

2012

## "A Damned Set of Rascals" the Continental Army vs. the Continental Congress: tensions among revolutionaries

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“A DAMNED SET OF RASCALS” THE CONTINENTAL ARMY VS. THE  
CONTINENTAL CONGRESS: TENSIONS AMONG REVOLUTIONARIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of History

by  
Megan Wilson  
B.A., Rice University, 2007  
May 2012

For Mom and Dad,  
Thank you for everything

## Acknowledgments

The process of writing a thesis has been more difficult and satisfying than I could have imagined. It would not have been possible without my friends and advisers who have provided immeasurable guidance and support along the way. I owe the largest debt of gratitude to my parents. From the beginning, they have encouraged my love of history and the American Revolution. They have watched “1776” more times than we should probably count and they took me to every museum and national park that we could find. I appreciate their love and support more than I can ever say or show. They have provided advice and support through the darkest days of my thesis writing and I know they are happy that it’s finally done! I happily dedicate “A Damned Set of Rascals” to them because they have always been there and have patiently listened to all the “cool” stories I accumulated in reading the *Letters of the Delegates to Congress*. My grandparents Richard and Darlene Wilson have also provided wonderful support in my academic endeavors. I could not have done this without the help of my family, thank you.

I owe thanks to the members of the E Circle: Julie Bachur, Sabrina Bartlett, Marissa Chow, and Meredith Fallon. They have all listened to me from the first weeks of freshmen year babble about history and I thank them for their support. Though many miles have separated us since graduation, they were all only a phone call away while I was writing and their support helped inspire my understanding of the importance of friendship networks. They also showed me that friends can and will support you no matter how much you complain about writer’s block and piles of library books. I am grateful to have such strong women in my life and you all inspire me, more than you know. Thank you to Joseph Ramirez who dragged me out of the house when I needed to have fun and who always managed to ask that panic-inducing question “So when is this thing going to be finished?” You made Baton Rouge a better city to live in and

I am glad you patiently listened to me talk about eighteenth-century revolutionaries for these past few years. There are five other people that I need to thank for keeping me sane during my years in graduate school, they provided much-needed laughter and allowed me to fully indulge in my nerdiness. The founding members of Baby Pigeon Press, INC.: Lauren Harper, Nanci Velez, and Vanessa Varin shared my love of brunch specials and historical crushes. Lauren Harper literally helped me survive the first two years of graduate school and I thank you for being there in so many ways. Nanci Velez always make me laugh and I envy her flair. I owe a tremendous amount to Vanessa, who read almost every page of this thesis. You pushed me to think more critically and while you were a wonderful editor, you were an even better friend. I must include National Park Ranger Nathan Hall in my acknowledgments. He has the coolest job and he is a pretty great friend, thank you. Thank you Jason Wolfe for always being there with advice or a good drink. You are a gentleman and a scholar.

I have many intellectual debts to acknowledge, but there are a few key people who helped me reach the thesis-writing stage. Ira Gruber was my undergraduate adviser at Rice and first introduced me to sharp historical criticism. He sparked my interest in the American Revolution and encouraged me to apply to graduate school. Next, I must thank Kersten Jacobson Biehn, a wonderful scholar and a great person; you have offered some of the best advice about how to survive graduate school and academia. I can only hope to live up to your example. But my greatest intellectual debt is owed to Paul Paskoff who showed me what it was to have a true mentor and adviser in graduate school. I may have stretched the limits of his editorial abilities, but he was always willing to talk history with me and I've enjoyed our time together. Thank you for taking a chance on the culture of honor. I also want to thank the other members of my thesis committee Victor Stater and Gaines Foster for taking the time to read and revise my work. Dr.

Stater almost convinced me to become an English historian with his scholarship and wonderful classes on Tudor-Stuart England, but I was too dedicated to my rascals. Dr. Foster has taught me how to think more critically about my assumptions and I thank him for reading about the code, even if it could be thought of more in the way of guidelines.

See what had happened was....

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## Abstract

As delegates gathered in Philadelphia in May 1775 for the start of the Second Continental Congress, many of the men present understood that independence was one possible solution to the growing problems with Parliament and King George III. Congressmen in the summer of 1775 created new revolutionary institutions to address the political crisis, and during those turbulent times they turned to the eighteenth-century culture of honor to provide guidelines for their conduct and decision-making. The legislative structure of the Continental Congress and the hierarchy of the Continental Army were shaped by the honor code. The eighteenth-century culture of honor constituted a system of defining cultural assumptions and behavior that helped to create social identity, structure social interactions, and govern behavior in the political and military spheres. Although in the 1770s there was no consensus on the exact definition of honor and its role in American society, the idea of honor did provide the “social glue” that held the colonists together as they contemplated and fought for independence. I argue that personal constructions of honorable behavior caused many of the problems between Congress and the army because gentlemen in those two institutions operated under different interpretations of the honor code.

When difficulties arose between Congress and the army over promotions, pensions, or congressional privilege, revolutionaries in both institutions turned to the guidelines of the honor code to resolve the disputes. The honor culture provided three options to address the tensions between the Continental Congress and the Continental army: mediation, resignation, or affairs of honor. Mediation was the most commonly used option and reveals the large friendship networks that developed between Congress and the army. A concern for honor helps to explain why disputes involving people’s intentions and reputations occupy a significant proportion of the



official records of the Continental Congress. Moreover, honor and its application by soldiers and politicians had a profound influence on the course and ultimate success of the Revolution.

## Introduction:

“I don’t see how any Man of Feeling or Sentiment can continue in a public Department where every measure is looked upon with a jaundiced Eye and of course all Mistakes are magnified into Sins political and moral.”

Richard Peters, 1778<sup>1</sup>

Standing on the muddy streets of York, Pennsylvania, in April 1778, Colonel Daniel Morgan accused Richard Peters, secretary of the congressional Board of War, of plotting against George Washington, the Continental Army’s commander-in-chief. Gossip exchanged in personal letters between civilian and military officials during the winter months of 1777/78 speculated about the existence of a possible cabal to replace Washington.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that Washington would never challenge a public official over words circulated in private letters, Morgan confronted Peters, hoping to force him to confess to his participation in the cabal and acknowledge his dishonorable behavior. Peters’s apology for duplicitous behavior would preserve Washington’s and the Continental Army’s honor. Peters’s and Morgan’s altercation exemplifies the problems and heated disagreements that developed among revolutionaries during the war for American independence.<sup>3</sup> This thesis analyzes the means by which revolutionaries dealt with the tensions that plagued the Continental Congress and the Continental Army.

Although Americans felt the pressure of trying to defeat the British army to ensure a successful

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 220. I first came across this quote in Paul David Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 171. Peters sent this statement to a friend in April 1778. The quote captures the difficulty of navigating the political and military sphere in which politics were personal. Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 163, discusses the tense meeting between Peters and Morgan in York.

<sup>2</sup> The Conway Cabal began in December 1777, when Washington became convinced that factions in Congress were pushing for Horatio Gates to replace him as commander-in-chief. Historians have decisively proven that the congressional cabal never actually existed. I discuss it here because Washington and his junior officers clearly believed that the threat was real. Most works that discuss the American Revolution allot several pages to disproving the existence of the cabal and then address its impact on Washington and Congress. For example, see: Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 155-171; Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 157-185; and Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 216-222.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term “revolutionaries” to indicate gentlemen who served in either the Continental Army or the Continental Congress.

rebellion, there was an underlying cause of the explosive problems between the two revolutionary institutions. That deeper cause was the eighteenth-century culture of honor, a system that dictated gentlemanly behavior and the options available to resolve disputes. The culture of honor shaped the decisions made by eighteenth-century gentlemen, creating many of the conflicts and compromises of the American Revolution.

If participation in politics at the most basic level required a good character and reputation, then the culture of honor provided a set of rules to govern how a reputation was maintained. Since gentility was a prerequisite for political status in the colonies, personal honor served as a carefully guarded component of character. Because of honor's critical importance, politicians and military officers guarded against any possible stain on their characters. In the eighteenth century, revolutionaries believed "honor was an all-or-nothing proposition."<sup>4</sup>

A leader, therefore, could not hope to lose his honor and maintain his public reputation. That was why Colonel Morgan confronted Richard Peters in the muddy streets. In this face-to-face encounter Morgan let Peters know that men were prepared to defend Washington's honor with their lives. Morgan also hoped to prove his loyalty to Washington. Any hint of a campaign to replace the commander-in-chief challenged Washington's honor and, consequently, the integrity of the officers who pledged their loyalty to their commanding officer.

Historians who discuss the conflicts between civil and military authorities during the war use three different analytical frameworks to explain how and why tensions developed and eventually dissipated: (1) ideological differences; (2) civilian meddling; and (3) an egotistical officer corps. In asserting the centrality of the culture of honor, this thesis proposes a new analytical framework to supplement the existing Revolutionary War historiography. Reference

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers & The Politics of Character* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 52.

to the eighteenth-century culture of honor helps to explain some aspects of the continual conflicts that developed between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army. By focusing on analyzing and explaining the revolutionaries' cultural worldview, I can explore how ideology shaped their behavior and why politics were so personal during the war years. An emphasis on the honor culture provides a more complete explanation of the problems that plagued the revolutionary war effort.

H. James Henderson, in *Party Politics in the Continental Congress*, and Jonathan G. Rossie, in *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution*, argue that ideological differences in both Congress and the army caused friction throughout the war.<sup>5</sup> Their analysis examines the contentious debate over establishing a standing army or using state militias to fight the British. This debate continued beyond 1775, as some delegates persisted in voting down any act that would serve to strengthen the Continental Army. Army officers are depicted in these texts as angry hotheads, resentful of congressional caution. Delegates also worried about the balance between state power and national power in deciding how to prosecute and pay for the war.<sup>6</sup> Historians portray the confrontations between officers and congressional delegates as the result of a struggle between ideological groups for control over the future direction of the American Revolution.

Though ideological differences were important reasons for tensions among revolutionaries, an analysis that relies mainly on such differences fails to explain how social connections shaped the delegates' reactions to the ideological conflicts.<sup>7</sup> The eighteenth-century

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<sup>5</sup> Hebert James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974) and Jonathan Gregory Rossie, *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress*, 218-245.

<sup>7</sup> This critique is shaped by Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*

culture of honor provided specific guidelines for political conflict and this aspect of analysis is missing from Henderson's and Rossie's accounts. Ideology and behavior were both shaped by the culture of the time.

The second analytical framework that most military historians prefer proposes that the Continental Congress almost crippled the Continental Army's ability to defeat the British because of the ineptness of congressional representatives. The case for civilian meddling is argued most persuasively in Richard H. Kohn's essay, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint" and *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* by James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender.<sup>8</sup> Some military historians celebrate the steadfast group of army veterans who valiantly ignored congressional interference and fought the British to the bargaining table. They present a heroic story of officers overcoming congressional stumbling blocks to win the war and save the revolution. Most historians who subscribe to this view describe the Revolution in terms of the development of a nationalist movement in both Congress and the army, one that urged the creation of a strong national government. They give little attention to delegates who wished to check the power of Congress. This argument loses sight of the pressures facing the Continental Congress during the war and fails to explain why Washington was willing to subordinate himself and his army to congressional authority. Moreover, while the army's resentment of Congress is readily apparent

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(New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010) and Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Richard H. Kohn, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint," in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, ed. Don Higginbotham (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978) and James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1982). Martin and Lender conclude *A Respectable Army* with this summation of the behavior of the Continental army: "paradoxically this same hardcore group of regulars [the Continental Army], so damned by so many patriots (and feared by ideologues as the antithesis of the republican ideal of the militia) set the highest example of selfless behavior in Revolutionary America." *A Respectable Army*, 194.

in the officers' personal letters, the relationship between the civil and military authorities was more complicated than that.

Research in political history also contradicts the military historians' indictment of congressional ineptitude and deliberate neglect of the army. Jack N. Rakove and Calvin C. Jillson and Rick K. Wilson rehabilitate the reputation of Congress, describing it as an extralegal assembly that managed to win a war and keep the children of the revolution from devouring one another.<sup>9</sup> While Congress and the army were not perfect institutions, the disputes that developed between them were a consequence of more than the delegates' ineptitude or their internecine ideological battles.

The third analytical framework presents the officer corps as an egotistical group, focused more on its personal grievances rather than on the larger issue of winning independence. Although this argument does not dominate the literature, it runs as a subtext through many discussions of the officer corps' behavior. Some historians portray the officers' behavior as petty and irrational, without examining how their worldview and social rank shaped their actions.<sup>10</sup> Though the litany of officers' complaints and resentments can be overwhelming to even the most tolerant researcher, they reveal the mentality of eighteenth-century American revolutionaries.

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<sup>9</sup> Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretative History of the Continental Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) and Calvin C. Jillson and Rick K. Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics: Coordination, Structure & Choice in the First American Congress, 1774-1789* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army & American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at University of North Carolina, 1979) and John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) See especially Royster's chapter "Valley Forge" and pp. 200-213 where he discusses the officers' pretensions to gentility and how their growing professionalization worried ideologues in Congress.

Colonial Americans' actions are more easily analyzed when viewed through the framework of the eighteenth-century culture of honor.<sup>11</sup> The culture of honor constituted a system of defining assumptions that helped to create social identity, structure social interactions, and govern behavior in eighteenth-century institutions.<sup>12</sup> Although there was no consensus in the 1770s on the exact definition of honor and its role in American society, the idea of honor did provide the "social glue" that held the colonists together as they contemplated independence.<sup>13</sup> Honor was significant for many societies because, in a world with no police force and limited access to law courts, "the willingness on the part of individuals to internalize standards of honor, and on the part of the communities to enforce them, was often the best guarantee of keeping the peace."<sup>14</sup> I argue here that personal constructions of honorable behavior caused many of the problems between Congress and the army because gentlemen in those two institutions operated under different interpretations of the honor code. A concern for honor helps to explain why disputes involving people's intentions and reputations occupy a significant proportion of the congressional record.

Several recent trends in historical analysis have shaped my use of the culture of honor framework to analyze historical actors' behavior during the American Revolution. The field of emotional history offers constructive and critical ways to think about honor and resentment, terms used frequently and forcefully in Americans' letters during the late colonial period and Revolution. Historians Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis have suggested that "emotional standards (sometimes called emotional culture) play a distinct role in any society or group." Emotional

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<sup>11</sup> See Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, Freedman, *Affairs of Honor, Trees, The Politics of Character*, or Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Brendan Kane, *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland, 1541-1641* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

standards influence a society's public representations "including law as well as literature...and they also affect personal judgments."<sup>15</sup> In the eighteenth century, anger and resentment were proper emotions for a gentleman to display publicly when he felt insulted by a social equal. Colonial society encouraged gentlemen to react with heightened sensitivity to any insult. In responding gentlemen had three socially acceptable methods of resolving the dispute: mediation, resignation, or affairs of honor. Etiquette books taught social leaders how to navigate the complex social hierarchy.<sup>16</sup>

Without the context of the eighteenth-century honor culture, gentlemen's reactions can appear to be petty and irrational. The study of emotional history has demonstrated that people were influenced by the social and emotional options available to them to express their feelings.<sup>17</sup> These options also limited a person's reactions to certain situations. Culture, to an extent, shapes the behavior of those who are part of it. This thesis analyzes the new elite American political and military culture developing during the Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Emotional history provides a useful analytical vocabulary to examine the language and behavior of contentious politicians and military officers.

The body of research on the political culture of the tumultuous 1790s is the most influential area of current historiography that support my thesis. Several recent books, including

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<sup>15</sup> Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, "Introduction," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, Eds. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>16</sup> John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington: The Hidden Political Genius of an American Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). Ferling discusses how Washington copied maxims from etiquette books as a young man. A good essay on the importance of etiquette books to colonial Americans is: C. Dallett Hemphill "Class, Gender, and the Regulation of Emotional Expression in Revolutionary-Era Conduct Literature," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, 33-51.

<sup>17</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> See Nicole Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at University of North Carolina, 2008). Eustace offers an insightful look into American emotional culture and how colonists acted out certain emotions. While I disagree with some of the arguments made by Eustace on how emotions played into the push for independence, her chapter on resentment was helpful in understanding the culture of honor in colonial Pennsylvania.



Joanne B. Freeman's *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, James Roger Sharp's *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis*, and Andrew S. Trees's *The Founding Fathers & The Politics of Character*, discuss why politics were so personal and fractious in the decade following ratification of the Constitution. These studies of political culture use elements of emotional history and a focus on the development of political ideology to analyze the fierce political combat of the 1790s. The company that politicians kept influenced both their political ideology and national reputation. Analysis of the language and behavior of historical actors in the late eighteenth century reveals how deeply intertwined personal relationships and politics were on the national stage. A political disagreement could very quickly turn into a character assassination because a gentleman's political ideology was linked to his personal identity. Political culture studies have uncovered the code of manners that governed historical actors' behavior in the 1790s, and this method of analysis may be applied to the 1770s to gain a better understanding of the political and military culture of the American Revolution.<sup>19</sup>

For the eighteenth-century culture of honor to have existed, a particular social group, the colonial elite, had to acknowledge and accept a standard set of norms that governed their behavior.<sup>20</sup> In the thirteen colonies, socially prominent gentlemen were expected to participate actively in the political sphere. As Richard R. Beeman stated in *The Varieties of Political*

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<sup>19</sup> Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, Andrew S. Trees *The Founding Fathers & The Politics of Character*, James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)

<sup>20</sup> Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 20. Appiah describes the social group as an "honor world," where people acknowledge a set of behaviors that apply specifically to their social group. Not all historians accept the existence of an elite economic and social group in colonial America, especially in comparison with British society; some historians used the term "self-proclaimed elite." I believe that American colonists lived in a hierarchical world defined by deferential and elitist social practices. Nicole Eustace used "self-proclaimed" in *Passion is the Gale*. For excellent overviews of colonial society, see: Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Robert Olwell and Alan Tully, Eds., *Cultures and Identities in Colonial British America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman*.

*Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*, colonists possessed an “instinctive assumption that there was an integral relationship between social authority and political power.”<sup>21</sup> The members of the colonial elite who possessed political power came from the ranks of “gentlemen freeholders, aspiring lawyers, and leisured merchants” and differed from their British counterparts only because they did not belong to an established hereditary aristocracy.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, the colonial elite mimicked the British gentry in various ways, usually by reading the same literature, studying law at the British courts, or adhering to the standards of the honor code prized by the British ruling elite. Colonial elites patterned themselves after the British elites to create an orderly and well-governed society “whose leaders possessed the appropriate traits of wealth, education, gentility and liberality.”<sup>23</sup> The creation of a deferential political system allowed the gentry to preserve their political power. Elite leaders believed that their superior education allowed them to legislate for the general good of society.

During the 1700s, all thirteen colonial legislatures practiced a form of deferential politics, and recognition of hierarchy and deference shaped the worldview of all participants in the American Revolution. Moreover, a political culture based on deference required knowledge of a person’s character and friendships. “Character,” in the eighteenth-century world, referred to the mix of traits, vices, and virtues that, together, determined a person’s social worth. Character was perceived as an almost “tangible possession, something one fashioned, held and protected, so that one could speak of acquiring character.”<sup>24</sup> A colonial gentleman believed that his peers’ recognition of his good character determined his personal self-worth and social rank. Colonial

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<sup>21</sup> Richard R. Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, xx. Freedman’s argument in *Affairs of Honor* influenced my analysis of the culture of honor. Her preface was helpful in initiating me into the vocabulary and meaning of eighteenth-century political disputes. The quote is from Trees, *The Founding Fathers & The Politics of Character*, 2.

society also held that education and moderation in behavior and speech were among the most important qualities that a leader needed to warrant the loyalty and respect of followers.

When a gentleman pursued political office or a commission in the local militia, he knew that his peers evaluated his character and reputation. Even a person's political beliefs were linked to his character. In his personal diary, John Adams described the typical colonial legislature, in which everyone knew "a Man's Pedigree and Biography, his Education, Profession and Connections, as well as his fortune."<sup>25</sup> This knowledge allowed legislators "to see what it is that governs a Man and determines him to his Party in Preference to that, to this System of Politicks rather than another."<sup>26</sup> A person's ideological principles determined his political identity and group of friends. Politicians at the First Continental Congress in September 1774 suddenly had to "enquire and learn the Characters and Connections, the Interests and Views of a Multitude of Strangers."<sup>27</sup> The Continental Congress stretched the boundaries of the old deferential political system, causing character and honor to take on a more significant meaning in the expanded political sphere.

