my judgement.”²⁵

Washington gave Hamilton explicit instructions to get more troops from General Gates in Albany, New York, but Gates refused all but the weakest and smallest brigade, forcing Hamilton to argue for better because Washington required the extra men. Hamilton complained about his encounter with Gates. This missive was surely circulated among the aides at headquarters to keep them up to speed on army news, and it most likely triggered their dislike for Gates, if not fueled their already existing displeasure and their belief that Washington was the only one who should be in command.

Off the battlefield, the aides maintained the utmost confidentiality, as they were also called upon to manage spy rings because Washington did not have a separate intelligence department. Washington chose them for secret operations to maintain security. Their routine work at headquarters masked their parts in espionage. Aides also questioned prisoners of war and deserters from the British army as a way of gaining more intelligence. Though instructions to spies and allusions to intelligence were written by the aides, they never wrote any explicit details about spy operations at Washington’s headquarters, maintaining secrecy for the rest of their lives.

The chief duty of these chosen men was to be “ready Pen-men,” “to be taken wherever they can be found,” as Washington wrote, capable of writing intelligently, and even endlessly.²⁶ Aides that could not write well were useless to Washington. There is a reigning myth that the aides were divided into writing aides and riding aides, but this is not true; all aides were writers.

²⁵ Hamilton to George Washington, November 6, 1777, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:354.

²⁶ Washington to Charles Lee, February 10, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, 3:283.; Washington to the Committee of Congress with the Army, January 29, 1778, in *The Writings of Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1933). 10:378.

Washington himself said to General Charles Lee that even if aides could “be Serviceable in Riding, and [useful in] delivering orders... the duties of an Aid de Camp at Head Quarters cannot be properly discharged by any but Pen-men.”²⁷ George Baylor, the only aide that was not one of these “ready Pen-men,” could not compose a decent letter, but was a reliable courier. Even so, Washington discreetly removed him from his staff as soon as possible.

Over the course of eight years of war, the thirty-two aides-de-camp wrote 17,000 documents. Reports, troop returns, inventories, warrants, ledgers, commissions, and Washington’s official orders were only the beginning of the papers that left the desks of the aides. Though written by various men, their letters remain consistent in style, for each aide was quickly taught to imitate in writing the voice of General Washington. This consistency can be seen even in just a handful of letters. The general himself once said that “it is absolutely necessary... for me to have persons that can think for me, as well as execute orders.”²⁸ Aides-de-camp even rewrote letters with the smallest erasures, as Washington wanted letters under his signature to be perfect. Washington’s aides were sometimes required to make decisions on their own on behalf of their commander, so they had to understand exactly what Washington expected as well as the complex innerworkings of the army. He gave aides general notes on what he wanted written, and “having made out a letter from such notes, it was submitted to the General for his... correction, afterwards copied fair... and signed by him,” according to aide James McHenry.²⁹ Aides needed a consistent writing style because some letters were also composed by

²⁷ Washington to Charles Lee, February 10, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, 3:283.

²⁸ Washington to Joseph Reed, January 23, 1776, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, 3:173.

²⁹ McHenry quoted in Steiner, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry*, 27n1.

more than one aide; these “circular letters” were often copies of General Orders to be distributed to each regiment.

The aides-de-camp performed their various duties with exceptional skill, though the duty they gave themselves unofficially was certainly their greatest achievement during the Revolution. Bound together by their loyalty and closeness to Washington, the aides were key in defending the general throughout the war, and they targeted his enemies and ensured that no one threatened his authority as commander in chief. Washington’s aides made it their personal mission to praise and defend their commander in chief, as they believed he was the key to winning the war and replacing him was ultimately asking for defeat.

Not only did the aides believe Washington’s skill was superior to other generals, but so was his character. They thought the other candidates for the command were self-absorbed and removed from the enlisted men, unable to meet their needs in a proper way, which would lead the army to a sure defeat. The commander’s character could also affect morale, and only a man with a good reputation could inspire men to enlist and stay enlisted. Anything they said about the general could be made public, so they chose to hide their negative opinions, only voicing those that benefitted Washington and the army.

What the aides did not say proved as important as what they did. Washington was exceedingly negative in private and in letters copied by the aides and sent to Congress, asking for more money, men, and supplies. The commander acted more positive in front of the enlisted men so they would not learn the truth of the army’s and Congress’s failings. Because morale was one of the only things keeping the army intact, the aides never shared Washington’s negativity or voiced the dire straits of the army.

While Washington possessed the gift of silence, the aides were vocal. They wrote words full of praise for their general, both to their families as well as to members of Congress. Some aides had family connections to powerful people who could continue to spread the word that George Washington was indeed essential to the war effort. Congress was influential in army commissions and their opinion was a factor keeping Washington in command. The aides wrote them singing his praises because they knew that war was not only winning on the battlefield, but in politics as well.

Aides-de-camp often mentioned their commander in letters to their families. Illustrating their protectiveness of General Washington, aide Joseph Reed wrote his wife Esther in mid-1776, “I do not think it right for the General to expose his person, on which all our safety so much depends.”³⁰ The aides believed that no other general was as capable as Washington at leading the Continental forces. There would be no point in defending his reputation if he was not alive to hold the command with which they so trusted him. An influential woman in the Philadelphia social scene, Esther Reed, with her husband’s words showing obvious dedication to and trust in Washington and his abilities, could then go to her friends to spread Reed’s message. On two separate occasions he wrote her about the dangers of playing politics during a revolution. “Instead of contesting about... forms of government, we must now oppose the common enemy with spirit and resolution, or all is lost,” he told Esther decisively.³¹ Three days later he repeated the sentiment, wishing that politics would be pushed aside and that “every nerve be strained for our defense.”³² Reed’s loyalty and belief in creating an independent nation so influenced his wife that she organized the Ladies Association of Philadelphia and contributed to the broadside “The

³⁰ Joseph Reed to Esther Reed, June 27, 1776, in Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, 1:193.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Reed to Esther Reed, June 30, 1776, in *Ibid.*, 1:194.