Deferential politics has dominated these pages because a professional military class did not exist in the colonies until the establishment of the Continental Army in June 1775. Although many colonial gentlemen had served in gratis positions in their local militias, there was no corps of retired professional soldiers. Some, such as George Washington, had gained military experience during the French and Indian War, fighting alongside the British Regulars, but British officials had always refused to allow colonial gentlemen to join the King's officer ranks.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> The British officers' refusal to acknowledge colonial elites' attempts to establish social equality can be found in Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1763* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), and John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 27-45.

British officers viewed colonial gentlemen as their social and cultural inferiors. Officers in the colonial armies could only observe and mimic the British officers' culture of honor from a distance. British professionalism and elitist rituals had awed colonists during the French and Indian War. From the beginning of the Revolution, the Continental Army adopted most of the traditions of the British military's culture, especially its honor code that encouraged a heightened vigilance to discern any insult or slight.<sup>29</sup> Problems arose later in the war when officers began to think of themselves as a distinct group of professionals who deserved to be treated with respect by civilian officials.

The need for public recognition of a gentleman's self-worth drove many revolutionaries to become acutely sensitive to any criticism of their performance.<sup>30</sup> The leaders of the war for independence already believed that they stood on shaky ground in challenging the authority of the British government and, because of those feelings of uncertainty, they avidly policed one another, alert to any attempt to corrupt the fragile new republic.<sup>31</sup> As Richard Peters declared after listening to Morgan's tirade, "I don't see how any Man of Feeling or Sentiment can continue in a public Department where every measure is looked upon with a jaundiced Eye and of course all Mistakes are magnified into Sins political and moral."<sup>32</sup> The key point of Peters's complaint highlights how the culture of honor turned all personal decisions into honorable or dishonorable behavior. Every decision reflected on a person's character with no distinction made between the private individual and his public actions. A revolutionary whose actions or

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence Was Fought* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 63.

<sup>30</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>31</sup> Michael A. McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," *The Journal of American History* 85 (1998), 950.

<sup>32</sup> Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 220.

decisions were questioned usually interpreted the objection as a challenge to his honor and, which made the political very personal.

Though many twenty-first century individuals may view the culture of honor as a concrete framework within which all controversies were settled by dueling. Most revolutionaries actually preferred to use third-party mediation to resolve their grievances. The colonial elite's extensive friendship networks allowed individuals to use intermediaries to learn if their reputation had been slandered. The intermediaries then determined if the gossip was a serious threat or simply an innocuous misunderstanding. Mediation could be used to forestall the issuing of a challenge to a duel or serve as the first step in an affair of honor.<sup>33</sup>

Often, when officers were unhappy about perceived congressional affronts to their honor, they resigned.<sup>34</sup> Resignations usually occurred after officers were denied promotions to the rank they felt they deserved or when congressional finances made it difficult to pay them on time. Many historians have judged harshly the officers who resigned during the war, but most revolutionaries believed that resignation was an honorable way to preserve their dignity. Politicians also resigned or "retired" from situations that they felt might prove injurious to their dignity. The culture of honor dictated the language used in the officers' resignation letters. Citing their personal resentment over congressional mismanagement of military affairs, officers excused their impending absence by insisting they had to leave to preserve their honor and reputation. Washington tried throughout the war to persuade officers not to take offense at congressional actions, arguing repeatedly that Congress was not intentionally insulting the

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<sup>33</sup> Third-party mediation is discussed in Trees, *Politics of Character*, Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), or Rossie, *The Politics of Command*.

<sup>34</sup> Discussions of the reasons why officers resigned are included in most histories of the Continental Congress and the Continental Army. See: Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*; Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*; Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*; or Edmund Cody Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941); and Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress*.

officer corps with its resolutions and proclamations. But many officers rejected Washington's assurances and began to demand respect in the form of guarantees of pensions from the civil authority.

The revolutionaries' ultimate dramatic recourse to preserve their honor was a physical confrontation, usually in the form of a duel.<sup>35</sup> A duel was a highly ritualized encounter between two social equals who were prepared to face death to prove that their actions were honorable. Also, a physical confrontation demonstrated the seriousness of the issue. Morgan feared that Peters might be a part of a conspiracy to dishonor Washington, and so, when Morgan confronted Peters, he demonstrated his readiness to protect Washington and his personal honor. In this instance, a face-to-face discussion resolved the conflict between Peters and Morgan. But other revolutionaries believed that only dueling could salvage their reputations and honor. Duels occurred with greater frequency among officers in the Continental Army but, as chapter four of this thesis makes clear, several affairs of honor involved military officials and congressional representatives. Such confrontations occurred because disputes over the policy of congressional privilege between the two revolutionary institutions were not initially resolvable by mediation.

The four chapters of this thesis follow the chronological timeline of the American Revolution and examine key issues that developed between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army. Chapter one examines the initial congressional debates concerning the establishment of the Continental Army. Delegates influenced by radical or conservative political ideologies clashed over the new army's structure and how much power should be granted to the new officer class. The sensitivity to social rank and hierarchy made it difficult to appoint

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<sup>35</sup> For excellent sources discussing the detailed rituals involved in an affair of honor see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, Appiah, *Honor Code*, Isenberg, *Fallen Founder*, V.G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honor and the Reign of the Aristocracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Pieter Spierenburg, Ed. *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

officers because some gentlemen felt slighted by their initial appointments. Resentments over promotions and officers' commissions caused many problems throughout the war.

Chapter two discusses the growing pains plaguing both revolutionary institutions at the beginning of the rebellion. The Continental Congress and the army frequently disagreed over the guidelines for promoting officers. Those differences reveal ideological groupings that transcended institutional boundaries. The dispute between General Philip Schuyler and General Horatio Gates over command of the northern army is a striking example of the way in which third-party mediation worked during the war and illuminates the close friendship networks that developed between the military and civilian institutions. Because of these colonial friendship networks, congressional factions developed to support each general's claim that he deserved sole authority over the northern army. Numerous congressional resolutions resulted from third-party negotiations and these allowed the controversy to drag on for over a year because all the participants in it had to work within the boundaries of the honor code.

Chapter three presents the Continental Army's attempts to push back against congressional control. Toward the end of the war, officers assumed that the new resolutions passed by Congress showed disrespect for their status as professional and honorable gentlemen. During the winter seasons, officer resignations became an acute problem for Washington and Congress. In 1777/78 officers began to demand half-pay pensions as a reward for their sacrifices during the conflict. The heated dispute over half-pay pensions symbolized to many revolutionaries problems within the culture of honor that dictated how gentlemen should react in times of conflict and stress. Instead of realizing that Congress hovered on the brink of insolvency, officers fixated on their need for public recognition of their sacrifice. If that

recognition was not forthcoming, the code of honor demanded that they resign, a resolution that was anything but desirable during the middle of a war.

Chapter four discusses the final resolution tool available to gentlemen to address insults to their character. Revolutionaries turned to affairs of honor as a last resort because a duel proved the seriousness of the insult. The policy of congressional privilege created several problems between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army because military officers believed that congressmen used privilege deliberately to injure their reputations. The issue of freedom of debate raised the question of whether the honor code allowed any loopholes if they aided in the prosecution of the war effort. Delegates wanted to be able to discuss openly whether certain generals should be fired or moved elsewhere to make sure American forces won battles. Officers who were discussed disparagingly on the congressional floor believed that they had the right to challenge congressmen for their character assassinations.

Each chapter aims to understand how the culture of honor shaped the revolutionaries' worldview and their decision-making processes. As political and military setbacks challenged colonial leaders, they worried also about their honor and reputation. When feeling pressured, these gentlemen knew that the culture of honor provided three viable methods by which to address their personal grievances. Subscribing to a conception of society that was dominated by a code of honor, these men of "Feeling and Sentiment" attempted to navigate the shifting ground of a rebellion. Honor was a means to that end, but it was a controversial frame of reference to guide the leaders of the Continental Army and the Continental Congress. All too often, they sought to defend their actions even at the expense of efficiency in prosecuting the war effort. And yet, while the code of honor caused many disputes, it did nevertheless, act as "social glue"



to hold together revolutionaries from the thirteen colonies and created the hope of a new American society and government.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kane, *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland*, 10.

## **Chapter 1: Revolutionary Fervor in Philadelphia: Creating New Institutions**

“Professional soldiers are apt to consider themselves as a Body distinct from the rest of Citizens. They soon become attached to their officers and disposed to yield implicit obedience to their Commands. Such a Power should be watched with a jealous Eye.”

Samuel Adams, 1776<sup>37</sup>

Hoping to forestall days of debate, John Adams rose in the Continental Congress in mid June 1775 to propose elevating George Washington as commander-in-chief of the newly established Continental Army. Adams described Washington as “a Gentleman whose Skill and Experience as an Officer, whose independent fortune, great Talents and excellent universal Character would command the Approbation of all America and unite the cordial Exertions of all the Colonies.”<sup>38</sup> Faced with almost certain fighting against British troops in Boston, Congress had agreed to create a military force under its control. The “cordial exertions of all the Colonies” referred to the distinct state militia units already gathered in Cambridge as a makeshift army. The appointment of a commander-in-chief signaled Congress’s intent to fight a defensive war against the British with a continental army composed of volunteers from all the colonies. Delegates wished to appoint a commander-in-chief who possessed military experience and who also understood and reflected the attributes of a gentleman. Emphasizing Washington’s independent fortune and “universal” character, Adams stressed his moral as well as social reputation.

Discussion of military matters dominated the Second Continental Congress from the first day of its legislative session. Revolutionaries found themselves making preparations for war

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<sup>37</sup> I read this quote first in Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 2. Primary source is a letter from Samuel Adams to James Warren on January 7, 1776.

<sup>38</sup> John Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*, Ed. Lyman Henry Butterfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 323.

even as they debated proposals for reconciliation with England. During its first few weeks, Congress oversaw the establishment of military and legislative structures that would influence how the war for American Independence was fought and understood by contemporaries. A letter from the Massachusetts Provincial Congress declaring that “the sanguinary Zeal of the ministerial Army, to ruin and destroy the Inhabitants of this colony [Massachusetts], hath rendered the Establishment of an Army indispensably necessary,” demanded that the Continental Congress grapple with an issue it had hoped to avoid at the beginning of the new legislative session.<sup>39</sup> Should a continental army be raised to protect colonists from the British Army or would this army interfere with redressing colonial grievances with Parliament? Intending to prod Congress into action, the Provincial Council argued that current events in the aftermath of Lexington and Concord dictated the creation of “a power full Army, on the side of America...to stem the rapid Progress of a Tyrannical Ministry.”<sup>40</sup>

Members of the Second Continental Congress knew they faced several momentous decisions in the summer of 1775. Congressmen differed over the question of declaring independence and whether they should create a professional army to fight Great Britain. To deal with these and other contentious matters, delegates clung to the culture of politeness that guided colonial society.<sup>41</sup> They constructed their new national legislature to ensure that each gentleman

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<sup>39</sup> May 11, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, Ed. Worthington C. Ford, et al. (Washington, D.C., 1904-37), 2:24. John Hancock presented the letter to the Continental Congress. Massachusetts President Joseph Warren wrote the letter on May 3<sup>rd</sup> to pass along the depositions collected after Lexington and Concord and to urge the creation of a national army. The language in the letter represents early radical political ideology blaming Parliament and Lord North for all the colonists’ grievances.

<sup>40</sup> May 11, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 2:25.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia U. Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by University of North Carolina Press, 1998). The culture of politeness emphasized that all members of society existed in a deferential world that allowed everyone to voice his opinion in a calm, dispassionate way. The third Earl of Shaftesbury advocated this method of political discourse to escape the rough-and-tumble world of political gossip. In reality, politics were conducted through gossip and innuendo but the delegates at the Continental Congress would have clung to the culture of politeness initially as they nervously gathered together to decide what direction the rebellion should take in the conflict with Great Britain.

would have an equal voice in debates. Well aware that they held opposing views on the question of independence and how much power national legislature should exercise, delegates created an institutional structure that allowed for the development and discussion of different political policies. A major weakness of the Continental Congress and the social conventions by which it operated was that there was no neutral forum for the expression of conflicting opinions without delegates feeling personally insulted.

A culture of politeness and deference left room for interpretation, and this leeway complicated Congress's efforts to commission the major and brigadier generals for the Continental Army. Several of the newly commissioned generals felt insulted by the seniority system established by Congress and threatened to resign, feeling that they needed to leave the Continental Army to preserve their honorable character. The institutional design of Congress and the delegates' political ideologies influenced how the national legislature handled this first challenge to its authority by the Continental Army. Even at the start of the armed rebellion against Great Britain, the culture of honor caused problems between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army.

Many of the delegates in Philadelphia had served in the First Continental Congress in September and October of 1774. Colonial leaders participating in the First Continental Congress understood that they were creating an extralegal assembly. They believed that the First Continental Congress had only the authority to address a petition of protest to Parliament and encourage colonial legislatures to adopt trade embargos.<sup>42</sup> The Continental Congress's main purpose was to allow elite leaders from all of the colonies to meet and exchange strategies on

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<sup>42</sup> Jerrilyn Greene Marston, *King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy from the King to the Continental Congress, 1774-1776* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 67, and Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 48-59.

how to resolve the political problems with Parliament. They did not intend to create a new national assembly that superseded the powers of each colony's legislature.

With the First Continental Congress's limited purpose in mind, politicians deliberately created a weak legislative body that emphasized decision-making by consensus. Members of Congress made decisions only after lengthy open-floor debate. The president of Congress had almost no authority besides that of casting a vote to break a tie, though appointment to the position was based on a gentleman's social prominence and reputation.<sup>43</sup> Each colonial delegation voted as a single bloc in geographical order from the most northern colony, New Hampshire, to South Carolina.<sup>44</sup> By deliberately creating a weak institutional structure delegates could prevent any colony from dominating the proceedings and stop political ideological factions from controlling all the decisions. Delegates debated the institutional structure because they wanted to dispel any rumors that they deliberately sought to usurp political power.

After agreeing to adopt new non-importation and non-exportation agreements in October 1774, Congress recessed. The representatives agreed to meet again in May 1775, should they need to discuss Parliament's reaction to their petitions. After receiving the news of Lexington and Concord, delegates gathered in Philadelphia in a state of considerable agitation. Colonial bloodshed was no longer just a theoretical consequence of challenging the Coercive Acts and Parliament's authority. When the Second Continental Congress began, the delegates unanimously agreed to keep the same parliamentary procedures from the First Continental Congress, a move that would profoundly shape Congress's decision-making during the American Revolution.

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<sup>43</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> The delegates adopted this arrangement to ensure that no colony gained more prominence than another. They focused on equality to prevent the creation of factions and had debated in the First Continental Congress for several days over the guidelines for casting votes.

Delegates approved of a weak institutional structure for two reasons. First, delegates had no idea at the beginning of the new session, that events in the next few weeks would dramatically alter Congress's responsibilities. By June, they controlled an army and had the new financial responsibility to pay for it. The siege of the British troops in Boston lent additional importance to the delegates' decisions. Growing numbers of Americans began to view Congress as the new national legislative body in control of military decisions.<sup>45</sup>

The second reason delegates resolved to follow the rules adopted by the First Congress was that they feared the rise of political factions. They accepted that there were different political ideologies but believed that parties were bad for legislatures. Political parties could destabilize the culture of politeness that preserved the political and social order. By allowing for an open discussion of every issue, no single group could dominate proceedings because each gentleman would have an opportunity to voice his opinion. The culture of honor dictated that every politician be able to speak, so that no one would feel slighted or insulted. An undesirable consequence of this policy was to make legislative business unwieldy and inefficient.<sup>46</sup>

Although delegates realized that debate was time-consuming, they hoped that it would prevent the creation of factions. If all had the chance to speak, there would be no need to organize special groups to manipulate politics. While the delegates expressed disapproval of political factions, they knew that factions had long existed in colonial politics. Colonial leaders had believed that political groupings arose when a temporary alliance among honorable men was needed to institute proper reforms for the benefit of the legislature and society.<sup>47</sup> With this history in mind, delegates to the Second Continental Congress adopted an institutional structure

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<sup>45</sup> Marston, *King and Congress*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin H. Newcomb, *Political Partisanship in the American Middle Colonies, 1700-1776* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 9.

that prevented any faction from dominating congressional business. That structure did not, however, prevent delegates from banding together to gain preferment for their friends or manipulate the outcome of a particular vote.<sup>48</sup>

The Second Continental Congress conducted most of its daily business through the committee system and, from 1775 to 1789 it created 3,249 committees.<sup>49</sup> Delegates served on dozens of committees throughout their legislative tenure. Some committees came into existence solely to answer a single letter, while a few standing committees, such as the Board of War, oversaw the Continental Army's military affairs. Committees typically proposed solutions to the issues they were asked to consider. The entire Congress then debated these proposals.<sup>50</sup> Committee service took up a considerable amount of a delegate's time. A few delegates served on a disproportionately large number of committees, either because of their reputation as diligent legislators or because they served multiple congressional terms.

The committee system's handling of military affairs generally followed a set routine. One example from October 1775 had delegates nominating by secret ballot, a three-man committee to travel to Washington's headquarters to determine what the army needed for winter encampment. Then, a separate committee, consisting of another five delegates would draft the specific instructions and questions to for the committee that traveled to Washington's camp. The committee of five would then read their proposed instructions aloud to all of the delegates. Congress would then debate each paragraph point by point, until a final set of instructions was passed. Then the committee of three who traveled to meet with Washington left Philadelphia

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<sup>48</sup> This statement is influenced by research in *The Beginnings of National Politics* and *Congressional Dynamics*. It challenges Henderson's *Party Politics in the Continental Congress*, which argued that regional subcultures influenced congressional voting. However, the other two monographs explain how the actual behavior of delegates focused more on compromising to prevent the development of permanent sectional or party politics. See specifically *Congressional Dynamics*, 169.

<sup>49</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 95.

<sup>50</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 91-131.

and presented Washington with instructions that had been approved by all delegates after lengthy debate. The entire process took four days.<sup>51</sup>

Decision-making by the committee system and open-floor debate made for slow progress. That officers in the Continental Army never realized how slowly Congress operated would cause problems later in the war. What officers attributed to intentional neglect was actually the result of delegates attempting to solve a problem through the committee system and open-floor debate. Legislators preferred this system because it was consistent with their understanding of the culture of honor. Every opinion was heard and, ideally, consensus decision-making prevented a delegate from feeling slighted or insulted during a debate. The debate over creating, for the first time, a continental army lasted for a full month, as delegates discussed the army's potential structure and the qualifications necessary to become an officer.

Debate over the Continental Army exposed ideological differences among delegates. Their competing ideologies shaped new interpretations of the eighteenth-century culture of honor and influenced the course and conduct of the month-long debate over establishing a new military force. New interpretations developed because many revolutionaries perceived that there was a potential power vacuum in America in the event that Britain was thrown out. They thought that they could re-fashion society into a new ideal form. Historians typically characterize congressional delegates as having been either radicals or conservatives.<sup>52</sup> All congressmen were members of the colonial political elite, but they disagreed on the best solutions to the political problems with Parliament. Both ideological groups hoped to use open-floor debate to persuade

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<sup>51</sup> See: Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 105; and Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 65-67. On September 29, 1775, delegates voted on who would travel to Boston and meet with Washington, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 3:266. On October 2, 1775, the delegates approved the instructions to the committee, *Ibid.*, 3:270.

<sup>52</sup> See Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress*; Marston, *King and Congress*; Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*; Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*.



the opposing group into joining their side. Eighteenth century political institutions allowed for the development of different political ideals, but it was difficult within the political culture to express those conflicting viewpoints without unintentionally insulting a gentleman's reputation. Political beliefs supposedly revealed a person's character.

Radical congressmen believed that, after years of repressive legislation, pursuit of independence was the only reasonable course of action. While their political goal was independence, they hoped that separation from England would permit a new elite social order to develop in the colonies. This social order would reward patriots for their contributions to achieving independence and establish a meritocracy in which citizens were judged according to "actual specimens of their Conduct, not by Squireship or Cousinship."<sup>53</sup> Lacking the strict hereditary aristocracy of England, social mobility had always been easier in the colonies, but this quote written by Silas Deane to his wife expressed a new vision of society. Gentlemen gained elite status by serving their country, jealously guarding the rights of citizens from the tyranny of any oppressive government. Radicals challenged the traditional social hierarchy and the culture of politeness. They hoped Parliament's actions would soon push conservative Revolutionaries into declaring independence.

Radical political ideology held that governments inevitably encroached upon the rights of citizens and so principled political leaders had to stand watch to prevent any perversion of political power. Influenced by the Whigs, then in the minority, colonists applied Whig political ideology to the crisis with Great Britain. Radical members of Congress concluded that independence was the solution to the problem of Anglo-American relations. They believed that keeping a connection with the British Empire would eventually corrupt colonial politics and

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<sup>53</sup> Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, July 20, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, Ed. Paul H. Smith, et al., (25 volumes, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1976-2000), 1:640.

principles. But radicals were in the minority in the Second Continental Congress and recognized that many conservatives were not ready to contemplate independence. Only in private letters did radicals encourage each other to prepare for severing all ties with the King and Parliament.<sup>54</sup>

The majority of delegates were conservative and their political approach argued for a slow, measured consideration of all the options available to resolve the crisis with Parliament. They worried that the crisis would upset the social hierarchy by removing them from power. Their traditional interpretation of the culture of honor also acknowledged merit, but they believed that genteel birth and a superior education endowed political leaders with the proper qualifications to make the best decisions. As pragmatists, conservatives realized independence was an option. They, however, wanted to submit more petitions to the British political authorities before consenting to a revolution that could end in failure.

In the first few weeks of the new session the Continental Army became a flashpoint for both ideological groups. Radicals believed an army was necessary to gain independence from England, but they harbored fears that the military could put an end to their republican dreams. History taught the American revolutionaries that standing armies had destroyed many republics and the specter of the English Civil War haunted the congressional chambers. Conservatives read the same political literature as radicals and also worried about creating a professional, standing army. Conservatives agreed to consider the establishment of a new military force so they could control the volatile situation in Boston between the colonies' militias and British troops.

The English Civil War loomed large in the delegates' minds warning against a professional army. Radicals and conservatives repeatedly discussed the lessons learned from

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<sup>54</sup> Great examples are: John Adams to James Warren, July 6, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:590 and Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnston, July 8, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:615, where Hewes declares "I consider myself now over head & Ears in what the ministry call Rebellion."

Cromwell's rule in the 1650s.<sup>55</sup> Puritan Roundheads raised the New Model Army to overthrow King Charles I, and after several years, the army grew more loyal to Oliver Cromwell, one of the generals, than the political movement. Eighteenth-century Americans believed Cromwell had used the New Model Army to suppress critics of his reign. The English Revolution began with the hope of securing more constitutional rights for citizens but ended with a dictator kept in power by a professional army's support.

In the decades after the civil war, political pamphleteers analyzed what had gone wrong in the war against the monarchy. Many writers believed that the use of a professional army had corrupted the revolutionary movement because soldiers became loyal to whoever paid them.<sup>56</sup> A new political ideology developed that asserted that citizens needed to protect their own rights by becoming involved in politics and, if necessary, taking up weapons, to defend those rights. These writers and their readers gradually formed the Opposition or Whig party in Britain. They challenged the King and Parliament, demanding a more representative government—but only for people who owned property and who therefore had a stake in society's prosperity.<sup>57</sup>

Whigs also proposed reforming the local militia units to use in the war effort. Arguing that vigilant civilians should not rely on an easily manipulated professional army to defend their rights, instead all landowners should pledge to serve to protect their rights and property. Whig pamphlets declared that local militia units should become the government's standard means by which to protect liberty. While Whigs preached this idealized vision of the militia, in reality, by

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<sup>55</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Delbert Cress, "Radical Whiggery on the Role of the Military: Ideological Roots of the American Revolutionary Militia," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (1979): 50. Two frequently cited pamphlets are: *Discourses Concerning Government* (1680) by Algernon Sidney; and *An Argument Shewing, that a Standing Army is inconsistent with a Free Government, and absolutely destructive to the Constitution of the English Monarchy* (1697) by John Trenchard and Walter Moyle.

<sup>57</sup> Marston, *King and Congress*, 135. For a more in-depth discussion of Whig ideology see, Lois G. Schworer, "*No Standing Armies!*": *The antiarmy ideology in seventeenth-century England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).

the mid-eighteenth century, Great Britain maintained a large standing army to expand and defend the borders of its empire.

In the American colonies, prior to the 1750s, militia units were the only military forces to defend territorial boundaries. High-ranking officers of colonial militias received their appointments from royal governors, while the soldiers elected junior officers. All officers typically came from the elite class and the militia rarely participated in military action until the French and Indian War.<sup>58</sup>

Whig ideology and the traditional use of colonial militias to defend territory influenced the debate over the Continental Army. After Lexington and Concord, Congressmen knew they needed an organized military force. They debated whether the army should be structured as a professional, European army or a citizen-soldier force similar in form and function to the local militia units. The debate over the army's potential form illustrates the delegates' competing political and social ideologies. Conservatives preferred a professional army that relied on a rigid social hierarchy to preserve discipline and order in the ranks. To radical delegates, colonial militias represented the ideal of virtuous citizens who volunteered to serve and to protect their rights and privileges against a "tyrannical Ministry."

During the month-long congressional debate in June 1775 over creating an army, radicals repeatedly invoked the memory of the English Civil War to argue against the establishment of a professional, standing army. They argued that the use of paid professionals meant that Americans were unwilling to sacrifice enough to defeat the British regulars.<sup>59</sup> In the radicals' vision of a new republican society, a citizen's actions determined if he was worthy of joining the new elite class. Radicals convinced themselves that the sheer enthusiasm of the people would

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<sup>58</sup> Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 35.

overwhelm and defeat the British Regulars in a few short military battles. This idealism was influenced by a Whig political doctrine that argued that a people's determination to protect their rights imbued them with a righteousness (or virtue) that easily defeated corruption. American radicals believed that the Revolution presented an opportunity for the "eyes of mankind" to judge "whether the government [Continental Congress], will be productive of more Virtue moral and political. We may look up to Armies for our Defence, but Virtue is our best Security."<sup>60</sup>

On a more practical level, voluntary participation in the state militias symbolized American patriotism and proved that colonists supported the Continental Congress's efforts. In traditional Whig rhetoric, professional armies used coercion on multiple levels. Standing armies recruited foot soldiers from the lowest levels of society, men who had no stake in society's welfare or interest in protecting civil liberties.<sup>61</sup> Whigs believed that professional soldiers were mercenaries sold to the highest bidder and they praised militiamen as free citizens who believed in preserving the civil authority. Many radicals argued that if "the Militia is composd of free Citizens. There is therefore no Danger of their making Use of their Power to the Destruction of their own Rights, or suffering others to invade them."<sup>62</sup> Radical delegates proposed establishing a Continental Army that was a loose collection of state militias under the control of Congress, in which citizens volunteered when needed to fight the British. This military structure relied on enthusiasm rather than harsh disciplinary measures to fight.

As radical delegates dreamed of a new republican society, conservative delegates in June 1775 still urged reconciliation with the king and Parliament. After Lexington and Concord, conservatives agreed with the radicals about fighting a defensive war to prevent further British attacks on colonial towns. But, they believed that only a professional army, instead of a

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<sup>60</sup> Samuel Adams to James Warren, November 4, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:299.

<sup>61</sup> Schwoerer, "No Standing Armies!", 95-136.

<sup>62</sup> Samuel Adams to James Warren, January 7, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3:52.

volunteer militia, would impress King George III with the seriousness of their claims. Therefore, in their desire to establish a professional army, conservatives had to undermine the radicals' argument that professional soldiers "are apt to consider themselves as a Body distinct from the rest of Citizens. They soon become attached to their officers and disposed to yield implicit obedience to their Commands. Such a Power should be watched with a jealous Eye."<sup>63</sup> Conservatives understood the radicals' fear of a standing army. They also worried about creating a military force that could potentially challenge the power of the civil authority. All members of Congress worried that the newly appointed generals might emulate Caesar and not Cincinnatus.<sup>64</sup>

Influenced by their interpretation of the culture of honor, conservatives insisted that the British could only be honorably defeated by another professional military force, an army trained to fight in the European military manner in open-field maneuvers. Colonists wanted to be recognized as civilized, honorable gentlemen fighting oppressive British policies, not as "savages leading savages in a howling wilderness."<sup>65</sup> Conservatives' fears about losing their social positions lead them to advocate a Continental army organized according to the strict hierarchical structure of European armies. A traditional army would allow the gentry to maintain control of the rebellion.<sup>66</sup> James Duane asserted that "Licentiousness is the natural Effect of a

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<sup>63</sup> Samuel Adams to James Warren, January 7, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3:52.

<sup>64</sup> For eighteenth-century individuals, Cincinnatus served as the role model of the ultimate citizen-soldier. Called upon by the Senate to solve a military crisis in 458 B.C., Cincinnatus served as dictator. When the crisis was resolved he relinquished his dictatorial powers. Legend states that Cincinnatus happily returned to his life as a farmer after winning great fame as a military commander. Julius Caesar served as a warning for a Republic's vulnerability to strong military commanders. Radical and conservative delegates worried that a professional American army could tempt a Revolutionary into becoming a Caesar. For discussions of Washington deliberately modeling himself after Cincinnatus, see Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: The Free Press, 1987) or John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*.

<sup>65</sup> John Shy, "American Society and Its War for Independence," in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, ed. Don Higginbotham (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 78.

<sup>66</sup> An excellent article that discussed how conservatives hoped to maintain control over the Revolution's military affairs in Virginia is McDonnell, "Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below," *The Journal of American History*, 946-981. Though his article

civil discord and it can only be guarded against by placing the Command of the Troops in the hands of Men of property and Rank.”<sup>67</sup>

After weeks of open-floor debate and a second frantic letter from Massachusetts that stated, “We tremble at having an army (although consisting of our countrymen) established here without a civil power to provide for and control them,” the delegates compromised on the Continental Army’s structure.<sup>68</sup> The army created in the summer of 1775 consisted of volunteers who had enlisted for one year of service in a traditionally structured army. In writing the Articles of War for the new army, both ideological groups agreed to less severe disciplinary measures than the British army.<sup>69</sup> Radicals supported one-year enlistments to prevent the growth of a class of professional soldiers. Conservatives gained a hierarchical army composed of elite officers with an emphasis on subordination and discipline. After Congress agreed to finance the Continental Army, it turned to the necessity of commissioning the army’s officers. A matter of paramount importance was determining the desirable qualities to be possessed by the officer corps.

When John Adams nominated Washington, he listed the qualities delegates believed would best serve the new army and a united colonial effort. Members of Congress were nervous about commissioning the officer corps, worried that the army might one day turn on its civilian

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emphasizes the middling class’s attempts to gain more political power, he offers valuable evidence detailing the colonial gentry’s mindset.

<sup>67</sup> James Duane to Robert R. Livingston, June 7, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:550.

<sup>68</sup> June 2, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:77. Letter, dated May 16, 1775, from Joseph Warren, President of the Massachusetts Provincial Council to the Continental Congress.

<sup>69</sup> Whipping soldiers for infractions served as the traditional punishment in a professional army, while officers faced courts-martial and rarely received physical punishment. Excellent sources discussing the army’s discipline and the different punishments for enlisted soldiers and officers are: Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*; Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington’s Army*; and Harry M. Ward, *George Washington’s Enforcers: Policing the Continental Army* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

masters. Washington's reputation among his peers illuminates the characteristics that both radical and conservative delegates desired in newly commissioned officers.

As commander-in-chief, Washington set the ethical and behavioral tone of the Continental Army.<sup>70</sup> Officers patterned themselves after Washington's example. In the eighteenth century, military professionals believed that a general led by his personality and that his character and reputation inspired men to victory.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the most successful and victorious generals were born and not made. The colonies had no formal military training academies and many officers in the Continental Army learned from reading military manuals.<sup>72</sup> Since most officers acquired training in the field, Washington and congressional delegates wanted to ensure that they nominated men from the right social strata for the officer corps.<sup>73</sup>

Legislators also nominated Washington for three other reasons: he was a Southerner, he had a legislative background, and he possessed an exemplary public demeanor. New Englanders wanted a commander-in-chief appointed from the South, something which they thought would incline other colonies outside New England to view the situation in Boston as a continental war and not as a localized problem in Massachusetts. A Virginian general would tie the most populous colony to New England for the duration of the war. A major issue complicating the war effort arose from problems of regionalism and localism that made inter-colonial cooperation difficult. Colonies, and later, states, jealously vied for positions of power during the American

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<sup>70</sup> Schwartz, *George Washington*, 108. Schwartz point out that in the eighteenth century historical actors believed that leaders should set the ethical and moral tone of the political sphere. This belief can also be applied to how the delegates viewed the continental army. They knew the commander-in-chief needed to serve as an inspiring military commander.

<sup>71</sup> Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, 69.

<sup>72</sup> Theodore Thayer, *Nathanael Greene: Strategist of the American Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960). Duffy, in *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, also discusses the lack of military training academies in Europe. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that military institutions were established mainly to train artillery engineers.

<sup>73</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 21-29, and Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 106-108.



Revolution.<sup>74</sup> Officer appointments were a key means of controlling the army and winning accolades for the bravery of a colony's citizens.

Representative Eliphalet Dyer of Connecticut recognized these sectional tensions when he confided to his friend Joseph Trumbull, that Washington's appointment "removes all jealousies, more firmly Cements the Southern to the Northern." He added, somewhat facetiously, that his appointment took away the fear "that an Enterprising eastern New England Genll proving Successfull, might with his Victorious Army give law to the Southern & Western Gentry."<sup>75</sup> New Englanders, recognizing the need for compromise, agreed to give up their hopes for a Northern commander-in-chief, by supporting Washington.

Commenting in a letter to a close personal friend, Washington acknowledged the sectional politics that led to his appointment, saying "It is an honour I wished to avoid...but the partiality of Congress added to some political motives, left me without a choice."<sup>76</sup> Aside from Washington's conventionally modest assertion that he did not seek the appointment as commander-in-chief, his statement indicates that he understood the sectional motivations that influenced the congressional delegates. Radicals and conservatives knew that all colonists needed to view the armed rebellion against England as a continental affair because, otherwise, the British would exploit regional disagreements to end the conflict.

Washington's years of service in the Virginia House of Burgesses comforted many of the congressional representatives. As a politician, he understood that the military must be subordinate to the civil authority at all times. This was one way to assuage delegates' fears of a standing army. In choosing Washington, they deliberately selected a commander-in-chief who

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<sup>74</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 77-79.

<sup>75</sup> Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, June 17, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:500.

<sup>76</sup> George Washington to Burwell Bassett, June 19, 1775, Ed. Philander D. Chase, et al. *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series* (20 volumes, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1985-2000), 1:13. Bassett was Washington's brother-in-law.

had a martial reputation for his service during the French and Indian War. But they also chose Washington because he had far more experience as a colonial legislator, even if he had not been one of the more celebrated members in the House of Burgesses.<sup>77</sup> Washington also possessed a political advantage due to his presence at the First and Second Continental Congresses.

Delegates were comfortable with nominating him because he had witnessed the debates over creating the Continental Army and they felt that they could trust him after socializing with him at numerous dinners and gatherings in Philadelphia.

Public demeanor was a critically important component of the eighteenth-century culture of honor. Gentlemen read etiquette books to learn how to comport themselves in public. Rituals and words held significant meaning in the social and political spheres, and Washington proved to be a master at crafting an honorable public demeanor in both. Delegates commented on his “easy Soldier like Air, & gesture.”<sup>78</sup> He impressed Eliphalet Dyer as “Clever, & if any thing too modest.” Washington “seems discret & Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow but Sober, steady, & Calm.”<sup>79</sup> These were valuable attributes in a leader who controlled the Continental Army. In fact, delegates were worried about volatile personalities in the army. An ostentatious general could either bankrupt the cause or persuade soldiers to establish him as a tyrant. Dyer believed that “his [Washington] modesty will Induce him I dare say to take & order every step with the best advice possible.”<sup>80</sup> That last statement reveals the key reason why New Englanders agreed to Washington’s appointment: he would obey congressional commands.

Washington’s modesty was an integral component of his character and a trait that an elite gentleman aspired to display in his public demeanor. A gentleman’s modesty showed that he

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<sup>77</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 77 and Schwartz, *George Washington*, 25-26.

<sup>78</sup> Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, September 10, 1774, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:62.

<sup>79</sup> Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, June 17, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:500. Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 85-87.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:500.

was not driven by ambition to seek personal gain. Delegates worried that command of the Continental Army might turn an unqualified colonist into a potential Caesar or Cromwell, but Washington cultivated the public demeanor of a Cincinnatus. Even Washington's acceptance speech displayed his modesty: "I declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think my self equal to the Command I am honoured with."<sup>81</sup> While reciting these conventionally modest words, Washington secretly harbored fears that he was irrevocably tying his reputation to the revolutionary cause and he knew that a failed rebellion would permanently damage his reputation among his peers. But the chance for glory as commander-in-chief persuaded him to accept command and take control of the disorganized troops surrounding Boston. In his private correspondence, he echoed the modest phrasing of his congressional speech, telling friends that he had not sought the appointment but had only agreed to take command because Congress needed his abilities.<sup>82</sup>

Washington refused to take a salary while serving as commander-in-chief, thereby cementing his reputation for modesty.<sup>83</sup> As a gentleman, he would serve for the benefit of his country with no expectation of remuneration. His independent fortune allowed him to maintain the public demeanor and life-style of a gentleman. Delegates appreciated this gesture because, as legislators, they too, served the public without pay. They received only a stipend to help with the

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<sup>81</sup> Address to Continental Congress, June 16, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:1.

<sup>82</sup> For his personal letters to friends see George Washington to Martha Washington, June 18, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:3; George Washington to John Augustine Washington, June 20, 1775, *Ibid.*, 1:19; George Washington to John Parke Custis, June 19, 1775, *Ibid.*, 1:15. Ferling, in *The Ascent of George Washington*, 88-89, discusses Washington's concern for his reputation when accepting the appointment. His analysis has shaped my argument. I also read Schwartz's *George Washington*, 4-9, but I disagree with his conclusions about Washington's modesty. He believes that Washington was truly modest and humble when he accepted the post. I think Washington's acceptance was a carefully calculated public performance. Washington wanted to be commander-in-chief, but worried about his reputation when accepting because it was a risky to undertake the job of leader of an armed rebellion.

<sup>83</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 86-87, and Schwartz, *George Washington*, 126.

expense of living in Philadelphia.<sup>84</sup> Washington's refusal to accept a salary therefore eased many delegates' minds and they told him "that a warm regard to the sacred rights of humanity and sincere love to your country, solely induced you in the acceptance of [your] important trust."<sup>85</sup> Politicians hoped that Washington would serve as a model of decorum and selflessness for the officer corps.

Washington adeptly crafted a public demeanor that appealed to radicals and conservatives alike. Radicals believed that Washington's refusal of a salary showed his zeal for the patriotic cause. Conservatives were happy with a Southern commander-in-chief and they hoped that Washington would serve as a conservative general fighting a defensive war, which would check the radicals' attempts to provoke independence.

Washington's personality profoundly shaped the structure of the Continental Army during the eight-year war for independence. By choosing Washington, delegates appointed a military commander who desired a conservative, professional army and who believed that officers should be recruited from the elite of every colony. In his first general orders to the camp outside of Boston, Washington stressed that disciplinary measures and "due Subordination" were necessary to prevent "extreme hazard, Disorder and Confusion." Without these measures, the army would perish in "shameful disappointment and disgrace."<sup>86</sup> He continually urged the army's ordinary soldiers and officers to think about the public's judgment of their actions. Men of honor cared about their peers' opinions of them. A man was a gentleman only if society recognized him as one.

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<sup>84</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 236-237. Delegates received stipends from their local legislatures when it became clear that Congress was becoming a permanent institution.

<sup>85</sup> Schwartz, *George Washington*, 126. The quote comes from a speech read to Washington, by the Massachusetts Provincial Council, welcoming him to the Camp at Cambridge.

<sup>86</sup> General Orders, July 3, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:54.

At the beginning of the war, the Continental Congress commissioned only major and brigadier generals; all other officer appointments were the purview of the colonial legislatures. Congressmen believed local politicians would nominate suitable “young Gentlemen of a military genius.”<sup>87</sup> Officers obtained their commissions through friendship networks. That is, gentlemen used influence and contacts to receive higher ranks in the officer corps.<sup>88</sup> Washington received hundreds of letters of recommendation from colonial leaders hoping to place family friends at his headquarters or in illustrious regiments. This emphasis on obtaining letters of recommendation meant that colonial legislatures and the Continental Congress were flooded with requests. Even so, delegates were happy to write letters of introduction on behalf of family friends or prominent young gentlemen from their colonies.