Sentiments of an American Woman,” both of which appealed to women to support the Continentals and raised funds for supplies for the army.

Around the same time, Reed also wrote his brother-in-law about an interaction he had with British officers belonging to General Howe’s retinue. Reed met one of Howe’s officers, who said that he had a letter addressed to a Mr. Washington. “I told him we knew no such person in the army,” Reed wrote.³³ The other officer came back with a second letter addressed to George Washington, Esquire, which Reed declined. Reed continued his story, “I could not receive a letter to the General under such direction... He then asked me under what title General, -- but catching himself, Mr. Washington chose to be addressed. I told him the General’s station in the army was well known...”³⁴ It was a third letter that finally addressed Washington correctly, and Reed accepted it and delivered it to the general. There was a hint of defiance in the face of Britain, which Reed subtly encouraged his brother-in-law to embrace as well. But more importantly, Reed showed the loyalty to Washington that all the aides embodied. There was a hint of defiance in the face of Britain, which Reed is subtly encouraging his brother-in-law to do.

More explicit praise of Washington’s character and abilities came from Tilghman when he wrote his father in late 1776. Tilghman stated that Washington’s “civilities to me have been more than I had a right to expect, but I endeavour to make it up by my Assiduity in executing his Commands.”³⁵ Washington was not a tyrannical general, and though he was aloof and distant, he greatly respected his subordinate officers. Tilghman continues that “an Order once given by him is implicitly obeyed tho’ every Department,” implying that a command given by anyone else as

³³ Reed to Charles Petit, July 15, 1776, in Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed*, 1:204.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Tench Tilghman to James Tilghman, August 13, 1776, in *Memoir of Lieutenant Colonel Tench Tilghman*, ed. S.A. Harrison and Oswald Tilghman (Albany: J. Munsell, 1876), 131.

commander in chief may not be so willingly obeyed, that Washington was vital to the success of the American war effort.³⁶

In another letter to his father in 1776, Tilghman describes Washington's military skill at the Battle of Brooklyn. Though the Continental Army's retreat from Brooklyn Heights was before "an Enemy much superior in Numbers," Washington evacuated his troops successfully.³⁷ Even in retreat from the enemy, Tilghman kept faith in the commander-in-chief to lead the army, maintaining a fierce loyalty to Washington by not abandoning him at the first sign of failure. At Kips Bay that same year, Tilghman wrote his father that Washington "laid his Cane over many of the Officers who shewed their men the Example of running," during an unplanned retreat.³⁸ Washington, as well as his other generals, tried to convince the men that there was no reason to retreat, and Tilghman paints Washington as a fearless commander who attempted to create order out of chaos. Though Kips Bay was an American defeat, Washington did everything in his power to turn the outcome around, and his aides-de-camp witnessed his efforts.

Even after his break with Washington and he left headquarters, Alexander Hamilton still saw it as his duty to protect the reputation of his commander. Writing to McHenry, who surely understood Washington's and Hamilton's personalities, Hamilton stated: "The Great man and I have come to an open rupture.... He shall for once repent his ill-humor. Without a shadow of reason and on the slightest ground, he charged me in the most affrontive manner with treating him with disrespect."³⁹ Here Hamilton obviously uses "Great man" with sarcasm because he saw the truth behind the great man everyone wanted Washington to be. Wanting his own command and kept from it by Washington, Hamilton took this argument with Washington as a perfect

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Tilghman to James Tilghman, September 3, 1776, in Ibid., 134.

³⁸ Tilghman to James Tilghman, September 1776, in Ibid., 137.

³⁹ Hamilton to James McHenry, February 18, 1781, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 2:569.

moment to leave the staff. Even so, Hamilton explicitly asked McHenry to keep his break with Washington a secret from those outside of headquarters, because despite his personal issues with Washington, Hamilton understood that his image as a commander and his popularity was crucial to maintaining the war effort. McHenry, Hamilton, and the other aides typically accepted the blows of Washington's temper, for if it impacted anyone but them, word would spread and the general's reputation would be tarnished, with the security of his command possibly threatened.

In a letter to Philip Schuyler, Hamilton detailed his break with Washington in 1781. In the same missive, Hamilton tells his father-in-law that though he did not get along with Washington at times, he still respected him and thought highly of his skill as a commander:

“The General is a very honest man. His competitors have slender abilities and less integrity. His popularity has often been essential to the safety of America, and is still of great importance to it. These considerations have influenced my past conduct respecting him, and will influence my future. I think it is necessary he should be supported.”⁴⁰

Even more important in promoting Washington's reputation than letters to family members and prominent individuals were letters to members of Congress. The aides saw the floor of Congress as another battlefield, writing strategically timed and worded letters to members of Congress about Washington. The general's aides intentionally sent letters praising Washington to certain members of Congress, trying to keep in the field the man who was possibly the army's only reason for standing. Words were currency for the aides, and they were not spent haphazardly on those who could not use them to their full potential in supporting Washington.

The government was truly Washington's biggest obstacle, as it controlled all funding and army commissions, and could therefore abandon the army and Washington by appointing a new commander less qualified for the position. Colonel Hamilton wrote *A Representation to the*

⁴⁰ Hamilton to Philip Schuyler, February 18, 1781, in *Ibid.*, 2:567.