A typical letter of introduction followed the format used by Eliphalet Dyer writing on behalf of Aaron Burr. First, he provided a brief overview of Burr’s family history and connections to prove Burr’s claims to gentility. Then Dyer assured his correspondent, Joseph Trumbull, the commissary general of the Continental Army, that Burr was a young gentleman of “fortune & regulation.”<sup>89</sup> Dyer emphasized fortune and regulation because those terms immediately signified an honorable character. Fortune meant that Burr could afford to look the part of a gentleman. Regulation signified a respectable public demeanor because no rumors of ungentlemanly conduct had reached Dyer’s ears. Dyer concluded his letter of introduction with a request that Trumbull help Burr receive an officer’s commission by vouching for his

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<sup>87</sup> Samuel Adams to James Warren, January 7, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3:52.

<sup>88</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 29-30.

<sup>89</sup> Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, July 18, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:634.

gentlemanly reputation. John Hancock also wrote a letter of introduction for Aaron Burr.<sup>90</sup> This process was repeated thousands of times throughout all of the colonies.

During the American Revolution, officers depended on leaders in the civil sphere to obtain commissions and promotions. This system, shaped by the eighteenth-century's culture of honor, ensured the military's subordination to Congress. But, it also created many opportunities for jealousy to ferment in the officer corps. Washington had no authority to set the guidelines for personal advancement. Officers, instead, needed to court politicians for their commissions. The process of appointing officers quickly assumed a personal dimension during the war because officers had to rely on their reputations and friendships in seeking new commissions or promotions. When for any of a number of reasons, politicians denied the officers' requests most believed that civil authorities were insulting their honor.

After establishing the Continental Army, Congress decided to appoint only generals. The rationale for the appointment of the majority of officers by local legislatures was the belief by congressmen that local politicians would be better able to verify the reputation of officer applicants through friendship networks. But even commissioning new generals for the Continental Army proved difficult for the congressmen. As John Adams stated, "nothing has given me more Torment, than the Scuffle We have had in appointing the General Officers."<sup>91</sup>

Washington arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early July 1775, ready to create a Continental Army with the help of his newly commissioned Council of War. He held the appointments for several new major and brigadier generals who would help Washington establish a new professional military force capable of meeting the British in open field combat. But, before the commander-in-chief could begin training his troops, three of the newly appointed

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<sup>90</sup> John Hancock to George Washington, July 19, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:133.

<sup>91</sup> John Adams to James Warren, June 20, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:519.

brigadier generals threatened to resign. It had taken several days of congressional debate to agree on the gentlemen to be nominated for these positions and, now those generals rejected Congress's authority. John Thomas, Joseph Spencer, and David Wooster believed that their new Continental Army appointments insulted their honor because they did not correlate with their local legislature's commissions.<sup>92</sup> Each general had received a rank with higher seniority in his local military forces than his new Continental Army commissions and he did not want serve under his former military subordinates. In early July, the delegates felt the army was challenging their authority.

After unanimously selecting George Washington, delegates disagreed over how to apportion the commissions for major and brigadier generals between the twelve colonies (Georgia's delegation was not officially in attendance until after Congress had created the Continental Army).<sup>93</sup> In the spring of 1775, the generalships represented an opportunity for a colony to receive recognition for its military contributions. After receiving a generalship, colonies then appointed a prominent local gentleman to a high military office. The appointments opened up new avenues of patronage and a chance for a colony to gain a reputation for martial excellence. Thus, George Washington's battle successes, the few that occurred, enhanced Virginia's reputation for raising quality gentlemen ready to win the war for American independence.<sup>94</sup>

The stakes involved in these appointments were high and delegates used a complex political calculus to dole out the generalships to the colonies that had raised troops in the spring to fight the British. Originally, Congress anticipated commissioning two major generals and five

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<sup>92</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 21-24. Rossie had a brief description of the three brigadier generals threatening to resign and I used his footnotes to further discuss the problems in the continental line.

<sup>93</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 12-14.

<sup>94</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 77.

brigadier generals. With, however, only seven positions to fill, delegates worried that some colonies would feel slighted. Congressmen understood that each colonial legislature wanted at least one generalship for its colony as recognition of their patriotic effort. Every colonist who followed the battle reports would read about the generals and what colonies they represented.<sup>95</sup>

John Adams described the political negotiations over generalships in a personal letter to Joseph Warren: “How many Brigadiers general we shall have,” Adams observed, “whether five, Seven or Eight, is not determined, nor who they shall be. One from N. Hampshire, one from R. Island, two from Connecticut, one from N. York, and three from Massachusetts, perhaps.”<sup>96</sup> Adams’s letter mentioned the colonies that had rushed volunteer armies to Boston after the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. A week after commissioning George Washington, Congress settled on appointing four major generals and eight brigadier generals. Soon, three generals threatened to resign in accordance with the eighteenth-century honor code, thereby wreaking havoc with Congress’s carefully considered political calculus.

When Congress commissioned the new generals on June 22, it also established their respective seniority level. Seniority dictated each officer’s level of authority and place on the line of promotion. A gentleman in the eighteenth century paid a significant amount of attention to his position in the chain of command, because he believed his commission rewarded his good character and reputation.<sup>97</sup> Gentlemen insisted that they could not serve with honor under men who had been their subordinates in the social hierarchy. The culture of honor stipulated that resignation served as their only peaceable option to deal with this type of insult to their character.

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<sup>95</sup> Colonial Americans believed that a person’s social class and the geographical location of his/her birth shaped his/her character. Eric Nellis, *An Empire of Regions: A Brief History of Colonial British America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). Colonies vied for honors during the Revolution, hoping to gain recognition and renown.

<sup>96</sup> John Adams to Joseph Warren, June 21, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:530.

<sup>97</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 29-39, McDonnell, “Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below,” *The Journal of American History*, 963-972, and Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How The War of Independence Was Fought*, 63-67.



Conservatives understood the officers' reactions, though they probably wished that they had not decided to reject congressional authority at the beginning of the rebellion. Radicals, however, hoped to create a new social order that would reward merit and not seniority. They wanted generals who happily accepted their patriotic commissions without worrying about seniority. Competing political ideologies shaped how delegates reacted to problems in the military sphere, and the culture of honor was open to interpretation by both radicals and conservatives in the Continental Congress and the Continental Army.

As the record of congressional proceedings makes clear, delegates deliberately listed the new seniority rankings of the major and brigadier generals. Delegates ranked the officers based upon their reputation and their respective colonies' military efforts. Artemas Ward of Massachusetts received the highest seniority of the major generals; he was placed second in command to Washington. Ward was ranked so highly because, prior to the establishment of the Continental Army, he had commanded the makeshift army surrounding the British troops in Boston. By making Ward second in command, delegates wanted to ease the sting of not appointing him commander-in-chief. Ward understood the political reasons for selecting Washington and never resented his congressional appointment. Congress then appointed Charles Lee, a former British officer, Philip Schuyler of New York, and Israel Putnam of Connecticut as major generals.

Using the political arithmetic alluded to by John Adams, Congress appointed eight brigadier generals. In order of seniority, from first to last, Congress commissioned Seth Pomeroy of Massachusetts, Richard Montgomery of New York and a former British officer, David Wooster of Connecticut, William Heath of Massachusetts, Joseph Spencer of Connecticut, John Thomas of Massachusetts, John Sullivan of New Hampshire, and Nathanael Greene of

Rhode Island.<sup>98</sup> Congress also appointed Horatio Gates, a former British officer, as adjutant general to help Washington create a professional army from the amateur military force gathered outside of Boston.

Congress awarded both Massachusetts and Connecticut three generalships each because those states had contributed the most men and material to the war effort. Congress attempted to commit New York fully to the war effort by commissioning two prominent New Yorkers. Delegates feared that New York City might be the next target of British forces and they hoped the commissions would prevent New York from declaring neutrality. These kinds of political calculations influenced the nominations of the Continental Army's generals and even the structure of the army. Decisions were made after lengthy debate highlighting how the delegates compromised their political ideologies to maintain the war effort. They also compromised on many other matters to ensure a deferential atmosphere in Congress where every opinion was heard to prevent injured feelings.

After the shots fired at Lexington and Concord, many colonial legislatures raised their own military forces and commissioned their own locally prominent gentlemen for the officer corps. Gentlemen received ranks of seniority in recognition of their reputation and political and/or military experience, because many of the newly commissioned officers had served in the French and Indian War. For example, when Congress appointed the new generals, it inadvertently ignored the seniority established by Massachusetts's local legislature. But in the case of Connecticut's generals, Congress intentionally disregarded the rankings to reward Israel Putnam for his military exploits during the spring.<sup>99</sup> Accordingly, when David Wooster, Joseph

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<sup>98</sup> June 22, 1775, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:103.

<sup>99</sup> Silas Deane to Jonathan Trumbull, Sr., July 6, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:593. Deane notified Trumbull, the governor of Connecticut, that "our Colony Orders were broke in upon in consequence of the heigh Opinion, which the Congress entertained of General Putnams Service & Zeal."

Spencer, and John Thomas received their new commissions from Washington, they threatened to resign.<sup>100</sup>

In Washington's first official letter to Congress on July 10, 1775, he described the difficulties with the new commissions. He also commented on the officers' behavior when they received the news. In Washington's words, "the Appointments of the General Officers in the Province of Massachusetts Bay—have by no Means corresponded with the Judgment & Wishes of either the civil or Military."<sup>101</sup> John Thomas resented his new commission; in the Massachusetts army he had ranked higher than Seth Pomeroy and William Heath. Now, he was a subordinate to them, ranked six out of eight officers. Thomas believed that his new commission insulted his character and reputation and that the Continental Congress had deliberately refused to acknowledge his achievements. Washington understood his hurt feelings, explaining to Congress that the situation "would make his Continuance very difficult, & probably operate on his Mind."<sup>102</sup> Washington urged Congress to find a solution that would preserve Thomas's dignity and allow him to serve in the Continental Army.

When Abigail Adams heard about Thomas's new commission, she told her husband, "I fear General Thomas being overlooked and Heath placed over him will create much uneasiness. If Thomas resigns all his officers resign; and Mr. Thomas cannot with honour hold under Heath."<sup>103</sup> Abigail Adams's comments reflected her keen awareness of the culture of honor used both in the military and in civil institutions. She understood that even if the commission was a mistake by Congress, Thomas and his peers considered the commission to be a comment on his

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<sup>100</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 21.

<sup>101</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, July 10[-11], 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:89.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:90.

<sup>103</sup> Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 25, 1775, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*. <http://www.masshist.org/ff/> (accessed September 10, 2011)

character. To support Thomas, his junior officers would have resigned in protest. Officers felt that their regiment's honor and their own personal honor depended on recognition of their general's military reputation. In most gentlemen's minds the struggle over rank and promotion correlated directly with how society and their peers valued their honor and reputations.

In fact, John Adams stated that a "Want of frequent Communication and particular Intelligence led us into the unfortunate Arrangement of General Officers, which is likely to do so much Hurt." The Massachusetts delegates had ranked their quota of Continental generals without realizing that their local legislature had already commissioned prominent local gentry. Adams learned in early July that the Continental Congress had unwittingly demoted Thomas. Adams reassured politicians in Massachusetts that "I have made it my Business ever since I heard of this Error, to wait upon Gentn. of the Congress...and contrive a Way to get out of the Difficulty, which I hope we shall effect."<sup>104</sup> Massachusetts delegates in Congress wrote apologetic letters to Thomas to assure him that they had not meant to insult his honor. As a measure of their seriousness in the matter, they proposed a plan to make Thomas the highest-ranking brigadier general.

Members of the Massachusetts state legislature and members of Congress worked together to negotiate a solution to Thomas's commission, they asked Seth Pomeroy to resign his new commission, and then they would replace Pomeroy with Thomas. Plagued by health issues, Pomeroy had already left the army encampment in Boston before the trouble with the commissions. His resignation was a simple formality that allowed Thomas to outrank Heath and coincided with the original rankings decided by the Massachusetts government.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> John Adams to James Warren, July 6, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:588.

<sup>105</sup> Congress ignored military precedent when they promoted Thomas to first brigadier general. Richard Montgomery of New York should have become first brigadier general when Pomeroy resigned because he was listed as the second brigadier general in seniority. Congress wrote a letter to Montgomery describing the

Joseph Spencer's and David Wooster's unhappiness over the new commissions was not so easily resolved. Congress commissioned Israel Putnam as a major general to reward his martial zeal. In the spring, Putnam had engaged British forces in a minor skirmish, earning him plaudits in Congress for his bold military manner. In a letter, one congressman praised Putnam, who had served in French and Indian War, as a man "totally unfit for every thing, but only fighting."<sup>106</sup> Congress rewarded Putnam by deliberately ignoring the ranks established by the Connecticut legislature. An infuriated Spencer and Wooster insisted that the Continental Congress must conform to Connecticut's decision.<sup>107</sup>

While Washington expressed sympathy for Thomas in his letter to Congress, he disapproved of how Spencer handled the news about the commissions. Spencer had left the army after threatening to resign and had then returned to Connecticut. Washington notified Congress that Spencer "was so much disgusted at the Preference given to Gen. Putnam, that he left the Army without visiting me, or making known his Intentions in any Respect."<sup>108</sup>

Washington's choice of words indicated his displeasure with Spencer's actions and painted Spencer as a petulant military officer and not a gentleman honorably protesting his unhappiness with a congressional decision. Washington's characterization of Thomas was in sharp contrast to his view of Spencer: "I must join in the general Opinion that he [Thomas] is an able good Officer & his Resignation would be a publick Loss."<sup>109</sup> Besides notifying Congress that Spencer left without his permission, Washington ignored Spencer in the rest of the letter. His silence about

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extraordinary circumstances to ensure Montgomery did not become resentful over this irregularity in military procedure. James Duane wrote to Montgomery stating: "I sincerely hope this may not give you any Displeasure as I am confident no Disrespect was intended." James Duane to Richard Montgomery, July 21, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:642.

<sup>106</sup> Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, July 20, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:640.

<sup>107</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 22.

<sup>108</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, July 10[-11], 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:89.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:89-90.

Spencer was an eloquent condemnation of Spencer's behavior and perhaps reflected Washington's doubts about Spencer's character. Washington was also silent about David Wooster, who remained in camp but complained loudly about the injustices done to his reputation. Such behavior likely lowered Wooster's stock in Washington's eyes.

Silas Deane and Eliphalet Dyer, congressional delegates from Connecticut, discussed the behavior of Spencer and Wooster in their personal and political correspondence. They seemed embarrassed by how petulantly Spencer and Wooster had acted. Deane wrote "that the late Arrangement of Officers, is highly disagreeable to Worster [Wooster], and Spencer and that high words have pass'd on the Occasion—that Worster talks high of his Thirty Years Service, and that Spencer left his Forces."<sup>110</sup> Deane, a radical delegate, believed Wooster' and Spencer's behavior insulted Putnam and he was happy that Congress had rewarded Putnam for his actions rather than for his social reputation. Radicals championed a new interpretation of the culture of honor, which emphasized the recognition of an individual's actions and not his pedigree.

Condemning Spencer's behavior, Deane argued that "he acted a part, inconsistent, with the Character, either of a Soldier, a Patriot, or even of a Common Gentleman to desert his post in an hour of Danger...and to turn his back sullenly on his General [Putnam]."<sup>111</sup> Washington undoubtedly agreed with Deane's sentiment, but he could never have expressed that view in a public letter to Congress. Washington had to choose his words carefully because his letters were intended for a public audience. Deane, however, could indulge himself by using heated words in a private letter to insult Spencer.

The culture of honor encouraged fine distinctions in the matter of socially acceptable behavior. Thus, although Spencer could resign his commission, he could not honorably leave his

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<sup>110</sup> Silas Deane to Elizabeth Deane, July 20, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:640.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:641.

troops without notifying the commander-in-chief. Resignation was an acceptable method of protest, but leaving camp without notice was impetuous behavior unbecoming of a gentleman. Eliphalet Dyer confided to a friend, “I have Endeavourd to make all the excuse for him [Spencer] possible that as this Congress had Superseded him in Rank by Genll Putnam...they must make some allowance for the first feelings up on such an Occasion. I hope he may return soon & behave in Character.”<sup>112</sup> Dyer disapproved of Spencer’s behavior because it reflected poorly on Connecticut’s gentry. He wanted Spencer to model his behavior after Washington’s public demeanor. A gentleman never allowed his emotions to influence his public behavior. Men should appear calm and rational at all times because only the lower social classes expressed their feelings without any control.<sup>113</sup> Spencer behaved poorly by leaving camp in high dudgeon. His actions reflected poorly on his character and made him look petty.

Dyer’s comments were indicative of Congress’s growing frustration with Spencer’s, Thomas’s, and Wooster’s behavior over the commissions. Many delegates thought that any nomination was an honor and that the generals should ignore their disappointment with their new rank and accept the commissions. Delegates could understand “the first feelings” of resentment and injured pride but would not tolerate it as a challenge to congressional authority.

Congress was already worried about its authority to raise an army for a defensive war and now it faced challenges from newly commissioned officers who preferred their local legislature’s authority. Wooster returned his commission to Roger Sherman, asking Sherman to “deliver it to Mr. Hancock with my best compliments, I desire him not to return it to me. I have already a commission from the assembly of Connecticut.”<sup>114</sup> Attachment to local authority complicated

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<sup>112</sup> Eliphalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, July 21, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:644.

<sup>113</sup> Eustace, *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power and the Coming of the American Revolution*, 154-161.

<sup>114</sup> Chase, Philander D., Ed., *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, footnote number 20, 1:95.

the Continental Congress's attempt to gain recognition as the new authority superseding, on certain matters, the colonial legislatures.<sup>115</sup> Delegates had two motives influencing their interest in controlling the Continental Army: it would make prosecution of the war effort easier since all decisions would be decided by one national legislature as opposed to thirteen legislatures; and it presented the opportunity for Congress to gather more authority and cement its power as the national legislature.

Congressional representatives resented Spencer's and Wooster's dismissal of their authority to appoint, in any order they preferred, the new major and brigadier generals for the Continental Army. John Adams believed that "Gentlemen here, had no private Friendships Connections, or Interests, which prompted them to vote for the Arrangement they made, but were influenced only by a Regard to the Service; and they are determined that their Commissions shall not be despized."<sup>116</sup> Adams was defending Congress's decision-making process against the resentful whispers of Spencer and Wooster. Some congressional delegates had come to resent the behavior of all three generals for their complaints about their appointments. Adams was convinced that "It will cost us, Pains to prevent their being discarded from the service of the Continent with Indignation."<sup>117</sup> Fortunately, the delegates relented in their anger when Spencer returned to Boston and accepted his brigadier general commission. Wooster also acknowledged his Continental Army commission, though he still considered himself a major general in Connecticut's army.

Members of Congress allowed their anger towards the generals to dissipate because, in the end, they had no alternative. The generals had, after all, eventually recognized congressional

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<sup>115</sup> Marston, *King and Congress*, 149-150.

<sup>116</sup> John Adams to James Warren, July 23, 1775 *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*. <http://www.masshist.org/ff/> (accessed September 10, 2011)

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, <http://www.masshist.org/ff/> (accessed September 10, 2011)



authority. Besides, another round of political calculus would have been necessary to replace Connecticut's quota of brigadier generals. Ultimately, though, what prevented Spencer's and Wooster's dismissal was that the delegates understood their first feelings upon being demoted. Congressmen may have disliked the generals' personal behavior but they accepted that threats of resignation were allowed and encouraged by the culture of honor. At the beginning of the Second Continental Congress, delegates were hesitant over how much power they possessed over the Continental Army's affairs. They therefore worked to reach a compromise with these generals. But, as the war dragged on, congressmen grew increasingly intolerant of the generals' behavior.

The dispute over congressional commissions illuminates several key concerns for the revolutionaries in both Congress and the army during the first two months of rebellion. Congress worried about creating a professional army and having to trust military officers with any power. The behavior of these three generals appeared to confirm all of the delegates' suspicions that military office transformed patriots into ambitious soldiers who sought greater power and influence. Now congressmen would watch the Continental Army's officers with an even more "jealous eye" to determine if they would despise and flout congressional authority. Delegates did, however, appreciate Washington's handling of the tense situation because he left everything in the hands of Congress (which he was probably very happy to do). Washington bowed to civil authority in handling internal military matters.

The commissions reveal the complicated political calculations involved in appointing officers who possessed military talent and experience while at the same time satisfying local legislatures that wanted their prominent local gentry recognized. Congress wanted gentlemen to fill the officer corps because such officers would be a part of the same culture of honor that

governed the actions of the congressional delegates. They would therefore share a set of values that shaped their public behavior and decision-making processes. But, at the same time, the culture of honor proved increasingly troublesome because it demanded that gentlemen constantly guard against threats to their character. To officers, commissions defined their social standing among their peers. If they were not promoted or failed to receive a ranking as high as they believed they deserved, then their character, which is to say, their honor, had been insulted. For the delegates, the commissions represented Congress's authority and control over the Continental Army. They worried that officers were challenging their legitimacy as the civil authority.

The friction between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army only grew worse as the army grew larger and added additional temperamental officers to the Continental Line. During the first two years of the war, Congress took steps to increase its control over the Continental Army. Congress, rather than Washington, established the guidelines for promotion. Congress further asserted its supremacy by discharging a major general during an active campaign season because political factions in both congress and the army had used open-floor debate to mediate an affair of honor between two generals, Philip Schuyler and Horatio Gates.

## Chapter 2: The Rank Business of Promotion

“I earnestly intreat you to make the most minute Enquiry, after every one of these [officer appointments], and let me know his Character, for I am determined, I will know that Army, and the Character of all its officers. I Swear, I will be a faithful Spy upon it for its good.”

John Adams, 1775<sup>118</sup>

Major General Horatio Gates strode into the congressional chamber in June 1777, with prepared speech in hand ready to defend his right to an independent command in New York state. Struggling to control his temper, Gates confronted congressmen about their recent decision to make him subordinate to Major General Philip Schuyler. Gates began by narrating “his Birth, Parentage and Education, Life, Character and Behavior.”<sup>119</sup> He outlined his claims to gentility and his qualifications for service in the Continental Army, arguing that “My Rank, my Station, my Services entitled me to more Regard than such unceremonious Treatment.”<sup>120</sup> Gates also asserted that New York representatives James Duane and William Duer had deliberately insulted his reputation by gossiping about his military performance in an effort to gain preferment for their close friend and fellow New Yorker, Philip Schuyler.

Gates’s accusations electrified Congress. Shouting down the allegations, James Duane demanded that Gates withdraw from the congressional chamber. Other delegates called for the general to continue. He eventually withdrew without finishing his speech and delegates grimly muttered among themselves about the continual problem of Continental Army officers challenging congressional authority.

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<sup>118</sup> John Adams to William Tudor, July 23, 1775, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007). <http://www.masshist.org/ff/> accessed October 9, 2011

<sup>119</sup> William Duer to Philip Schuyler, June 19, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:229. For another description of Gates’s appearance in Congress, see Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 86-87.

<sup>120</sup> Horatio Gates’ Notes for a Speech to Congress, June 18, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:213-216.

The shouting match between Gates and Duane in June 1777 reflected how over the past two years tensions had increased between Congress and the Continental Army. Congress had begun to exert more control over the army in October 1775 through various laws and regulations. At times, the officer corps reacted to the congressional initiatives with resentment and anger, but most officers followed Washington's example of patient cooperation with Congress's numerous directives and interference with military protocol. During the war, the issue of rank and promotion became a major point of contention and confrontation between the civil and military authorities.

From the beginning, Congress decided to control promotions within the Continental Army. Delegates wanted to ensure that the right gentlemen with the proper qualifications fought for the correct political and social principles. Unfortunately, in Congress promoters of these principles split along ideological lines between radical and conservative revolutionaries. As discussed in chapter one, these factions held different opinions about the proper qualifications for officers. Radicals hoped to reward patriotic fervor and action. They wanted to create a social meritocracy introducing a new conception of the eighteenth-century culture of honor that valued their political principles. In contrast, conservatives wanted to use the traditional eighteenth-century culture of honor to preserve social stability. While they recognized merit as a crucial component of honor, they believed that the rebellion was safest in the "hands of Men of property and Rank."<sup>121</sup>

Ideological differences also existed in the military. Many army officers had held political positions prior to assuming their new military commands and identified themselves as either radical or conservative revolutionaries. Officers often communicated with politicians in Congress or in their local legislatures to exchange news and to discuss their political principles.

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<sup>121</sup> James Duane to Robert R. Livingston, June 7, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 1:550.

John Adams believed that “a free Correspondence between the Members of Congress and the Officers of the Army, will probably be attended with Advantages to the public by improving both the Councils and Arms of America.”<sup>122</sup> What Adams was not so subtly encouraging was close personal communication among all revolutionaries. Such exchanges with their political allies and friends would, he hoped, prevent feelings of alienation within the officer corps. Furthermore, many congressional delegates wanted to receive the army officers’ suggestions for reorganizing the Continental Army into a military force capable of beating the British. While delegates trusted Washington as commander-in-chief, they also wanted to know the opinions of other officers so that no general had too much power or influence with Congress.<sup>123</sup> Men in the civil and military spheres exchanged thousands of letters in which they shared gossip and political opinions during the rebellion.

As the war progressed, gentlemen moved fluidly in and out of both revolutionary institutions. The rotation of officers and politicians allowed friendship and patronage networks to expand beyond the scope of local connections. If congressmen failed to be reelected to the Continental Congress, they might join the military or become wartime governors of their colonies/states. Army officers followed a similar pattern: Philip Schuyler ran for gubernatorial office in New York while fighting British General Burgoyne’s invasion from Canada; other officers eventually won election to the Continental Congress or to their local legislatures. In fact, many close relationships existed between politicians and military officers during the war.

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<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Jack Rakove, *Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 126. John Adams wrote this letter to Colonel Daniel Hitchcock on August 3, 1776. Their letter exchange discussed questions about promotions in the army and how the recently reformed paymaster system would work. <http://www.masshist.org/publications/apde/portia.php?id=PJA04d250>

<sup>123</sup> The correspondence between Adams and Colonel Daniel Hitchcock was typical of the exchange between politicians and officers. Hitchcock originally wrote to complain about having to pay for all of his men’s uniforms because he was the colonel. Adams encouraged the correspondence because he wanted to understand the grumblings of the officer corps and help mediate some of the issues. They only exchanged a few letters in the fall of 1776 before Hitchcock died in January 1777.

These friendships are important because they were channels for the flow of political gossip. In the eighteenth century, patronage and close connections helped gentlemen gain political office or a colonelcy in the state militia. Friendships provided an instant character reference because gentlemen were only acquainted with people whose reputation and character they respected. In this and in other ways, delegates of the Continental Congress used the guidelines for eighteenth-century society to bring order to these turbulent times. Delegates paid close attention to their fellow delegates' friends believing they revealed people's political allegiances.<sup>124</sup>

Friendships were a major factor in the dissatisfaction over ranks and promotions within the Continental Army. Officers believed that their comrades gained preferment due to their connections with political officials. Originally, Congress had only appointed generals leaving the other officer appointments to local legislatures. By 1777, after two extensive debates the Continental Congress commissioned all officers above the rank of captain. Continental Army officers now looked to Congress and not their superior officers for promotions, a shift that resulted in even more letters between the two revolutionary institutions.

When officers were unhappy with their ranks or lack of promotion, many threatened to resign. As an eighteenth-century military manual warned, “[N]obles become extremely disgusted with war when they do not receive promotion. They believe that an injury has been done to their reputation unless, by suitable advancement, they are reassured that one is pleased with their services.”<sup>125</sup> Of course, this suitable advancement was subjective, leaving room for

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<sup>124</sup> As I have already noted, John Adams recorded this sentiment in his diary, writing “In a Provincial Assembly, where we know a Man’s Pedigree and Biography, his Education, Profession and Connections, as well as his Fortune, it is easy to see what it is that governs a Man and determines him to this Party in Preference to that, to this system of Politicks rather than another, etc...But here it is quite otherwise. We frequently see Phenomena which puzzles us. It requires Time to enquire and learn the Characters and Connections, the Interests and Views of a Multitude of Strangers.” Quoted in Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 20, Adams’s observation captures the significance placed upon character and friendships in colonial politics.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, 78. This quote is from a military treatise *Reflexiones Militares* written in the late 1720s by Don Alvaro Novia Osorio y Vigil, Marqués de Santa Cruz de

interpretation in both Congress and the officer corps over when promotions were needed. Officers of all ranks pushed for promotion writing to acquaintances and close friends to plead their cases. In an officer's mind a higher rank signified greater recognition of his reputation among his peers.<sup>126</sup> This mindset made promotions personal during the war. Politicians understood these feelings but grew frustrated with the ceaseless petitions from officers threatening to resign if they did not receive a higher rank.

Friendship networks mediated the threat of resignation because friends and political allies promised to put forward an aggrieved officer's name for the next round of promotions. Delegates offered to work on behalf of their friend's interests in hopes of soothing the officer's temper and bruised ego. Mediation served as a critically important method for negotiating the tension caused by the eighteenth-century culture of honor's requirement that a gentleman challenge any perceived insult to his character. Friends urged each other to calm down and think through decisions before writing a letter of resignation or issuing a challenge to a duel. If a duel was the only option in the participants' minds, then mediators helped explain to the peer group why such drastic action was necessary.

The importance of mediation to negotiating the tensions between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army is revealed in the dispute between Major Generals Horatio Gates and Philip Schuyler over who would command the northern army in upstate New York. The controversy lasted for over a year and resulted in multiple congressional resolutions and several threats of resignation. Schuyler and Gates each used his political allies and friends in Congress to fight for him and these allies used mediation to maneuver on behalf of the generals.

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Marcenado (1684-1732). Santa Cruz wrote the manual to share his expertise on battle tactics; Duffy used this quote to explain the eighteenth-century European culture of honor, capturing perfectly the same sentiments expressed by Continental Army officers in their personal and official letters.

<sup>126</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 38.

The Schuyler-Gates controversy exposes how the culture of honor complicated the interactions between the military and civil authorities. The dispute was inherently dangerous and political factions in Congress were determined to use mediation to resolve the disputes between the two generals before it ended in an affair of honor.

From 1775 through 1777, Congress introduced new regulations for the military, exerting more control over the Continental Army than perhaps delegates realized at the time. Congress controlled promotions and in the fall of 1775 began to create a professional army by introducing harsher disciplinary measures and longer terms of enlistment.<sup>127</sup> As Congress increased its authority, it encountered problems rooted in the culture of honor, as officers resented congressional control over military promotions.

Writing to Congress in late September, Washington worried that he would not have enough soldiers during the winter to keep the British contained in Boston. Army enlistments ended in early December and some soldiers were already deserting to return home for the harvest. Washington's concerns about expiring enlistments offered revolutionaries, in both the army and Congress, an opportunity to contemplate a new organizational structure for the colonies' military forces. The original army created in June was a haphazard affair, and mainly a reaction to the urgent situation in Massachusetts after Lexington and Concord. In the fall of 1775, delegates began thinking about the best way to conduct a defensive war in the following year.

Conservatives and radicals differed, often sharply, over the future of the army and even what constituted a desirable outcome of the war. Conservatives initially hoped that a few quick,

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<sup>127</sup> In the summer of 1775, delegates wrote the Articles of War allowing only 39 lashes to punish military infractions. Enlistments were usually measured in terms of months because no revolutionary could imagine the war lasting for longer than two years. In December 1776, delegates and army officers began discussing extending the terms of enlistment for either three years or for the duration of the war. Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 69-76, and Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 66-74.



decisive military victories against the King's troops would bring Parliament to the bargaining table. Delegates avidly exchanged letters detailing the latest rumors from London about British military strategies. Washington alerted Congress that the Continental Army was slowly melting away, while hearing news that Britain was hiring mercenaries to fight in the colonies.<sup>128</sup>

Radical and conservative delegates in open-floor debate discussed "how, when, and where the said Army may be best raised and levied." Some politicians raised the question of "by whom the Officers should be chosen and recommended."<sup>129</sup> Both Washington and members of Congress wanted to bring order to the haphazard American military forces. Unfortunately, revolutionaries in both institutions disagreed on the best methods for restructuring the army.

John Adams's notes about the debates in October 1775 revealed how radicals and conservatives were still debating the army's structure, a topic they had struggled with during the summer months. The military stalemate in Boston between Washington and Howe, in the fall, presented an opportunity for Congress to guide the Continental Army in either a politically radical or conservative direction. Ultimately, the delegates compromised because they could not imagine that the war would last beyond December 1776.

According to Adams's notes, delegates debated whether the Continental Congress should appoint all officers over the rank of captain. Adams listed each delegate and a short synopsis of his argument.<sup>130</sup> The debate grew heated when delegates proposed enhancing Congress's control over the officer corps. Radical delegates, such as Roger Sherman, Samuel Ward, and Eliphalet Dyer, urged Congress to leave officer appointments to the discretion of each colony's legislature. Conservative delegates, such as James Duane, Samuel Chase, and Edward Rutledge argued for

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<sup>128</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, September 21, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 2:24-30.

<sup>129</sup> October 2, 1775, *Journal of the Continental Congress*, 3:271.

<sup>130</sup> John Adams's Notes of Debates, October 10, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:156-157.

increasing the Continental Congress's control over its army. The debates in October 1775 reveal the influence that radical and conservative interpretations of honor exerted on delegates' decisions about the army's structure.

Conservatives argued for increased control over the officer appointment process, believing that vesting Congress with the power to appoint all officers would cause the military to transfer its allegiance from units' respective provinces to the national legislature. Delegates wanted to prevent accidentally superseding a local legislature's rankings, thereby avoiding a situation similar to the problems that had arisen during the summer of 1775, when three brigadier generals had threatened to resign. Arguing that "We are to form the grand Outlines of an American Army-a general Regulation," James Duane then asked his fellow congressmen: "If We were to set out anew, would the same Plan be pursued?" He suggested that Congress appoint officers in consultation with the generals, stating, "Schuyler and Montgomery would govern my Judgment. I would rather take the opinion of Gen. Washington than of any Convention. We can turn out the unworthy and reward Merit."<sup>131</sup> In referring to Schuyler and Montgomery, Duane had deliberately called attention to two socially conservative generals, his close friends and fellow New Yorkers. The conservatives' final point stressed Congress's fiscal control over the army, arguing, "We pay. Cant We appoint with the Advice of our Generals."<sup>132</sup> Even in Adams's sparsely detailed notes, the radicals' explosive reactions to the conservatives' arguments is clear. John Langdon of New Hampshire warned that conservatives proposed "a very extraordinary Motion" rife "with many Mischiefs."<sup>133</sup>

Radicals believed provincial conventions were better equipped to nominate officers for the Continental Army because local social networks could uncover and report the character and

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<sup>131</sup> John Adams's Notes of Debates, October 10, 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 2:156.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:157.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:157.

personal history of each applicant. Dyer insisted, “we must derive all our Knowledge, from the Delegates of that Colony. The Representatives at large are as good Judges and would give more Satisfaction.”<sup>134</sup> Radicals wanted to select officers for their political principles creating an officer corps filled with patriots who understood and recognized the dangers of a standing army.

Many New England congressmen worried that a conservative Continental Army would upset the traditional structure of the local militia units, where foot soldiers elected their own officers. Washington abhorred this traditional practice because he believed officer elections encouraged too much familiarity between the ranks.<sup>135</sup> In fact, radical delegates warned that “You cant raise an Army if you put Officers over the Men whom they dont know. It requires Time to bring People off from ancient Usage.”<sup>136</sup> Radicals wanted an officer corps composed of one-year volunteers, either elected by army privates or selected by local legislatures for their ideological beliefs. Such arrangements would prevent the conservatives from enhancing Congress’s power at the expense of the provincial legislatures.

After a heated discussion, Congress delayed issuing new guidelines until a congressional committee had consulted with Washington at the army’s headquarters in Boston. Washington then persuaded delegates to assume responsibility for all officer appointments above the rank of captain. Congress’s final decision was a compromise between radical and conservative delegates, who agreed that each colony’s delegation should consult with their local legislature before endorsing the appointments.

Though Congress created a Continental Army, each regiment was comprised of soldiers from a specific colony. Not even Washington ever considered blending the regiments because

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 2:157.

<sup>135</sup> McDonell, “Popular Mobilization and Political Culture in Revolutionary Virginia: The Failure of the Minutemen and the Revolution from Below,” *The Journal of American History*, 963, and Stephenson, *Patriot Battles*, 63-65.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 2:157.

all revolutionaries agreed that men were more inclined to volunteer if they could serve with their neighbors. By maintaining local distinctions in the regiments, officers then inundated their specific colonial representatives with letters laying out their pleas for promotions or threats of resignation if they were not granted.

The Continental Army suffered major military reverses during the 1776 campaign season: an invasion of Canada failed spectacularly and Washington lost New York City and was chased into Pennsylvania by Lord General Cornwallis. The Battle of Trenton, however, offered a beacon of hope to war-weary Americans at the end of the year. After an arduous campaign season, officers in their winter encampments began petitioning their congressional representatives for promotions to recognize their dedicated service to the American cause. When Congress did not respond quickly enough to suit the officers, they began grumbling and threatening to resign en masse. During the war, officers never recognized how long the political process took in the Continental Congress because of the committee system and open-floor debate. Thomas Burke of North Carolina routinely observed that congressional debates were “perplexed, inconclusive and irksome.”<sup>137</sup>

Facing threats of resignation en masse, Congress contemplated for the first time the establishment of specific guidelines for standardizing officer promotions in the Continental Army. Prior to February 1777, promotions were a haphazard affair and officers questioned Congress’s motives for commissioning certain individuals. They grew resentful and exchanged accusations about favoritism running rampant and corrupting Congress. Spurred by Washington’s notification that three major and ten brigadier generals needed to be appointed,

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<sup>137</sup> Thomas Burke, “Report by Thomas Burke concerning the debates of the Continental Congress,” February 12-19, 1777, William Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, (Raleigh: P. M. Hale, Printer to the State, 1886), in *Documenting the American South*. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007, 11:380-386. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr11-0260>

delegates spent a week discussing specific guidelines for promotions.<sup>138</sup> Delegates debated three different options for promoting officers, eventually settling on a compromise that satisfied no one.

The first proposal suggested that Congress promote officers according to seniority in the ranks. Some delegates preferred this solution because it adhered to traditional military protocol. It left no room for interpretation about the delegates' motivations; instead promotions were linked to seniority within each state's regiments. Other delegates shouted down this idea, arguing it left Congress without the ability to reward extraordinary battlefield exploits. By using only seniority, the civil authority had no other incentive to offer that would inspire military officers to work harder to gain advancement. Perhaps there was also a fear that this proposal might establish a professional officer class similar to that in European armies.

Radicals proposed promoting heroic and brave officers according to merit. Merit was however, a contested idea and had multiple meanings to revolutionaries in both institutions. Did it consist of possessing excellent martial skills or the correct political principles? How could members of Congress possibly agree on what merit meant in every officer's promotion? Burke was horrified at the idea of using merit as the sole basis for promotion and he warned that Congress "ought to give no room for jealousy."<sup>139</sup> Specific guidelines, such as seniority, were needed that offered no room for interpretation.

Burke proposed a third option, revealing his interest in maintaining civilian control over the officer corps. He suggested that "each State should recommend officers in proportion to the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 11:380-386. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr11-0260>. Burke's notes provide the best description of the debates, but they do reflect his heated opinions and he was not shy about condemning what he considered "ill-conceived" ideas and proposals.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 11:381.

men they furnish: three Battalions, one Brigadier, nine, one Major General.”<sup>140</sup> Burke hoped his proposal would allow members of Congress to control the politics within their own state regiments while also encouraging states to raise more military forces for greater political cachet. Francis Lewis of New York understood Burke’s motivations and urged his provincial legislature to send more delegates to Philadelphia, writing, “notwithstanding many declarations to the contrary, Colonial prejudices sway the minds of individuals, that each State appear interested in the debates, for promotion in the line of their respective States.”<sup>141</sup> Two years into the war and a year after signing the Declaration of Independence, states still competed with each other for national recognition.