Committee of Congress while the army was camped at Valley Forge. This 13,000-word report outlined the innerworkings of the army and served as a rebuttal against Washington's critics, both military and civil. It outlined everything the army had done while encamped at Valley Forge, from drilling troops to supply statistics. The report also contained a plan for completely reforming the Continental Army.

Colonel John Laurens wrote the most opinion pieces to Congress, most likely because he had a family connection to the government. Mixing the personal with the political, Laurens' father Henry Laurens was both family and a member of Congress, later becoming its president. The father read his son's comments on Washington and covertly watched Congress's members for any signs of enemies to the commander. Though his letters to his father were usually confidential, Laurens knew his father could use his words to build support for Washington when it was low. Colonel Laurens even directly reprimanded Congress for "giving orders to officers on detached commands, without communicating them to the General, [which] is not only a deficiency of politeness, considered as an omission of a compliment which is due him."⁴¹ Colonel Laurens felt that Henry Laurens, as the president of Congress, was responsible for ensuring that its members showed Washington the proper respect, whether they liked him or not. Because all of the aides were loyal to Washington, they wanted him to be treated as the true commander of the army, and they felt that if Congress undermined his authority, it was only a matter of time before that spread to the army ranks.

Laurens also wrote his father that Washington was really the only man capable of commanding the Continental Army. "If ever there was a man in the world whose moderation and Patriotism fitted him for the command of a Republican army, he is, and he merits an unrestrained

⁴¹ Laurens to Henry Laurens, April 5, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of John Laurens*, 154.

confidence.”⁴² The aides knew of rumors that Congress plotted to replace Washington, and they believed that any of his successors would be unsuccessful because they would lead the army for the benefit of themselves rather than the whole country. Because the aides were constantly with Washington, they observed how he commanded, and their confidence in him was based on personal experience.

A general who believed himself better than his inferiors in a republican army in a country that aimed for democracy was the antithesis of the Revolution’s purpose. According to Laurens, Washington, “our truly republican general,” who “set the example of passing the winter in a hut himself,” and therefore did not just lead by issuing orders, but also by example.⁴³ Washington also “disavow[ed] the cruel treatment of [British] prisoners with which he has been so often charged.”⁴⁴ Laurens also stated that Washington gave the captives blankets purchased with the money used to secure supplies for the army, “to establish his reputation in point of humanity.”⁴⁵ Though they were the enemy, Washington did not abuse the British prisoners, showing humanity and kindness and the respect the army warranted for not treating prisoners as the British did on prison ships. Laurens explicitly praised Washington for this, as he knew that any other general would not have been so fair to enemy prisoners.

Though the aides had a real job to do, including spy rings and army organization, they continued their praise for Washington through the whole war, making that their constant focus, knowing that such praise could affect the outcome of the war itself. They chose to defend their commander in chief, despite their knowledge of Washington’s flaws and the stress of war. Their closeness to Washington and each other created a bond that made their defense of the general

⁴² Laurens to Henry Laurens May 7, 1778, in *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴³ Laurens to Henry Laurens, December 15, 1777, in *Ibid.*, 93-4.

⁴⁴ Laurens to Henry Laurens, February 9, 1778, in *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

that much stronger, as they were sons defending their father figure. However, the aides' strongest fight for their commander was not in their praise for him, but in their defense of him among threats from his enemies.

Chapter 2

Although General Washington's aides-de-camp did praise him often in order to protect his image and authority as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, that praise was not their most powerful weapon. Often the aides blamed or scapegoated others to show that Washington was better than his other generals. During the Conway Cabal in 1778 and after the Battle of Monmouth later that same year, Washington's aides blamed and insulted General Thomas Conway, General Horatio Gates, Thomas Mifflin, and General Charles Lee to prove that Washington was the most successful general in the Continental Army and therefore the only one capable of fulfilling the duties of commander-in-chief.¹

The Conway Cabal occurred in the winter of 1778, when the army was encamped at Valley Forge. The classic definition of the Cabal begins with General Thomas Conway, for whom the Cabal is named, General Horatio Gates, and Washington's first and former aide-de-camp Thomas Mifflin. While the army was at Valley Forge, the Cabal formed after a long string of defeats for Washington's army, and many Americans feared losing the war. Washington's detractors blamed him for every defeat, and some wanted to replace Washington as commander with Gates, who was Mifflin's choice.

What came to be called a cabal might more accurately be termed an attempt at an "administrative coup" which began earlier and did not actually involve a "secret" plot against Washington. This "administrative coup" did not actually seek to replace Washington but rather sought to put someone above his position and diminish his authority as the commander-in-chief.

¹ For an overview of the Conway Cabal and the Battle of Monmouth, see Mark Edward Lender, *Cabal!: The Plot Against General Washington*, (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2019) and Mark Edward Lender and Gary Wheeler Stone, *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).

Gates, Mifflin, and Conway, as well as several members of Congress were displeased with Washington and privately discussed putting Gates in his place, and they hoped to discredit Washington by sending Conway, “whose assignment was to expose Washington’s grave defects as commander of the army” to Washington’s headquarters to do so.² The Board of War, created by Congress to reform the army, was the true threat in the Cabal. While not a wise decision militarily, Congress formed the Board based on the same fear that began the Cabal itself, trying to ensure that the new country won the war. Formed in two years before the Cabal in June 1776 by the Second Continental Congress, the Board of War was a special standing committee that would oversee the army’s administration and make recommendations for the army to Congress. The Board’s members initially came from Congress. Because those men could not keep up with the pace of the workload, in 1777, the Board’s membership changed to three permanent members who were not in Congress plus a clerical staff. At the same time, the Board’s duties were expanded. It would supervise recruitment of soldiers and weapon acquisition. The Board of War also became Congress’s only official intermediary between it, the army, and military affairs in individual states.