In his congressional speeches, Burke insisted that guidelines needed to be established. He argued “that the Congress would be an object of very jealous apprehension, unchecked and unlimited as it is, if the officers of the army held their honor at the precarious pleasure of a majority.”<sup>142</sup> He understood that “Officers hold their honor the most dear of anything. Setting them aside when they were entitled to promotion would wound that honor very sorely.”<sup>143</sup> Burke’s statements captured the essence of why officers threatened to resign, because they believed promotions were public recognition of their reputations. Burke knew that the culture of honor shaped the interactions between civil and military authorities because every revolutionary understood the honor code. He warned that officers believed delegates possessed the arbitrary power to wound or to recognize the officers’ honor. Congressmen wanted to exert more control over the armed forces, but there had to a clear line to that authority. Officers needed to know that there were unambiguous, unbiased guidelines. That is why Burke argued against merit-

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 11:381.

<sup>141</sup> Francis Lewis to the New York Convention, February 18, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:314.

<sup>142</sup> Thomas Burke, “Report by Thomas Burke concerning the debates of the Continental Congress,” February 12-19, 1777, *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 11:381.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 11:381.

based promotions and encouraged promotions calculated either by seniority or state contribution quotas. He wanted to eliminate any room for interpretation to prevent officers from resenting politicians and threatening resignation. The eighteenth-century culture of honor complicated the business of promotion.

After a strenuous week of debate, delegates crafted a compromise. The final resolution declared, “that in voting for general officers, a due regard shall be had to the line of succession, the merit of the persons proposed, and the quota of troops raised, and to be raised, by each State,” and gave officers three different options for petitioning for promotion.<sup>144</sup> Ultimately, the new guidelines proved disastrous for the Continental Congress and the Continental Army, a topic discussed further in chapter three. Although Congress achieved its goal of exerting more control over the military with the new guidelines, just as Burke warned, officers now jealously resented Congress’s power over promotions and seethed over the delegates’ arbitrary power.

The Continental Army was shaped by the circumstances of the war. Initially created by Congress to fight a defensive war against British troops in Boston, by the fall of 1775 the army had been split into three different forces fighting throughout the United States.<sup>145</sup> From the beginning, Washington kept in close contact with the civil authority, notifying Congress when the army needed new officers appointed, soldiers recruited, or money to procure supplies. His letters prompted debates over different proposals to solve the army’s problems. Such debates took time and the army began to grumble about its civilian masters and government inefficiency. Even as Congress argued about solutions for the army, it hoped to prevent the military from growing too professional and strong; for the delegates, civil liberties were more important than

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<sup>144</sup> February 19, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:133.

<sup>145</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 90-97. In March 1776, George Washington commanded the main body of troops, usually referred to as the Continental Army, Philip Schuyler commanded the northern army in upstate New York, and Charles Lee was in charge of the southern army.

an efficient military machine. To deal with the growing problems between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army, revolutionaries in both institutions turned to the resolution process provided by the culture of honor. Mediation was the first step to reducing tensions.

Delegates built a mediation process into Congress's institutional structure by using open-floor debates and the committee system. In 1777, mediation was needed to resolve escalating tensions between the army and Congress and between two major generals, Schuyler and Gates.<sup>146</sup> These generals were arguing over who actually commanded the northern army in upstate New York and each attempted to use his friends and political connections in Congress to decide the matter in his favor. Perhaps more clearly than any other situation that came before Congress, the Schuyler-Gates controversy exposes how mediation worked in a dispute between the two revolutionary institutions involving forceful personalities and basic political principles.

Congress actively participated in planning military campaigns for the Continental Army. Delegates sent letters to Washington suggesting different locations for attacking British troops and urged the construction of forts along the frontier. Though most conservative delegates had initially supported a war for defensive purposes, by August 1775, Congress's war goals had changed dramatically. Caught up in a military fever and encouraged by delegates from New England and New York, Congress planned an invasion of Canada for the fall of 1775. Several delegates argued that Canada longed to be liberated from British control and that an invasion would also secure New England's northern borders against an attack from the British troops stationed in Canada. Major General Philip Schuyler and Brigadier General Richard

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<sup>146</sup> *The Politics of Command* first highlighted the importance of the Schuyler-Gates controversy but Rossie does not discuss the impact of the honor culture in influencing how Congress and the generals handled the dispute. Other details were provided by Paul David Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976); and Don R. Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler and the War of Independence, 1775-1783* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).



Montgomery, with advice from congressmen, planned the invasion of Canada against enormous odds.<sup>147</sup>

As the war expanded to new battlefronts, delegates created new departments and committees to handle their increased correspondence.<sup>148</sup> Congress appointed Schuyler commander of the northern army in the newly formed Northern Department. Major generals eagerly sought command of the new departments because the promotions denoted delegates' confidence and approval and boosted the officers' prestige.

Philip Schuyler of New York served simultaneously as a delegate in the Continental Congress and as a major general in the Continental Army.<sup>149</sup> The New York state legislature approved of his dual role, reelecting Schuyler every year to his political post. Schuyler, a wealthy landowner in New York, had strong political connections to many conservative revolutionaries. His close family friends included the extended Livingston clan, John Jay, James Duane and William Duer. These men kept him apprised of all the political gossip while he was away on army service. Before receiving his officer's commission in June 1775, Schuyler had also developed friendships with conservative Southern congressmen, such as Samuel Chase and Edward Rutledge. Schuyler would depend on the support of his friends and political allies when he competed with Horatio Gates for control of the northern army.

A former British army officer, Gates possessed years of military experience and, in the summer of 1775, he had eagerly volunteered for service in the Continental Army.<sup>150</sup> Gates

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<sup>147</sup> Those odds included a Congress overly optimistic about the military prowess of its generals, an appalling lack of supplies, Canadian winters, and troops launching an invasion of a country that showed no interest in joining the American rebellion. Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 108-111.

<sup>148</sup> Congress created a Northern Department, a Middle Department and a Southern department, in response to the British ordering 20,000 more soldiers to serve in North America. Washington as commander-in-chief technically oversaw all the departments but in reality the commanding generals exercised a great deal of leeway in running their individual geographic areas. Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 90-91.

<sup>149</sup> Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 1-2.

<sup>150</sup> Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography*, 38-39.

believed in radical Whig ideology, a major reason for his voluntary retirement from the British army in the early 1770s. His political principles and common birth had stymied his advancement in Britain's peacetime army. After selling his commission, he immigrated to Virginia ready to live the genteel existence of a planter. Congress took advantage of Gates's military experience and appointed him adjutant general, a key administrative position in the army. In Boston, Gates helped Washington drill discipline into the unorganized American forces. Washington and Gates, however, disagreed over the establishment of a conservative military hierarchy in the Continental Army. Gates preferred a military meritocracy, a system rejected by the British military. Gates forged a strong bond with Congress's radical minority faction after receiving his commission. Samuel Adams, Roger Sherman, and James Lovell became Gates's close political allies and friends and they suggested him for command of the American army in Canada in June 1776.

The invasion of Canada proved an utter disaster for the American troops. Montgomery died storming the city gates of Quebec and thousands of soldiers perished either because of the freezing temperatures or a smallpox outbreak. Congress heard throughout the spring of 1776 about the retreat of the American forces, and worried congressmen even sent a committee to investigate the Canadian debacle to find out which general to blame for the army's failure.<sup>151</sup>

Samuel Chase, a close friend of Schuyler, served on the committee and absolved Schuyler of any guilt. Chase found Schuyler innocent for two reasons: he was a close friend and, moreover, he had never traveled with the troops into Canada. Schuyler had remained in New York to facilitate the transportation of supplies for the invasion and to negotiate neutrality treaties with several Indian tribes. Fixing blame elsewhere, Chase declared in an open report that

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<sup>151</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 97.

David Wooster and his Connecticut troops had hindered the American war effort.<sup>152</sup> Chase wrote: “General Wooster is in our opinion unfit, totally unfit, to Command your Army & conduct the war; we have hitherto prevailed on him to remain in Montreal, his stay in this Colony is unnecessary & even prejudicial to our Affairs, we would therefore humbly advise his recall.”<sup>153</sup> Chase’s strongly worded appraisal was guaranteed to destroy a man’s public reputation and Wooster was livid. He demanded a congressional inquiry to clear his name from Schuyler’s whispering campaign and Chase’s public accusations. A congressional inquiry cleared Wooster, but he missed his opportunity to command the American forces in Canada. Instead, that honor would go to newly promoted Major General Horatio Gates.<sup>154</sup>

On June 17, 1776, Congress granted Gates an independent command in Canada, hoping he could halt the army’s retreat. Gates’s congressional friends trusted him to prevent British General Sir Guy Carleton from physically cutting off New England from the rest of the American colonies. Delegates resolved “That General Washington be directed to send Major General Gates into Canada, to take the command of the forces in that province.”<sup>155</sup> John Adams wrote Gates a giddy, congratulatory letter emphasizing his hopes that Gates would turn the situation around quickly. “We have ordered you to the Post of Honour, and made you Dictator in Canada for Six Months,” Adams remarked teasingly “or at least untill the first of October. —

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<sup>152</sup> Commanders assigned to the Canadian expedition were plagued with bad luck and untimely deaths. Richard Montgomery died at the city gates, Congress then appointed John Thomas as Montgomery’s replacement but Thomas died in early May 1776 from smallpox. On his deathbed, Thomas appointed David Wooster to be his successor and the congressional committee (Samuel Chase, Benjamin Franklin, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton) publicly challenged this appointment. Delegates were already predisposed to dislike Wooster, because of his conduct during the summer of 1775, but Chase also knew that Schuyler and Wooster disliked each other. Wooster had begrudgingly accepted his brigadier general commission, though he still believed he should be ranked a major general since that was his commission in the Connecticut army. Wooster considered himself equal in rank to Schuyler and this angered Schuyler. He wrote disparaging reports about Wooster to Washington and his close friends in Congress influencing Chase’s behavior on the congressional committee. See Philip Schuyler to George Washington, May 16, 1776, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 4:318. The failed invasion of Canada is discussed in *The Politics of Command*, 96-103, and Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 108-11.

<sup>153</sup> Commissioners of Canada to John Hancock, May 27, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 4:81.

<sup>154</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 103, and Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 58-60.

<sup>155</sup> June 17, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:448.

We dont choose to trust you Generals, with too much Power, for too long Time.”<sup>156</sup> Even as Adams celebrated Gates’s new opportunity, he issued a lighthearted but clear reminder that military officials were subordinate to Congress. Much correspondence of congressmen with officers demonstrated a balance between friendship and a clear warning to remember the supremacy of the civil government.

Gates quickly set out for his new command but, before he arrived, the American forces had abandoned Canada. Suddenly, Gates had an independent command but no army. At their first meeting in Albany, New York, Schuyler’s and Gates’s tempers flared as they debated the meaning of Gates’s new commission. Gates believed Congress would want a new army recruited and trained to invade British territory. Schuyler disagreed with Gates’s interpretation of the congressional resolution and was concerned that Gates thought that he now possessed total control over the northern army. Both major generals agreed to write Washington and Congress about their conflicting interpretations concerning Gates’s commission.<sup>157</sup> Gates believed his new independent command was an opportunity to earn a national reputation for military glory. Schuyler, for his part, felt threatened by Gates and worried that Congress doubted his abilities and that representatives were plotting to replace him as commander of the northern army and Northern Department.

Composing a letter to notify Washington of the situation, Schuyler swore that he and Gates “mean to be candid and wish to have the Matter settled without any of the Chicane, which would disgrace us as Officers & Men.”<sup>158</sup> They agreed to write separate letters explaining their views of the situation and then “shew each other what we have written to you upon the

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<sup>156</sup> John Adams to Horatio Gates, June 18, 1776, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamases*, <http://www.masshist.org/ff/> Accessed March 21, 2011

<sup>157</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 107-108, and Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 163-164.

<sup>158</sup> Philip Schuyler to George Washington, July 1, 1776, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 5:174, and Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 163-164.

Occasion.”<sup>159</sup> Each general wanted to present a calm public demeanor while Congress arbitrated the dispute. A gentleman needed to appear composed and rational at all times, but both men felt that their honor was at stake.

This was a difficult situation for Washington and Congress to negotiate. Schuyler made it clear that he considered Gates’s interpretation of the congressional resolution to be a direct insult to his character and reputation. He warned that “If Congress intended that General Gates should command the Northern Army wherever it might be, as he assures me they did, it ought to have been signified to me, and I should then have immediately resigned the Command to him.”<sup>160</sup> But Schuyler insisted, “until such Intention is properly conveyed to me I never can.” He told Washington “to lay this letter before Congress, that they may clearly & explicitly signify their Intentions to avert the Dangers & Evils that may arise from a disputed Command for after what General Gates has said the Line must be clearly drawn.”<sup>161</sup> Though Schuyler and Gates each tried to avoid appearing petty in his petition, each man was upset and wanted Congress to declare that his interpretation of the dispute was correct. They only wrote to Washington to follow traditional military protocol; all three officers knew that only Congress possessed the authority to fix the misunderstanding.

On July 8, only days after declaring independence from Great Britain, Congress addressed the conflict over command of the northern army. A new resolution stipulated “That Major General Gates be informed, that it was the intention of Congress to give him the command of the troops whilst in Canada, but had no design to vest him with a superior command to

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 5:174.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 5:174.

<sup>161</sup> Philip Schuyler to George Washington, July 1, 1776, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 5:174. Walter Livingston wrote a memorandum of the conversation between Gates and Schuyler at their first meeting. Schuyler enclosed the memoranda in his letter to Washington. During the conversation, Schuyler threatened to resign stating Congress “could not put him under the command of a younger officer, nor oblige him to be a Suicide and stab his own Honor.” *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, did not provide the full text of the memoranda but a quick summary can be found in footnote 3, 177.

General Schuyler, whilst the troops should be on this side Canada.” John Hancock, in his role as president, was then ordered to write both generals “recommending to them to carry on the military operations with harmony, and in such manner as shall best promote the public service.”<sup>162</sup> Members of Congress hoped that this resolution solved the conflict between the two major generals, but Schuyler’s ruffled feathers did not settle so easily.

Every few months, over the next year, Schuyler or Gates wrote to Congress threatening to resign unless his demands were granted. Each general and his friends in Congress began to see control over the northern army as a contest between ideological groups and a referendum on character. The competition over command thus became an affair of honor to both men, and so they continually sought reassurance from Congress that it preferred one of them to the other. Furthermore, Schuyler’s stubborn personality made it difficult for him to forgive any slight or forget any insult. He continually pushed and prodded Congress into confirming its preference for him over Gates.<sup>163</sup> However, Gates had political allies in Congress who worked on his behalf to maintain his reputation. When a misunderstanding over a congressional resolution escalated into an affair of honor between two major generals, the congressional floor became the only location to mediate a feud that involved public reputations.

Mediation served as one of the few tools available to prevent an affair of honor from reaching the dueling ground. In the Schuyler-Gates controversy, friendship networks in both the Continental Army and the Continental Congress resolved the dispute to prevent the resignation of either major general. Congressmen talked their friends in the army out of threatening to resign while simultaneously promising to guard against evil designs that involved the officers. Mediators soothed tempers, but they could also complicate the resolution process. Some

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<sup>162</sup> July 8, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:526.

<sup>163</sup> Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 196-201.

gentlemen were quick to see elements of conspiracy in certain congressional resolutions as they tried to protect their friend's character.<sup>164</sup> Though personality clashes could complicate the mediation process, mediation helped dissipate some of the tensions that developed between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army. It served as a valuable tool for both military and civil personnel to resolve their differences.

Both generals wanted the civil authority to arbitrate their dispute because they needed to have their reputations publicly validated. A gentleman's character required public acknowledgment from his peers; Schuyler and Gates understood this unwritten rule of eighteenth-century society and used their friendships in Congress to secure an advantage over the other general.<sup>165</sup> Mediation and the generals' friends smoothed over the dispute and, after the July 8 resolution, Gates took command of Fort Ticonderoga to start preparing soldiers for a new invasion of Canada.

Schuyler continued to worry that Congress no longer appreciated his abilities, and so he wrote to his friends asking for confirmation that Congress respected him. Otherwise, he warned, he would resign.<sup>166</sup> In October, Edward Rutledge drafted a resolution refusing to accept Schuyler's resignation. Rutledge assured Schuyler "that the aspersions, which his enemies have thrown out against his character, have had no influence upon the minds of the members of this house, who are fully satisfied of his attachment to the cause of freedom."<sup>167</sup> Rutledge's intentionally provocative language in the resolution revealed his firm allegiance to Schuyler. His mention of aspersions and enemies fed into Schuyler's worries instead of calming them. Radical

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<sup>164</sup> One example is Samuel Chase to Philip Schuyler, July 19, 1776, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, ed. Edmund C. Burnett (reprinted by Peter Smith, Gloucester, MA: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1963) 2:17. "I am sorry to find how egregiously you have been represented to the Members of Congress. You have many Enemies."

<sup>165</sup> See: Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 146-150; Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 160-166; and Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 60-61.

<sup>166</sup> Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 196-201.

<sup>167</sup> October 2, 1776, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 5:841.

delegates used the same warnings about conspiracy in their letters to Gates and Gates's closest friends in the army. Lovell warned Trumbull in dramatic terms to

Put on thy Sword; prepare thy Cuirass; the Beast [Schuyler] is in fierce Rage and Fury against thee. The Breath of his Mouth is doubtless as the Flame of a Furnace. His Bile overfloweth even to the End of his armed Paws, so that a Flood of it is before our Eyes for Contemplation. How have thy Stars forsaken thee, my Friend! so that the baleful Influence of High Gain hath Power over thy Fortune.<sup>168</sup>

These allusions to conspiracies reflected and reinforced congressmen's worries about conspiracies and factions as the war dragged on. The harsh strain of fighting the British increasingly wore away at the colonial unanimity that had marked the spirit of '75. Debates in Congress over the Schuyler-Gates controversy illustrate the delegates' insecurity about winning the rebellion.

During the winter of 1776, both Gates and Schuyler campaigned for complete control of the northern army. Many of Schuyler's conservative allies tried to overturn Gates's independent command within the Northern department. Gates visited Congress in Baltimore, to lobby in person for a repeal of the July 8 resolution.<sup>169</sup> Schuyler's confidants kept him informed of Gates's lobbying and he worried that Gates would prove successful. In the early spring, Schuyler demanded that Congress grant him complete control of the Northern Department and northern army, including the ability to fire Joseph Trumbull, a key supporter of Gates. Congressmen became frustrated with Schuyler's increasingly truculent tone and his continual demands for preference. Some members began to view Schuyler's personality in a negative light, worrying he was too petty and too focused on his reputation to prepare for the upcoming military campaign. In fact, in March 1777, Congress issued a resolution chastising Schuyler,

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<sup>168</sup> James Lovell to Joseph Trumbull, February 12, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:266. Trumbull was general commissary of the Northern Department and close friends with radical delegates; he supported Gates's efforts to become sole commander of the northern army.

<sup>169</sup> Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 75-80. Congress convened in Baltimore after fleeing from the advancing British troops in the winter of 1776.



revealing the delegates' growing impatience with the Schuyler-Gates controversy. They warned Schuyler that his tone in several recent letters was "highly derogatory to the honour of Congress;" and "it is expected his letters, for the future, be written in a stile more suitable to the dignity of the representative body of these free and independent states, and to his own character as their officer."<sup>170</sup> A frustrated and offended Congress invoked the key terms of honor and dignity to reprimand Schuyler. The resolution warned Schuyler that his language had become increasingly petty and dictatorial and that, as an officer, he needed to remember that he was subordinate to congressional authority.<sup>171</sup>

Schuyler became livid upon receiving the congressional remonstrance. He left camp and traveled to Philadelphia intent on tendering his resignation and forcing a congressional inquiry into his management of the northern army.<sup>172</sup> He wanted his character rehabilitated before the public. Because Schuyler was technically a delegate to the Continental Congress, he was officially able to participate in legislative business. His friends managed to soothe his temper, convincing him to continue his service in the Continental Army. They even wrangled a public vote of confidence for Schuyler in May 1777, through a new resolution that confirmed his command of the northern army. John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress, wrote a letter to General Gates "informing him, that Major General Schuyler is order'd to take upon him the Command in the Northern Department." Gates's options were "either to continue in the

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<sup>170</sup> March 15, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:181. Congress also issued another resolve stipulating "That it is altogether improper and inconsistent with the dignity of this Congress, to interfere in disputes subsisting among the officers of the army; which ought to be settled, unless they can be otherwise accommodated, in a court martial, agreeably to the rules of the army; and that the expressions in General Schuyler's letter of the 4th of February, 'that he confidently expected Congress would have done him that justice, which it was in their power to give, and which he humbly conceives they ought to have done,' were, to say the least, ill-advised and highly indecent." For the moment, delegates were tired of interfering in the fight between Schuyler and Gates though the congressional declaration of neutrality would not last for long. Delegates interfered in disputes between officers because the conflicts usually involved friends and allowed the civil authority to exert its control over the military.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:181.