In the fall of 1777, Gates was appointed the president of the Board of War and Quartermaster General Thomas Mifflin was appointed as a member. The inspector general, who would control the training of the entire army as well as be the commander’s agent for tactical efficiency, was under the jurisdiction of the Board. As the president, Gates was technically ranked above Washington, diminishing the role of the commander. Gates and the Board began interfering with logistics and field operations when they were only meant to be keeping records. Washington was against the Board interfering with army operations and the Board as a whole, so

² Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789*. (Boston: Northeastern University, 1983), 216.

he reported directly to Congress instead of through the Board by writing directly to the president of Congress. Washington was even warned by a former member of the Board itself: “Be ware of your Board of War.”³

In December 1777, Congress appointed Conway as the inspector general. Conway’s instructions indicated that he would outrank Washington as well, and possibly even have control over Washington’s subordinates, which would include his aides-de-camp. As inspector general, Conway reported to Gates, and because both men were above Washington, they effectively eliminated any authority of the commander. By appointing Conway to this rank, Gates and Mifflin hoped that Washington would be so furious and his pride so hurt that he would resign on his own, or that Conway would find such fault in Washington that he would oust him from command.

Based mostly on gossip and not much actual intelligence, the supposed Cabal began with a letter from Conway to Gates in which he stated, “Heaven has been determined to save your Country; or a weak General and bad Counselors would have ruined it.”⁴ Conway was saying that the country’s only hope was that God would save them and that Washington was weak and so were his “Counselors:” his other generals and his aides-de-camp. The letter was never made public and was known only to Conway, Gates, Washington, his aides-de-camp, and the officer who informed Washington of the letter. The aides and Washington had already been suspicious of a threat before the infamous letter from Conway, so it was no surprise when Hamilton mentioned to George Clinton, the governor of New York, “the existence of a certain faction” and

³ Benjamin Harrison to Robert Morris, February 19, 1778, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith and Ronald M. Gephart (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1976-2000), 8:651n2.

⁴ George Washington to Thomas Conway, November 5, 1777, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary Series, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 12:129-30.

that he could not “doubt its reality in the most extensive sense.”⁵ Hamilton wanted to inspire others to stop the perpetrators of the Cabal: “all the true and sensible friends to their country, and of course to a certain great man [Washington], ought to be upon the watch.”⁶

Once the aides became convinced that Gates, Mifflin, and Conway were plotting against Washington, they loyally defended their general’s authority by criticizing the members of the Cabal. As the military commander, Washington felt as though it would be wrong for him to interfere in the political side of the Revolution, so the aides made it their job to do “what Washington felt like he could not or should not – meddling directly in the political theater.”⁷ After Conway’s letter, Gates had mostly distanced himself from Conway and Mifflin, so surprisingly the aides left him out of their barrage of disparaging words. Gates was not openly plotting to replace Washington, though he was open to the opportunity if Congress sought to place him in command. But he was aware that others shared his “dim view of Washington’s performance.”⁸ The aides wrote letters to Congress and other men in power describing what the Cabal was doing to undermine Washington – and therefore the revolution – and their belief in its existence. Lieutenant Colonel Tilghman insisted that the best way to stop the Cabal was to broadcast its doings to the public, as widespread notoriety was the best “way to stop the poison” of the Cabal.⁹ So, while Washington sat silent and let his enemies incriminate themselves by letting them accidentally admit to their own mistakes.

Almost as if to make up for an awkward silence, the aides became their commander’s voice by criticizing his detractors in letters. Just as the aides-de-camp used their letters to defend

⁵ Alexander Hamilton to George Clinton, February 13, 1778, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 1:428.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lender. *Cabal!: The Plot Against General Washington*, 177.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹ Tench Tilghman quoted in *Ibid.*, 178.

and praise Washington, they used them here to defend Washington and criticize his detractors. Aide John Laurens wrote his father that “Gen Conway was charged with cowardice at the battle of German Town,” trying to prove that no man exhibiting such dishonor should outrank Washington, who had never been accused of cowardice in battle.¹⁰ Laurens actually omitted a key detail: Conway was found sleeping during the retreat at Germantown, but this was from exhaustion rather than cowardice.¹¹ Hamilton also heavily criticized the army’s newly-minted inspector general, saying, “He is one of the vermin bred in the entrails of this chimera dire, and there does not exist a more villainous calumniator and incendiary.”¹² Washington had never been described the way these two aides characterized Thomas Conway, illustrating their belief that Conway was not the right choice to have the authority of a commander.

The aides-de-camp also believed that Mifflin had started the Cabal. After Washington’s disastrous defeat at Fort Mifflin and later setbacks in Pennsylvania, Mifflin lost faith in Washington’s ability to win the war. For the aides, Mifflin started the entire Cabal by stirring anti-Washington sentiments in Congress and promoting Gates. Laurens wrote that there was “a certain party, formed against the present Commander in chief, at the head of which is General Mifflin.”¹³ The aides assumed that Mifflin was the head of the Cabal because he had been slighted by Washington earlier in the war. Mifflin was Washington’s very first aide-de-camp in 1775, and showing that Mifflin turned on his former benefactor so easily was Laurens’s way of proving Mifflin’s involvement in the Cabal. Aide Tench Tilghman also believed that Mifflin was

¹⁰ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, January 3, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777-8*, ed. William Gillmore Simms (New York, 1867), 102.

¹¹ Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 89.

¹² Hamilton to Clinton, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:428.