<sup>172</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 146, and Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 219-229.

Command in the Northern Department, under Major General Schuyler; or to take upon him the Office of Adjutant General in the Grand Army immediately under the Commander in Chief.”<sup>173</sup>

Satisfied, Schuyler left to rejoin his forces in Albany.

Schuyler’s friends happily informed the New York legislature about their victory over Gates and his radical friends. William Duer confided to Robert R. Livingston, “I have now the Pleasure to inform you that in Spite of all the Arts and Influence made use of by the Eastern Delegates in conjunction with the Members from New Jersey-we have got Genl. Schuyler's Conduct fully justified, and himself reinstated in his Command in the Northern Department.” Duer’s letter revealed the politics involved in Congress’s decision, declaring that “his [Schuyler’s] own merit... and the all powerful Influence of Truth assisted with Management at length effected all our wishes and we carried the Question.”<sup>174</sup> Duer’s honest comment about the “Truth assisted with Management” referred to the politicking that influenced the delegates’ votes. Schuyler’s friends fought for him for both personal and political reasons, and they wanted a New Yorker in charge of the northern army defending upstate New York. Duer’s reference to the management alluded to the intimation by the New York delegates that their support of the war effort hinged upon Schuyler’s continued service in the army.<sup>175</sup>

Bad news traveled swiftly and Gates was furious with Congress’s decision. His son stoked his anger, asking him: “What fault have you committed that you should be thus disgraced before all America?” He went on to urge Gates to hit back: “I conjure you...to resent this ignominious treatment by leaving the service of the Congress, a body that neither rewards officers according to their merit or has firmness to stand by even its own decrees.” Gates agreed

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<sup>173</sup> May 15, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7:364.

<sup>174</sup> William Duer to Robert R. Livingston, May 28, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:140.

<sup>175</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 147-149.

and traveled to Philadelphia to argue for his honor.<sup>176</sup> Gates's prepared speech defending his reputation electrified the delegates when he accused Schuyler's friends of deliberately spreading lies about him and his reputation. Gates voiced serious accusations and, because of them, he was forced to withdraw from the congressional chamber when congressmen concluded that he was challenging civil authority and congressional privilege.<sup>177</sup> Gates had the unfortunate luck to arrive in Philadelphia only four days after Congress had censured Muster Master General Gunning Bedford for challenging Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to a duel for words spoken during debate.<sup>178</sup> Members of Congress were sensitive about belligerent generals who contested their authority and they quickly shouted down Gates's speech.

Duer and Duane, then, wrote Schuyler detailed letters describing Gates's appearance before Congress. Duer described "the tenor of his Discourse [as] a Compound of Vanity, Folly and Rudeness." Both Duane and Duer openly acknowledged to Schuyler that they had campaigned on his behalf and felt no remorse if they had injured Gates's character in front of other revolutionaries.<sup>179</sup> Knowing the consequences of deliberately injuring a person's reputation, Duer blustered, "Perhaps he may take it into his head to call me out....Should this be the case I am determin'd not to She[l]ter myself under Priviledge, being convinced of the Necessity there is to act with Spirit, to enable me to discharge with Fidelity the Trust reposed in

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<sup>176</sup> Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 86. Robert Gates to Horatio Gates, June 6, 1777.

<sup>177</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 151-153.

<sup>178</sup> June 14, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:466-467. Bedford's challenge to Sergeant will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>179</sup> James Duane to Philip Schuyler, June 19, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:225. "I have no doubt but the General has heard very minutely what part I took with respect to him. I do not repent it. The Interest of the Continent, the Honour of Congress, & the dictates of Justice requir'd it; and I must put up with the General's displeasure, Which I find myself dispos'd to do with great Resignation and Philosophy." William Duer to Philip Schuyler, June 19, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:229-230. "I plainly saw that he was brought in with an Intention to brow beat the New York Members, whom he considers as his Mortal Enemies, and I was determin'd to let him see that it was indifferent to me whether I offended him or not."

me.”<sup>180</sup> While Gates never issued a challenge to a congressional delegate over the situation, Duer probably proudly patted himself on the back for his bravado and loyal defense of Schuyler’s honor.<sup>181</sup> Duer’s comments offer an insight into how congressmen and soldiers were renegotiating the rules of the honor culture as the fighting dragged on. Did congressional privilege shelter politicians from affairs of honor when they questioned the fighting abilities of military officers? For many officers, their martial skill was synonymous with their character, an identification that perhaps explains why Gates and Schuyler became offended whenever a new congressional resolution was issued that supported one general at the expense of the other. While they used Congress to publicly defend their reputation, they also wanted their friends to help mediate their dispute and support their efforts. Most likely, their friends talked them out of taking drastic action because neither general resigned during the year long controversy. After Gates indignantly withdrew from Congress in late June, he returned to his Virginia farm contemplating if he would return to the army as adjutant general or perhaps petition for an independent command on another battlefield.<sup>182</sup>

Major military setbacks plagued the northern army under Schuyler’s command during the summer of 1777, as Burgoyne overwhelmed the Continental Army in upstate New York. The final blow to American morale was the evacuation of Fort Ticonderoga. Ethan Allen’s Green Mountain Boys and Benedict Arnold had captured the fort in May 1775; now it returned to British hands. When news about the fall of Fort Ticonderoga reached Philadelphia, delegates from New England demanded that Schuyler be replaced. In late July, members of Congress

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<sup>180</sup> William Duer to Philip Schuyler, June 19, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:229-230.

<sup>181</sup> This is speculation on my part, but I believe Duer’s letter reveals his satisfaction with his role in shouting down Gates on that day.

<sup>182</sup> Nelson, *General Horatio Gates*, 79.

spent two days debating the overturning of their mid-May resolution that had reaffirmed Schuyler's independent command.<sup>183</sup>

Allegiances to Gates and Schuyler shaped the debate, with both sides advocating its friend's military ability and popularity. Delegates discussed the issue of popularity many times because they believed men would only fight for officers who inspired them. This common eighteenth-century assumption shaped Washington's public behavior and influenced the selection of officers. Many of Gates's friends argued that Schuyler was too aristocratic and unpopular to inspire the militia to defeat Burgoyne. If Gates were reappointed, then soldiers would flock to serve under his command. William Williams of Connecticut defended his desire to promote Gates by confirming Schuyler's lack of popularity, "in Conn.: mentions the joy of the people on Gates appmt., their apprehensions when Sch came to Cong., their grief when replaced."<sup>184</sup>

Attacking the radicals' arguments, Schuyler's friends insisted that any general would face military setbacks when substantially outnumbered by the enemy. Schuyler simply needed time to recruit more militiamen to resist Burgoyne's invasion. Other delegates demanded a congressional inquiry of Schuyler's management of the army before publicly replacing him with another officer. An inquiry provided Schuyler the opportunity to explain his actions and to defend his character.<sup>185</sup> Otherwise, Schuyler might have had genuine grounds for accusing Congress of insulting his honor.

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<sup>183</sup> Charles Thomson's Notes of Debate, July 26 and 28, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7: 382-384, and 389-390, and Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 160-166.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:383. All the notes are in Thomson's shorthand as he recorded the main points of each delegate's argument. I retained Thomson's shorthand because I think it gives more power to William's words. Congress spent hours in open debate discussing the merits of Schuyler and Gates, with delegates affirming their allegiances to their friends and political allies. They also hoped to use mediation to find a compromise that would preserve the honor of both Schuyler and Gates.

<sup>185</sup> Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 226.

The debates ended in a compromise, by which the delegates resolved to conduct an inquiry into Schuyler's management of the northern army before replacing him with Gates.<sup>186</sup> Two days later, however, as more bad news arrived, Congress ordered that another general of Washington's choice replace Schuyler. While a radical departure from the typical congressional policy of controlling all officer promotions, no delegate wanted to be responsible for earning Schuyler's ire by promptly promoting Gates to replace him. They passed the decision on to Washington so that it seemed professional instead of personal. Washington, however, refused to become involved in the last act of the Schuyler-Gates saga, declaring that he was happy to work with the general preferred by Congress.<sup>187</sup>

Schuyler's friends had warned other New York politicians about the growing momentum in late July to replace Schuyler as commander of the northern army. While they always wanted to defend Schuyler's reputation against his political enemies, they worried about losing political leverage if they continued to support him. In stark terms they told New York's Council of Safety of the "Delicacy of our Situation. If the Eastern Delegates carry their point the World is left to conclude not only that General Schuyler is unworthy of the Command; but that if the late changes had not taken place, Ticonderoga, by the abilities of Genl Gates, might still have been preserved."<sup>188</sup> If, however, they continued to argue on Schuyler's behalf "and the Eastern States be backward in supplying their militia, and the calamities of the Country in that Quarter

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<sup>186</sup> July 29, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:585.

<sup>187</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command*, 164. Washington wrote to President John Hancock, "At the same time that I express my thanks for the high mark of confidence which Congress have been pleased to repose in me by their resolution authorizing me to send an officer to command the Northern army. I should wish to be excused from making the appointment... The present situation of that department is delicate and critical and the choice of an officer to the command may involve very interesting and important consequences."

<sup>188</sup> Philip Livingston, James Duane, and William Duer to New York Council of Safety, July 29, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:394.

increase, Would there under these circumstances, be any End to Clamour and Reproach?”<sup>189</sup>

They hoped the congressional inquiry would clear Schuyler’s reputation but, by late July 1777, they were unwilling to spend any more political capital to prevent Gates’s promotion. They halted their efforts on Schuyler’s behalf for continued command because they believed a congressional inquiry would exonerate his character. Gates’s allies rejoiced at their victory over Schuyler. It had taken a year, but they finally had the major general they preferred ready to engage and defeat Burgoyne’s invading army. The Schuyler-Gates controversy reveals the friendships that developed between officers and congressmen during the war, but it also exposes how the friendships could create some of the problems that developed between the Continental Army and the Continental Congress.

Friendship networks proved valuable to revolutionaries in both institutions because they allowed mediation to help ease tensions. When the culture of honor created conflicts, such as the Schuyler-Gates controversy, most gentlemen turned to mediation before issuing a challenge to a duel or submitting their resignation. Because Schuyler and Gates were high-ranking officers, they used Congress to arbitrate their conflicting claims to command of the northern army. Both officers had the support of strong political factions in Congress, which allowed their dispute to last for over a year. Their constant negotiations over the details of their command showcase how important rank and promotion were to most military officers.

The Continental Army and the Continental Congress experienced significant growing pains from the fall of 1775 through 1777 because both institutions were changing and adapting to the exigencies of a protracted war. Through numerous new rules and regulations, Congress

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 7:394. They ended the letter without reaching a decision writing “It is not easy to determine the Line of Conduct we ought to pursue especially as we cannot be assisted by your Advice nor strengthened by your Authority. We shall take the first opportunity to inform you of the Event. And in the mean time assure you that we are most respectfully, Honourl Gentlemen, Your most Obedient, humble Servants,”

increased its control over the military. Delegates used these regulations to prevent the growth of a strong, professional military corps. Congressmen worried that officers might decide to become kingmakers, should they become dissatisfied with the national legislature. Hoping to cement the officers' loyalty to the civil authority, Congress decided to control all officer appointments above the rank of captain. But, as Burke had warned, the military soon began to resent Congress's power over rank and promotions, the more so because the official guidelines established in February 1777 offered too much room for interpretation.

The eighteenth-century culture of honor encouraged gentlemen to be sensitive to any perceived insult to their character. Moreover, officers believed that promotions were linked to their peers' evaluation of their character. Most officers would have agreed with Schuyler, who insisted that “[a] Man's Character ought not to be sported with and he that suffers Stains to lay on it with Impunity really deserves none nor will he long enjoy one.”<sup>190</sup> Officers continually petitioned Congress, hoping to gain public recognition either through a promotion or a pay raise. They used friendship networks to plead their cases. Not surprisingly, many congressional representatives became resentful over the numerous petitions for promotions. Soon, legislators refused to put forward petitioners' names thereby, creating even more resentment in the officer corps. As John Adams dismissively confided to his wife, “I am wearied to Death with the Wrangles between military officers, high and low. They Quarrell like Cats and Dogs. They worry one another like Mastiffs. Scrambling for Rank and Pay like Apes for Nutts.”<sup>191</sup> Even after the Schuyler-Gates controversy proved how seriously officers took the matter of promotions, Adams and a majority of congressmen refused to acknowledge the officers'

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<sup>190</sup> Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler*, 192.

<sup>191</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, May 22, 1777, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17770522ja> accessed November 11, 2011. I first came across this quote in Kohn, “American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint,” in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, 118-119.



sensitivity. In the winter of 1777/78, the army began pushing back against congressional authority, demanding new guidelines for promotions and pensions for life. The army wanted more respect from the civil authority; they were tired of being “spied upon,” presumably for their own good; and they wanted their fellow revolutionaries in Congress to trust them by granting them more autonomy.

### Chapter 3: These Winters of Our Discontent

“The spirit of resigning, which is now become almost epidemical is truly painful and alarming— This spirit, prevailing among many of the best Officers, from various inducements, if persisted in, must deeply wound the common cause...”

George Washington, February 1778<sup>192</sup>

Stealing a moment to write a letter, Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston described to his brother the events of the last few hectic months. In a tone of utter exhaustion, Livingston detailed the army’s condition at Valley Forge, stating sarcastically, we “are now Building Huts for our winter Quarters without Nails or Tools so that I suppose we may possibly render ourselves very Comfortable by the Time winter is Over.”<sup>193</sup> Still feeling the sting of the defeat of Washington’s army twice by Sir William Howe in September and October of 1777, Livingston resented that “the Enemy are rolling in the Fat of the Land having played the Soldier sufficiently to secure them the Best of Quarters,” while “all my men except 18 are unfit for duty for want of Shoes Stockings and Shirts.”<sup>194</sup> Washington established his army’s winter headquarters at Valley Forge, after negotiating a compromise with the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania’s legislature. With Howe’s army firmly ensconced in Philadelphia, politicians insisted that the Continental Army maintain a strong presence in the Pennsylvania countryside to help bolster public morale. These political considerations contradicted Washington’s original plan of dividing his forces into several small winter camps, spread throughout the countryside, to make it easier to supply the army.

The legacy of Valley Forge dominates the narrative of the American Revolution, but the reality of that winter offers an opportunity to examine the military’s growing resentment of

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<sup>192</sup> George Washington to John Glover, February 18, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:579-580.

<sup>193</sup> Henry Beekman Livingston to Robert R. Livingston, December 24, 1777, *A Salute to Courage: the American Revolution as seen through wartime writings of officers of the Continental Army and Navy*, 111-112.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

congressional authority and how officers began to demand respect as fellow gentlemen and revolutionaries. As the military pushed back against congressional authority, tensions between the two institutions went beyond the point of compromise. Instead, revolutionaries turned to resignation as a conflict resolution measure to preserve their honor and reputation.

Winter always aggravated the problems between the Continental Army and the Continental Congress because officers had more time to mull over real or imagined slights to their dignity in their quarters. Having no immediate military campaigns to plan, officers typically focused on complaining about their lack of pay, lack of promotions, and lack of supplies. At Valley Forge, they added a new item to the list of complaints: pensions. Pensions were a divisive issue within the officer corps and a controversial proposal on the legislative agenda. For officers, pensions came to symbolize respect and honor and therefore made pensions an emotionally charged issue for congressional debate. Many delegates in Congress felt pressured by the military to vote in favor of granting pensions. When tensions escalated over establishing them, revolutionaries in both institutions resigned to protest injuries to their character that occurred during the debates.

In *A Revolutionary People at War*, Charles Royster emphasized that Valley Forge was a turning point in the Continental Army's institutional history. After Washington appointed Baron von Steuben to mold his army into a force of European quality, soldiers spent months learning traditional battlefield tactics and drills to instill new professional discipline. Royster argues that Valley Forge is where the army began to believe they were the embodiment of revolutionary virtue. Soldiers thought of themselves as distinct from the public because they were sacrificing their fortunes and oftentimes their lives to fight for independence.<sup>195</sup> The civil authority grew

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<sup>195</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783*, 190-254.

concerned over the army's growing resentment and anger, but congressmen were divided ideologically over solutions to placate the military.

The fall of 1777 to the spring of 1781 were years that represented the nadir of America's military and political fortunes, as the revolutionaries struggled to fight a war for independence with no money and a frustrated and tired public. So, why in the midst of these terrible times did congressmen and officers resign from service? Royster argues that most officers resigned when the reality of war did not mesh with their romantic notions of military glory. Upon that realization, they returned their commissions to escape the hardships of active military duty, a decision that was probably for the best because they were too interested in cutting a dashing figure than successfully fighting the enemy in battle.<sup>196</sup> There was, however, more to the resignations than disillusionment with the war.

After fleeing Philadelphia just hours ahead of Howe's invading army, Congress settled in York, Pennsylvania, for the winter months. The drama of retreating from the temporary capital of the United States for the second year in a row frustrated many of the delegates, and they grew impatient with Washington's leadership. While Horatio Gates had conquered Burgoyne's large army in upstate New York, Washington had lost a series of battles, forcing the national legislature to abandon its capital.<sup>197</sup> In the fall of 1777, delegates struggled with their own growing irritation with the army and with the management of the war for independence.

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<sup>196</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 201.

<sup>197</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, September 30, 1777, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 2:504. "In the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> instant [September], the Congress were alarmed in their beds by a letter from Mr. Hamilton...that the enemy was in possession of the ford over the Schuylkill...so that they had it in their power to be in Philadelphia before morning." The rest of the letter details the circuitous route that Adams and other congressmen traveled to avoid the British army. For the delegates' growing frustration with Washington, see Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 279-297. Burnett, however, in his chapter "Confusion of Tongues Discontent, Intrigue" is conflating the delegates' frustration with Washington losing Philadelphia, into a plot (the Conway Cabal) to actively replace Washington with Gates. I agree, with other historians, who dismiss the idea that an actual plan existed in Congress to fire the commander-in-chief.

The war had already lasted far longer than any revolutionary had anticipated in the summer of 1775 and delegate absenteeism began to interfere with congressional productivity. As delegates fled Philadelphia, some continued on the road until they reached home instead of stopping in York, Pennsylvania. The average workload of a congressional delegate consisted of ten-to-twelve-hour days filled with committee meetings and long open-floor debates. If a delegate did not surreptitiously leave Congress, then he might write to his state legislature asking to resign his position due to pressing family matters or because he resented the political compromises necessitated by congressional factions. Congressmen believed that politics and votes were personal and, by 1777, some of them were tired of public service. Delegate turnover became a larger issue in the winter months when Congress had difficulty reaching a quorum to conduct business.<sup>198</sup> Elbridge Gerry humorously notified Samuel Adams that he needed to return to Congress and help with congressional business since “few can stand it as well as our Friend Mr. Lovell; he writes Morning Noon and Night, Sickens once a Fortnight, and devotes a Day to Sleep, after which, like the Sun from behind a Cloud, he makes his Appearance with his usual Splendor.”<sup>199</sup> Still, the work never stopped. During the winter, delegates debated the Articles of Confederation, fiscal policy, officers tendering their resignations, new guidelines for officer promotions, army pensions, and how to supply an army that was in an “Almost Naked & very often in a Starveing Condition.”<sup>200</sup> The problems plaguing the war effort made the civil and military authorities sensitive to any gossip about their performance. The winter months of

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<sup>198</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics: Structure, Coordination, and Choice in the First American Congress, 1774-1789*, 153-163; Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretative History of the Continental Congress*, 218-246; Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 298-316; all discuss the problem of absenteeism, which really started in the winter of 1777/78 and grew worse each succeeding year.

<sup>199</sup> Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, February 7, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:76.

<sup>200</sup> Henry Beekman Livingston to Robert R. Livingston, December 24, 1777, *A Salute to Courage*, 111-112. Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783*, 35-73.

1777/78 were filled with accusations and innuendos about the merits of Continental Army officers and congressional delegates.