¹³ Laurens to Henry Laurens, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens*, 103.

the source and that Mifflin was using Gates as a “puppet.”¹⁴ “Great pains are taking to swell” Gates’s character and popularity and “to depreciate that of our worthy General.”¹⁵ Of Mifflin’s machinations in the Cabal, Tilghman also said, “I have never seen any stroke of ill fortune affect the general in the manner that this dirty underhand dealing has done.”¹⁶

The aides believed that there was a real plot to oust Washington from his position and place someone else there, so they villainized Conway and Mifflin, hoping to prove that those two generals were not benefitting the revolution. However, the aides-de-camp could have made up the plot of replacing Washington while knowing that he would still maintain his rank but not the power, opting for a scare tactic to stir Congress into action to restore Washington’s rightful authority, remove Conway, and neutralize the Board of War. The aides and their general knew the strength of Mifflin’s political savvy and Gates’s popularity, which caused Congress to acquiesce in the creation of the Board of War, hoping it would “reverse the fortunes of war.”¹⁷ Those two men combined in powerful positions scared them; they all understood that the Board was becoming the commander-in-chief’s superior and a legitimate threat to an army already weighed down by defeat and death.

The Cabal eventually failed to oust Washington, because of the aides’ defense of Washington and because Washington’s detractors could not fully agree with each other. Some did not like Washington but did not want him replaced because they disliked the options for replacement. Those who disliked him and “faulted him on military grounds did not necessarily disagree with him on ideological grounds,” and not all of Washington’s enemies wanted him

¹⁴ Tench Tilghman quoted in Mark Edward Lender, *Cabal!*, 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Tilghman quoted in Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 318.

¹⁷ Lender, *Cabal!*, 156.

removed from command.¹⁸ After the Cabal was mostly silenced by the aides-de-camp, Conway resigned from the Continental Army and returned to his native France. Gates apologized to Washington, resigned from the Board of War, and became the commander of the Eastern Department in November 1778. Mifflin also left the Board of War and rejoined the army in only a minor role because of his shortcomings as quartermaster general, gathering supplies for the army.

General Charles Lee was the last obstacle in the way of Washington and a peaceful command without infighting. Long before 1778, in letters to Gates, Lee had privately criticized Washington, and in 1775, some in Congress had spoken of him as commander-in-chief over Washington. The Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778, and its aftermath ruined Lee's future in the Continental Army and got rid of Washington's last opponent, much to the credit of his aides-de-camp, who worked to defame Lee and his performance on the field in the weeks after the battle.¹⁹

When Washington heard that the British were leaving Philadelphia, he planned to attack them with the newly-trained army from Valley Forge. At a council of war, Washington placed Lee in command, but Lee thought the plan was foolish and refused, thinking that the army was not prepared enough to fight the stronger British forces, even after training at Valley Forge. Right after the council of war, the aides were complaining about Lee's presence. Hamilton stated that the council "would have done honor to the most honorable society of midwives, and to them only."²⁰ Hamilton thought the council was useless and unproductive, because Lee was initially against the attack. Instead, the command was given to the Marquis de Lafayette. When Lee

¹⁸ Ibid., 222.

²⁰ Hamilton to Elias Boudinot, July 5, 1778, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:510.

learned this, he wanted the command back, and Washington granted it to him. Washington ordered Lee to attack the British at Monmouth Courthouse while he traveled behind Lee by an hour. When he could, he sent his aides to deliver his orders.

On June 28, 1778, Lee obeyed and began the attack, but soon ordered a retreat. It was possible this retreat could have been disorderly. There are mixed accounts. Only Lee received direct orders from Washington, causing confusion among the other officers, as those orders were never relayed to them, and they were not informed as the situation on the field changed. Washington then took over for Lee and led the army in the rest of the attack, which technically ended in a stalemate.

Monmouth was an inconclusive battle or stalemate, but to protect Washington's reputation, his aides spoke of it as a total victory. In the weeks and months after the battle, the aides-de-camp used their connections to Congress to criticize Lee and to describe what happened on the battlefield. Hamilton and Laurens, especially, used the casualty numbers and the fact that they had fewer casualties than the British as a way to claim victory. They also believed they won because the British left the field, and the Americans were the last ones standing. By the evening of the day of the battle, the two aides had even spread the word of Lee and Washington's interaction on the field. Laurens thought that their victory could have been greater and that Clinton's "whole flying army would have fallen into our hands" had it not been for Lee, whose "retreat spread a baneful influence everywhere."²¹ Hamilton said Washington "directed the whole with the skill of a master workman. He did not hug himself at a distance and leave an Arnold to win laurels for him, but by his own presence he brought order out of confusion."²²

²¹ Laurens to Henry Laurens, June 30, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens*, 198.

²² Hamilton to Boudinot, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:512.

In a letter, Hamilton began by praising Washington. Then he criticized the confusion Lee created, and even disparaged Gates, who had claimed victory at the Battle of Saratoga when Benedict Arnold had really done all the fighting. Hamilton used this as a way to insult Lee because of his actions at Monmouth and Gates because the aides suspected his involvement in the Cabal. Of Washington, aide James McHenry said, "I do not think... the general ever in one day displayed more military powers, or acquired more real reputation. He gave a new turn to the action. He retrieved what had been lost... He unfolded surprising abilities, which produced uncommon effects."²³

After the battle, Washington and Lee had different versions of what actually happened, and the aides supported Washington's version of events and promoted it to ensure that everyone accepted it. To further criticize Lee, the aides made sure the strongest narrative stated that it was a disorderly retreat. They covered up or blatantly ignored the fact that Lee, with five thousand men, had only been expecting to fight around two thousand men but was instead faced with eight thousand elite British soldiers. The aides also never mentioned that Washington was too far behind Lee to be of any support before Lee ordered a retreat.

On June 30, 1778, two days after the battle, Charles Lee again made himself a perfect target for Washington's aides to blame for lack of a more decisive victory. He sent Washington a disrespectful letter: "I must conclude that nothing but the misinformation of some very stupid, or misrepresentation of some very wicked person, could have occasioned you making so very singular expressions as you did."²⁴ He thought Washington reprimanding him on the battlefield for the disorderly retreat and disobeying orders was either born of false information or someone

²³ James McHenry quoted in Mark Edward Lender and Gary Wheeler Stone, *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle*, 296-97.

²⁴ Charles Lee to George Washington, July 1, 1778, in *The Lee Papers*, (New York: New York Historical Society, 1871-74), 3:98.

plotting against him. Lee was already the aides' scapegoat for the Battle of Monmouth even before this letter, and Lee had just appeared more guilty to them in trying to blame outside forces, like the British's numbers or the vague orders he was given. He also implied that the aides were part of the plot to ruin him, saying they were "dirty earwigs who will forever insinuate themselves near persons in high office."²⁵ The aides were already attacking Lee, and this gave them even more reason to do so. A week after the battle, General Charles Lee was court-martialed on three charges: disobeying orders the morning of the battle, ordering an "unnecessary, disorderly, and shameful retreat," and disrespect towards the commander-in-chief.²⁶ All of Washington's aides-de-camp were witnesses at the trial, and they all condemned Lee, who was pronounced guilty on all three charges and relieved of his command. In private letters, some aides even said that Lee's actions at the battle may have been outright treason. There is no evidence that Washington himself made a move to interfere with what the aides said about Lee, and it seems that he felt the same way about his fellow general. If the trial had not deemed Lee guilty, the aides surely would have defamed him anyway and most likely would have tried to prove that the trial was somehow corrupted.

After the court-martial and Lee's subsequent suspension from the army, the aides appeared to think their fight with Lee was over, and the attacks on his name slowed. Months later, however, Lee was still not done trying to redeem himself; he attempted to persuade Congress to dismiss the sentence of his court-martial. He published a pamphlet, *Vindication to the Public*, defending his actions at Monmouth and criticizing the hostile witnesses – the aides-de-camp – at his court-martial. Despite Lee's explanation of his behavior, Congress confirmed the verdict, and Laurens gleefully wrote Hamilton that Lee had all but ruined himself. All the

²⁵ Ibid., 3:99.

²⁶ Ibid., 3:282.

aides had left to do was finish off what he started. “I think you will without difficulty, expose, in his defense, letters, and last production, such a tissue of falsehood and inconsistency, as will satisfy the world, and put him forever to silence,” Laurens said.²⁷ Not long after Congress’s confirmation, Laurens said he had heard “that General Lee had spoken of General Washington in the grossest... terms of personal abuse.”²⁸ In Washington’s honor, Laurens challenged Lee to a duel, with Hamilton as his second. On December 24, 1778, Laurens shot Lee in the side, a wound that Lee did survive, and both men walked away honorably. After this, Washington was finally able to be the victor of both the Cabal and the Battle of Monmouth. Monmouth was the true event that silenced the Cabal for good and solidified Washington’s authority and his command, as it showed his strength in battle and renewed faith in the American cause and victory.

Because of the aides’ unwavering support of their general and their adamant belief that he was the only commander that could win the war, they were instrumental in ensuring that Washington stayed in command. Criticizing Gates, Conway, Mifflin, and Lee allowed the aides to show that Washington was a much more honorable and skilled general, and that those four officers were corrupt and scheming for advantage, where Washington kept out of politics and was solely focused on a better future for the new country. Without the actions and words of the aides-de-camp during the Conway Cabal and during and after the Battle of Monmouth, Washington may very well have lost the authority that accompanied his title as commander.

²⁷ John Laurens to Hamilton, December 5, 1778, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:593.

²⁸ Account of a Duel Between Major General Charles Lee and Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 1:603.

Conclusion

Depictions of the American Revolution in the forefront of American memory show George Washington as the lone commander of an infant country's army. But Washington was never alone. Spanning eight years of war, the general had thirty-two aides-de-camp who worked with him behind the scenes to ensure that the army had all the tools it needed for victory.

Washington personally selected each of his aides, who were chosen for their intelligence and writing skills. The aides handled battle plans, supplies, war finances, prisoner exchanges, mutinies, relations with foreign allies, orders during battles, and even spy rings. Their chief duty, however, was writing endless amounts of correspondence, including Washington's official orders, inventories, warrants, and commissions. This massive amount of writing from the aides has often been forgotten and thought to be Washington's own hand; the aides had to learn to imitate Washington's voice in everything they wrote, as their words carried the authority of the commander.

No matter where the aides were from, they all shared the same dedication and loyalty, for both their new country and their commander-in-chief. The aides also bonded over their common values of a free nation, which brought them together in Washington's "military family," and they became as close as brothers, living and working together in tight spaces and supporting each other in battle.

If the aides were brothers, Washington became their father figure. The general fully trusted each aide and cared for them deeply. He wrote the aides his true thoughts about the war that would surely be condemned had they reached the public, and he trusted the aides to keep this information quiet. Like any family, their relationships were sometimes strained. Washington was

known to have a fierce temper, which the aides bore the brunt of more than anyone else, as they were always with him. Despite the tension, Washington and most of his aides had a strong bond that lasted the entirety of the war and into the early years of the republic.

Their constant loyalty inspired the aides' greatest contribution to the American Revolution: keeping Washington in command. The aides knew important people from across the colonies, which benefitted Washington by giving him easy access to people in places of authority. The aides' valuable connections allowed them to complete their unofficial duty of defending Washington and the decisions he made as commander. The aides understood that Washington was vital in the success of the Revolution and that anyone else in command would surely lose the war. Compared to others, Washington had "superior presence, infinitely better judgement, more political cunning, and unmatched gravitas."¹ Washington was in command because he so obviously made it clear that his only goal was the betterment of America, not the betterment of himself and his position. As aide Alexander Hamilton stated, the general would "never yield to any dishonorable or disloyal plans" that injured the Revolution because honorably won independence was Washington's only goal.²

Washington's skill and character were superior to any other officer in the army, and the aides praised their general and kept any negativity to themselves because they knew the value of their commander. With letters to prominent families and members of Congress, the aides circulated good things about Washington, from his honor and integrity to his bravery in battle, and how critical his presence was. Praising Washington and avoiding negative comments also helped improve the morale of the army, which kept the army intact and inspired its soldiers to

¹ Ron Chernow. *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 185.

² "Continental Congress Remarks on the Revenue and the Situation of the Army," February 20, 1783, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University, 1961), 3:264.

fight for their freedom. To his aides, Washington's command was the only option "for the honor of the Army, and the welfare of America."³

However much the aides defended Washington, the commander's enemies still tried to challenge his authority. The Conway Cabal of 1778 involving Horatio Gates, Thomas Conway, and Thomas Mifflin and Charles Lee's actions at the Battle of Monmouth posed the greatest threats to Washington's command. To protect Washington, his aides criticized and blamed Gates, Conway, Mifflin, and Lee for any wrongdoings, which put Washington in a better light than his detractors. Though the Conway Cabal remains one of the Revolution's many mysteries, the aides and Washington believed that it was a real threat. The aides moved quickly and decisively to crush those who did not fully trust Washington. There was disagreement about what happened at Monmouth, including what Washington's orders truly meant and if Lee was really committing treason by not attacking and retreating instead. It can be seen today that Washington was also at fault for what occurred that day. However, the aides used Lee as a scapegoat and blamed him for everything that went wrong to show that Washington was the best commander for the Continental Army. After the Cabal and Monmouth, Washington was revered as America's top general. His command was never threatened again, thanks to the aides rising to the challenge of his enemies.

Throughout the American Revolution, the aides maintained the survival of the army and supported Washington both in their typical duties as his official family and in their defense of him. Without the aides-de-camp, Washington may have lost his authority, and the war may have gone very differently under the control of a different commander. The aides inspired a national unity through their continued faith in Washington and American independence, and that unity

³ Laurens to Henry Laurens, June 30, 1778, in *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens*, 194.

spread from their inner circle to the public. Washington's aides-de-camp enabled Washington to be propelled into greatness after the war, and their words on their commander still resonate in portraits and biographies today. These men were "from the different parts of the Continent," yet they had still become "one patriotic band of brothers" bound together by loyalty to Washington and the Revolution.⁴ And that dedication was what led America to victory.

⁴ George Washington quoted in Don Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 34.

Washington's Aides-de-Camp and Military Secretaries

(includes how long each remained on staff)

Thomas Mifflin.....	July 4, 1775 – August 14, 1775
Joseph Reed.....	July 4, 1775 – October 1775
John Trumbull.....	July 27, 1775 – August 14, 1775
George Baylor.....	August 15, 1775 – January? 1777
Edmund Randolph.....	August 15, 1775 – October 22, 1775
Robert Hanson Harrison.....	November 5, 1775 – March 25, 1781
Stephen Moylan.....	March 6, 1776 – 1777?
William Palfrey.....	March 6, 1776 – April 27, 1776
Caleb Gibbs.....	May 16, 1776, commander of Life Guard
George Lewis.....	May 16, 1776, junior officer in Life Guard
Richard Cary.....	June 21, 1776 – December 1776
Samuel Blachley Webb.....	June 21, 1776 – December 1777 (captured)
Alexander Contee Hanson.....	June 21, 1776 – September 1776
William Grayson.....	June 21, 1776 – January 11, 1777
Pierre Penet.....	October 14, 1776 – 1782?
John Fitzgerald.....	November 1776 – soon after June 28, 1778
George Johnston.....	January 20, 1777 – October 1777 (died)
John Walker.....	February 19, 1777 – March 1777
Alexander Hamilton.....	March 1, 1777 – February 16, 1781
Richard Kidder Meade.....	March 12, 1777 – October 1780
Peter Presley Thornton.....	September 6, 1777 – ????
John Laurens.....	September 6, 1777 – March 29, 1779
James McHenry.....	May 15, 1778 – May 22, 1781
Tench Tilghman.....	June 21, 1780 – December 1782 ¹
David Humphreys.....	June 23, 1780 – December 23, 1783?
Richard Varick.....	May 25, 1781 – November 18, 1783
Jonathan Trumbull, Jr.....	June 8, 1781 – September 3, 1783
David Cobb.....	June 15, 1781 – December 17, 1783
Peregrine Fitzhugh.....	July 2, 1781 – October 1781
William Stephens Smith.....	July 6, 1781 – spring 1782
Benjamin Walker.....	January 25, 1782 – December 23, 1783
Hodijah Baylies.....	May 14, 1782 – December 23, 1783
Martha Washington ²	
Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette ³	

¹ Tench Tilghman served as a volunteer aide from August 1776.

² Martha Washington is listed because there is evidence that she worked in Washington's office during winters when an extra aide was needed

³ The Marquis de Lafayette was a volunteer at headquarters upon his arrival, but was made a Major General by the Continental Congress. He was also friends with many of the aides during the war and maintained post-war relationships with many army officers, including Washington and Hamilton.

Overview of Washington's Staff

Mifflin: 1744-1800, Pennsylvania, attended College of Pennsylvania (now UPenn), quartermaster general, suspected to be involved in the Conway Cabal, snubbed by Washington after the war

Reed: 1741-1785, New Jersey, attended Princeton, studied law in London, lawyer, Adjutant-General, accused Benedict Arnold of military malpractice, signed Articles of Confederation

Trumbull: 1756-1843, Connecticut, attended Harvard, son of Connecticut governor Jonathan Trumbull, artist

Baylor: 1752-1784, Virginia, not as good of a writer as Washington wanted him to be, was normally Martha Washington's escort, led the 3rd Regiment of Continental Light Dragoons ("Baylor's Dragoons")

Randolph: 1753-1813, Virginia, attended William and Mary, lawyer, father was a Loyalist, deputy muster master general for the Southern Department of the Continental Army, first Attorney General, defended Aaron Burr in his 1807 treason trial

Harrison: 1745-1790, Virginia, Washington's prewar lawyer, brother-in-law of Johnston, officer in Alexandria, VA militia, nicknamed the "Old Secretary" by the other aides, second-longest time as an aide-de-camp, Chief Justice of the General Court of Maryland, often seen as Washington's chief of staff

Moylan: 1737-1811, born in Ireland, Pennsylvania, studied in Paris, muster-master general in 1775, helped organize the first ships of the Continental Navy, Quartermaster General in 1776, became Commander of the Calvary in 1778

Palfrey: 1741-1780, Massachusetts, mercantile business, possibly a nonpracticing clergyman, aide-de-camp to General Charles Lee before Washington, paymaster general of the Continental Army until 1780, lost at sea on his way to France after being appointed by Congress as a United States consul

Gibbs: 1748-1818, Rhode Island, commander of Washington's Life Guard, served as an extra aide-de-camp,

Lewis: 1757-1821, Virginia, Washington's nephew, second in command in Life Guard, served as an extra aide-de-camp

Cary: 1746-1806, Massachusetts, attended Harvard

Webb: 1753-1807, Connecticut, aide-de-camp to General Israel Putnam before Washington, stepson of Silas Deane, shot three times during the war, commanded "Colonel Webb's Additional Regiment, captured in 1777 and released 1781, helped Washington found the Society of the Cincinnati, grand marshal at Washington's 1789 inauguration

Hanson: 1746-1806, Maryland, attended College of Pennsylvania, Washington's first assistant secretary, worked under Harrison (his cousin), lawyer, associate judge of the General Court of Maryland 1778-1781

Grayson: 1742-1806, Virginia, attended College of Pennsylvania, lawyer

Penet: French businessman, supplier for the Continental Army, never really was at headquarters because he was in France getting supplies, this appointment seems to have been because Washington thought one of his aides in France would garner more support

Fitzgerald: d. 1799, immigrated from Ireland in 1769, Virginia, wounded at Monmouth

Johnston: 1750-1777, Virginia, VA militia 5th Regiment, died in Morristown, only one to die while on Washington's staff

J. Walker: 1744-1809, Virginia, distant cousin of Washington, attended William and Mary, in House of Burgesses 1771, observer of the army for the VA legislature (kept secret and made an aide to cover up), lawyer

Hamilton: 1755/7-1804, born in Nevis, New York, attended Columbia, lawyer, NY Independent Artillery Company, third longest-serving aide, fluent in French, first Secretary of the Treasury, died from GSW from duel with Aaron Burr

Meade: 1746-1805, Virginia, studied in England, frequently delivered messages from headquarters

Thornton: 1750-1780, Virginia, House of Burgesses, volunteer/extra aide-de-camp

Laurens: 1754-1782, educated in Europe, tried to recruit slaves for the army, son of Henry Laurens (president of Continental Congress), reckless in battle, died at the Battle of the Combahee River 1782, fluent in French

McHenry: 1753-1816, born in Ireland, Maryland, doctor, attended Newark Academy (now University of Delaware), apprentice to Dr. Benjamin Rush, surgeon of the 5th Pennsylvania Battalion 1776, captured 1776 at Fort Washington, started on staff as assistant secretary, transferred to Lafayette's staff 1781, 2nd Secretary of War

Tilghman: 1744-1786, Maryland, attended College of Pennsylvania, mercantile business, I would say that he was Washington's favorite aide-de-camp if there was to be such a favorite

Humphreys: 1752-1818, Connecticut, attended Yale, aide-de-camp to General Putnam until 1780, private secretary to Washington, set up the first successful woolen mill in the US

Varick: 1755-1831, New Jersey, lawyer, aide-de-camp to Benedict Arnold, deputy muster master general of the Northern Department, appointed to organize Washington's letters written during the war

Trumbull, Jr.: 1740-1809, Connecticut, attended Harvard, son of Connecticut governor Jonathan Trumbull, replaced Harrison as military secretary, paymaster general of the Northern Army 1775-8, first comptroller of the treasury 1778-9, Connecticut legislature

Cobb: 1748-1830, Massachusetts, attended Harvard, studied medicine, major general of militia 1786, service in Shay's Rebellion

Fitzhugh: 1759-1811, Maryland, son of Colonel William Fitzhugh (friend of Washington), served as an extra aide-de-camp, captured after "Baylor's Massacre" 1778 (released 1780),

Smith: 1755-1816, New York, attended College of New Jersey, married Abigail Adams (daughter of John Adams)

B. Walker: 1753-1818, born in England, New York, aide-de-camp to Baron von Steuben, formally adopted by Von Steuben and made one of his two heirs, appointed post-Yorktown

Baylies: 1756-1842, Massachusetts, attended Harvard, aide-de-camp to General Benjamin Lincoln 1777-1780, captured at Charleston 1780, appointed post-Yorktown

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