By the fall of 1777, the pressures and problems of the war stretched the revolutionaries' patience, leaving many gentlemen feeling that resignation was the only way for them to preserve their dignity.<sup>201</sup> Resignation served as a form of protest when there was no direct opponent to challenge to a duel or when officers could not find a specific delegate in Congress to blame for their woes. The winter months allowed officers and politicians plenty of time to become disgruntled at their treatment by the public.

Officers' pay continued to be a thorny issue between the army and Congress. Wanting to be frugal, congressmen from the beginning, in June 1775, had stipulated a low salary for officers, believing men should volunteer for patriotic rather than pecuniary reasons.<sup>202</sup> In the fall of 1775, Washington had petitioned Congress for an increase in the officers' pay, arguing that the current allowance was "inadequate to their Rank, & Service; & is one great Source of that Familiarity between the Officers & Men, which is so incompatible with Subordination & Discipline." The low pay, he added, did not allow subalterns "to support the Character & Appearance of Officers."<sup>203</sup> While Congress provided the uniforms for enlisted men (that is, when supplies existed,) officers paid for their own uniforms. In the eighteenth century, clothing signaled rank and character.<sup>204</sup> Officers were expected to maintain a neat and genteel appearance to inspire

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<sup>201</sup> The resignation process entailed an officer notifying his commanding officer that he wished to return his commission and retire from service. Then, Washington and the Continental Congress had to approve the resignation and draft discharge papers. Most resignations were accepted, but often Washington and other senior officers tried to convince men to stay and fight.

<sup>202</sup> On June 14, 1775, Congress decided on the pay scale for junior officers and common soldiers, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2:89-90 and on June 16, 1775, delegates established the pay for senior officers and men serving in the artillery, *Ibid.*, 2:93-94.

<sup>203</sup> George Washington to John Hancock, September 21, 1775, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 2:26.

<sup>204</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 69, and Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army*, 38-41.

their soldiers' obedience and awe. Even eighteenth-century military manuals encouraged this practice, stating that "these pleasant externals [uniforms] are not combat weapons, to be sure, but they are a perpetual reminder to the officer of his status and distinction, and by impressing his superiority on his soldiers they incline the men to consideration, respect, and obedience."<sup>205</sup>

Money helped codify social distinction and Washington knew that his junior officers were going into debt trying to maintain the lifestyle expected of an officer.<sup>206</sup> To retain officers, Washington successfully persuaded Congress in November 1775 to increase officers' salaries, even as radical congressmen grumbled about the lack of patriotic virtue in the officer corps.

By November 1777, officers were again focused on their salaries as they settled into winter quarters. Pay, promotions, pensions, and food became the major topics for discussion in Washington's dissatisfied army. Officers blamed their problems on an apathetic public and a callous national legislature. As a camp doctor recorded in his journal, "the officers look upon Congress with an evil eye, as men who are jealous of the army, who mean them no good, but mean to divide and distress them."<sup>207</sup>

Currency inflation and squabbles over promotions exacerbated the officers' feelings of resentment. The issue of pay grew more significant as officers received letters from their families describing the escalating prices of everyday items. Officers knew their salaries could not cope with the inflation. Many families actively encouraged their loved ones to return home to help out with the family finances because a soldier's pay was inadequate. Even when families did not complain about money, some officers were tired of continually reaching into their own pockets to provide themselves and sometimes their men with food and clothing when army

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<sup>205</sup> Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, 86.

<sup>206</sup> Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 47.

<sup>207</sup> Kohn, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint," in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays*, 108.

supplies failed to materialize. Officers in debt or inadequately supplied blamed Congress and the Commissary Department for their woes, and many at Valley Forge probably would have secretly sympathized with Private Dennis Kennedy's threat to desert "as soon as he got shoes" while "cursing Congress."<sup>208</sup>

Pay helped officers provide for their families, but it also symbolized the civil authority's respect. Officers believed that Congress must pay them at a level commensurate with their personal sacrifice for the war effort and that, by refusing to grant this idealized amount, Congress purposefully injured the dignity of the officer corps.<sup>209</sup> With prices continuing their climb, most officers realized that an increase in their salary would not necessarily end their financial troubles. They then discussed the possibility of receiving postbellum pensions, which would help them pay off any debt incurred during the war. Pensions would signal civilian respect, while also offering an opportunity for families to be financially secure if employment opportunities were scarce after the war.

As usual, Congress used the winter months to analyze what had gone wrong during the previous military campaigns and contemplate strategies for the upcoming season. After losing the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, Washington wanted to institute new reforms in the Continental Army. Congress also wanted an army that would be able to defeat British troops, and they commissioned a committee to meet with Washington at Valley Forge to discuss institutional change. Before the committee arrived, Washington asked his senior officers to submit in writing their proposals and opinions for plans to solve the problems plaguing the army.<sup>210</sup> A majority of the officers urged Washington to advocate half-pay pensions, reforms in

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<sup>208</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 195.

<sup>209</sup> Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*, 105.

<sup>210</sup> *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*. In Volume 13, the letters offer a valuable insight into the mindset of senior officers. Some letters reveal the officers' revolutionary ideology by arguing for or against



the Quartermaster Department, and new rules for promotions because the February 1777 guidelines had left too much room for interpretation. Each senior officer warned Washington of the dissatisfaction in the officer corps, where gentlemen of all ranks were threatening to resign if conditions did not improve. Officers were frustrated with civilian authority at the local and national levels; they wanted immediate action but had no idea that Congress was struggling on some days just to reach a quorum so that it could conduct legislative business.<sup>211</sup>

Officers tended to resign in larger numbers during the winter months: the result of dwelling on the miserable conditions of army life. Although the ordeal of Valley Forge marked the increasing professionalization of the Continental Army, creating a unique martial pride among soldiers and officers, there were nevertheless, a larger number of officer resignations that winter than in any previous winter.<sup>212</sup> Officers cited various reasons for leaving the army, including injuries sustained during the previous campaign, supply shortages, inflation, and the length of the war. Some officers were tired of fighting for independence; others did not want to train to become professional officers. Officers in both groups left the army.

Most of the letters of resignation submitted to Washington were shaped by the eighteenth-century culture of honor. Officers deliberately styled their letters to highlight their gentlemanly status, using key terms to explain why they needed to leave the army. They usually gave one of three reasons for returning their commissions: personal health; no money to provide for their family; or to protest injuries to their reputation. Officers were intent on explaining to Washington why they had to resign, and they sought his approval by appealing to him as gentlemen. Though the officers understood that they were fighting for independence, many still

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pensions and the purchasing of commissions. On page 102, note 1, the editors of *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series* provide a list of officers who recommended reforms to Washington to propose to the congressional committee.

<sup>211</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 155-160.

<sup>212</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 190-254.

believed that they needed to protect their reputations at all cost. Cultural norms about the importance of character and reputation triumphed over patriotic virtue in the army, but it did so, as well, in the Continental Congress. Most of the letters of resignation tended to follow a similar format, and Washington's patience was stretched to its limit during the winter of 1777/78, when hundreds of officers submitted their resignations.<sup>213</sup>

An officer's letter of resignation did more than return a commission. Such a letter also served as a conflict resolution tool for easing tensions. Many officers intended their letters to be received as a formal notification of protest and a validation of their gentlemanly status in the public sphere. The honor code encouraged gentlemen to resign when situations threatened their gentility, and their letters of resignation reveal some of the hidden rules of the code. Historians have tended to judge officers harshly for abandoning the army because of seemingly petty grievances, but to the officers it was a matter of character and reputation, crucial elements in their social standing.

Junior officers cared about how their letters of resignation were perceived by their superior officers. They carefully analyzed the language used in their discharge papers and they could read between the lines of Washington's pen, understanding which of his words meant an honorable discharge and which ones indicated merely a routine discharge. Lieutenant Colonel Lott Brewster requested an honorable discharge in January 1778 because "he lacked the Constitution to stand the fatigue of another Campaign."<sup>214</sup> Washington approved his request, but Brewster complained to Washington's aide-de-camp Richard Kidder Meade, who had written the

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<sup>213</sup> Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 201; and George Washington to John Banister, April, 21, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:574. "The Virginia line has sustained a violent shock in this instance not less than ninety have resigned already, to me, the same conduct has prevailed among the Officers from the Other States, though not yet so considerable a degree..."

<sup>214</sup> James Mitchell Varnum to George Washington, March 20, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:247. The story of Lieutenant Colonel Lott Brewster is related in the footnote to Varnum's letter, highlighting how much word choice and language mattered to the revolutionaries.

letter accepting Brewster's resignation, that "the Discharge does not mention that my Reasons are thought Sufficient but that on my insisting for it as my Right it was Granted."<sup>215</sup> Brewster was protesting to Meade about the treatment of his character in the discharge papers because he was not granted an honorable discharge. In Brewster's formal discharge papers he was merely given a routine discharge from the army, and he was upset with Washington's word choice. Washington's aide-de-camp added insult to injury with his final reply to Brewster's protest about the language of the discharge papers. Meade notified him that, "the Genl was by no means satisfied with your reasons for leaving the Army, but as he knew of no power that he had to keep an officer contrary to his will, that a discharge should be granted to you" but "had that discharge expressed his approbation," there would be "an inconsistency in his conduct."<sup>216</sup>

Occasionally, Washington overtly expressed his disapproval in his replies to resignation letters. Those replies reflected his frustration with the officer corps and how the culture of honor complicated military affairs. Hoping to shame a colonel into staying with the army, Washington wrote:

Officers wishing to retire have frequently observed, that there would be enough left, and therefore that the want of their services could not be material. Those who reason thus pay themselves but an ill compliment, as they evidently confess, that others possess more virtue—more attachment to the great and common cause than they themselves do. If there are hardships attending the service, why should not all equally share in them?<sup>217</sup>

Washington's choice of words deliberately questioned the resigning officer's character and attempted to manipulate him into remaining with his troops. Washington also reiterated the importance of patriotic virtue in coping with the hardships of military service. However, the hardships of service were unequally distributed depending on the state regiment. Some

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 14:247.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 14:247.

<sup>217</sup> George Washington to Charles Lewis, March 21, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:254.

Continental Army regiments suffered major difficulties due to problems encountered by their local legislatures in pulling together supplies and shipping them to Valley Forge.<sup>218</sup> While Washington could become peevish on occasion after receiving multiple resignations in a day, he grudgingly accepted that, according to society's rules his officers had a right to resign their commissions. He wanted gentlemen to serve in the officer corps and had to deal with the consequences of the gentlemen's code of honor.

The majority of the officers' resignation letters in 1777/78 addressed the negative impact of the war on their "private Affairs."<sup>219</sup> As an officer explained to Washington, "I am not possessed of an independent fortune & what little I have is much impair'd by my Continuance in the Army."<sup>220</sup> Officers complained that their "pay on the present establishment when compared to the advanced prices of every Article of Life...is by no means adequate to support them in a Character suitable to their Rank."<sup>221</sup> Most soldiers, particularly officers, in the Continental Army struggled to maintain financial solvency because they were paid in a new currency that depreciated rapidly.

Officers also frequently cited their health and constitution when resigning their commission. Washington quickly granted honorable discharges to officers seriously wounded in battle but was frustrated with other officers who sought to retire when they were not physically harmed. Many complained about the hardships of camp and simply wished to be home with their families. Senior generals had little patience with officers who were obviously resigning

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<sup>218</sup> Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 33-52. In an attempt to reform the Continental Army supply system, Congress had made it the responsibility of state legislatures to provide for their own state regiments.

<sup>219</sup> Edward Stevens to George Washington, January 24, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:335. In, Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 103-110, and Kohn, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint" in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War*, 107-108, the authors discuss how the resentment towards Congress always grew worse during the winter seasons.

<sup>220</sup> Peter Scull to George Washington, January 7, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:167

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:167, and Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 41-47.

because they were homesick. As the winter dragged on at Valley Forge, Washington became increasingly reluctant to grant furloughs to junior officers because, once at home, many were likely not to return to camp. Unfortunately, the policy of refusing furloughs created a backlash when officers started resigning because they were not allowed to leave camp.<sup>222</sup>

Washington felt health was the least honorable reason for officers to return their commissions. When officers resigned due to their unhappiness with camp conditions, it set a bad precedent among their junior officers and the foot soldiers, who usually suffered even more extreme hardships in winter quarters. But Washington realized it was better to discharge officers than force them to remain in service when they were clearly unhappy.<sup>223</sup> Though he let officers resign, by March 1778 he was again frustrated enough with the proffered excuses to write disparagingly to Major Isaac Beall: “I am at a loss to account how Gentlemen can reconcile such an abandonment of the Public Interest, at this crisis of our Affairs, either with the principles of honor or their duty to themselves and their Country.”<sup>224</sup> Washington pointedly condemned Beall’s behavior, notifying the major that Washington did not think he had acted in a gentlemanly manner. During the war, Washington attempted to broaden the meaning of the traditional culture of honor to include patriotism in order to shame officers who were resigning. Nevertheless, he knew he could not prevent them from using resignation to protest injuries to their reputation or to leave the hardships of military service.

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<sup>222</sup> George Washington to George Lewis, January 11, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:202 and William Smallwood to George Washington, January 26, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:355. “I would only remark, that my refusing Furloughs, & Liberty of Officers going upon the Recruiting Service, has already, & will part some Officers who perhaps the Corps will sustain no great loss...It would give me great Concern was this defection to be attributed to real suffering but I am fully persuaded the Idea of Home, absorbs every other.”

<sup>223</sup> George Washington to James Mitchell Varnum, March 20, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:247.

<sup>224</sup> George Washington to Isaac Beall, March 31, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:363. Washington continued stating “if however you think yourself warranted, and are determined to quit the army, I must at least insist upon your retaining your Commission till the Arrival of more Officers in Camp.”

Officers usually threatened to resign after being passed over for a promotion or because of personality problems within the different states' officer corps. Selfish though such reasons may seem, they were hardly that. Promotions equaled public recognition of a gentleman's character in the eighteenth-century military.<sup>225</sup> Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston is the perfect example of an officer who knows that he should not resign during the war because of dissatisfaction over promotion, but who insists that it would be a grievous mortification to be "commanded by those Formerly my Inferiors in Rank." Livingston began his letter to Washington by stating:

Could I at any Time have embraced an Opinion prevalent in the Army, *That the Indignity with which an Officer is treated, when by an Act of the Legislature or Ruling Power he is superseded in Rank renders him justifiable in withdrawing himself from the Service of his Country*, I should have long since have followed the Example of Many others and resigned my Commission.<sup>226</sup>

Livingston protested that he did not want to pursue that course of action but, should such a situation arise, he would have no choice but to resign in order to protect his reputation.

Problems with promotions fueled Washington's frustration with Congress because he understood his officers' sensitivity over rank. In December and early January, he fell victim to speculation (known as the Conway Cabal) that Horatio Gates might replace him as commander in chief. Historians agree that the Conway Cabal never existed in the minds of anyone but Washington and his staff officers, though some congressmen were frustrated with Washington's demands for military reform in 1777.<sup>227</sup> Studying the Conway Cabal reveals the flow of gossip in the personal letters that passed between officers and politicians. News about the Cabal

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<sup>225</sup> Ferling, *Almost a Miracle*, 285. "Rank was a matter of critical importance to the officers. To a man, they were scorchingly ambitious, and many were driven by monumental egos," to present one example of historians negatively judging the Continental Army officers. Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 200-201.

<sup>226</sup> Henry Beekman Livingston to George Washington, January 22, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:314. Italics in the original letter.

<sup>227</sup> For more information on the Conway Cabal, see: Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 140-181 and Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 279-297.

reached Congress when John Laurens, Washington's aide-de-camp, wrote to his father, Henry Laurens, president of the Continental Congress, asking if radical delegates were plotting to replace Washington with Gates. Speculation about a cabal reveals Washington's own sensitivity concerning his reputation as a general. Lord Stirling started the controversy by passing along a comment in a letter to Washington, allegedly written by Brigadier General Thomas Conway to Horatio Gates, stating: "Heaven has been determined to save your Country; or a weak General and bad Councillors would have ruind it."<sup>228</sup> Sensitivity to how others perceived one's character influenced most of the revolutionaries' decision-making process during the war.

Officers warned Washington that "we are exceeding sorry to say that in this army no regular Line of promotion has ever been observed. Promotions without any apparent reason have taken place, which reflect disgrace & dishonor upon us."<sup>229</sup> For these officers, the 1777 guidelines had left too much room for interpretation and recent promotions had upset several brigadier generals. They felt "unprecedented & surprising promotions are frequently taking place in favour of persons who have never distinguished themselves as soldiers, and who have nothing more to boast of it in the present contest, than that they have modestly trumpeted their own praise to Congress."<sup>230</sup> To eliminate their grievances they proposed that Congress create a special commission "to fix the rank of the officer upon a proper footing, and to settle a regular line of promotion, not to be departed from, but in cases of extraordinary merit, or upon great political principles."<sup>231</sup> By mentioning political principles they acknowledged that congressmen felt pressured to commission foreign officers, such as Thomas Conway and the Marquis de

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<sup>228</sup> William Alexander, Lord Stirling to George Washington, November 3, 1777, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 12:111.

<sup>229</sup> Certain General Officers to George Washington, December 31, 1777, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:80. John Sullivan and Enoch Poor wrote the letter of protest.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:80.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:81.

Lafayette, to please potential foreign allies. Some senior American generals believed that French officers received preference in promotions because they were not subject to the state quota problems. Resentment plagued every congressional decision to promote officers. As Elbridge Gerry complained, “[B]ut what has been the consequence of every appointment of generals officers made by Congress? If it did not suit the whole army, opposition has taken place, and reduced Congress to the necessity of asserting the rights of themselves and their constituents.”<sup>232</sup> Though some members of Congress may have grown frustrated with the problems relating to promotions, others understood the officers’ sensitivity about rank.

Officers attempted to portray their resentment over promotions as a reasonable response to slights injuring their character. “Resentment,” as Nicole Eustace explains in *Passion is the Gale*, “resulted from a man’s rational appraisal that the words or actions of another menaced his honor and social standing.”<sup>233</sup> A gentleman should always maintain control over his feelings and passions, which is why it is rare to read a letter in which Washington loses his temper.

Brigadier General George Weedon’s letter of resignation used carefully selected language to highlight his resolute and gentlemanly resentment of another general’s promotion. He maintained that he had “coolly and impartially considered every Circumstance attending this extraordinary change. I have advised with many friends on the Subject.” Weedon wants Washington to know that his feelings are tempered by reason and that he was not jealous, which was a petty emotion, but, rather, rightly resentful.<sup>234</sup> Weedon had also reached out to other revolutionaries for the purpose of mediation, hoping to see if there was any chance for him to

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<sup>232</sup> Elbridge Gerry to Henry Knox, February 7, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:76. He continued with an ominous warning that if Congress gave up their rights to appoint generals than they were “consenting to give them up in a manner that would sap the foundation of liberty.”

<sup>233</sup> Eustace, *Passion is the Gale*, 160. See also, Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 38-66.

<sup>234</sup> George Weedon to George Washington, April 13, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:503.



receive a promotion. But, after learning that there would be no possibility of promotion, he had decided “with the Coroberating Opinion of many of your friends, as well as my own,” that it would be inconsistent “with my honor [other] than to refuse Service under those that have been so long my Junior Officers.”<sup>235</sup> Weedon’s letter echoed the language and logic used by Colonel Henry Beekman Livingston and numerous other officers.

In an effort to staunch the flow of resignations, Washington met with a congressional committee in mid-January to urge reforms that directly addressed officers’ complaints about indebtedness, health, and injustices in the granting of promotions. Prior to meeting with congressional delegates, Washington solicited the opinion of many senior officers about how to repair the problems in the Continental Army. He compiled their suggestions into a long letter to be submitted to a small congressional committee visiting Valley Forge, detailing military issues that needed to be addressed and offered a few potential remedies.<sup>236</sup> Washington was focused on keeping the officers happy and in the army. He hoped the new congressional resolutions would ease some of the complaints in the officer corps by showing that congressmen valued the officers’ service. In the opening paragraph Washington explicitly states that the officers’ grievances need to be resolved first “since without officers no army can exist.” As a conservative gentleman, Washington wanted to use the months at Valley Forge to create a truly professional army capable of defeating the British army in set battles, and this meant new standards of discipline and drill would be implemented. Influenced by his conservative social principles, Washington believed that officers inspired soldiers to perform better through their

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 14:503.

<sup>236</sup> George Washington to A Continental Congress Camp Committee, January 29, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:376-404. For more information on the committee at camp during the winter of 1777/78, see: Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 165-168; and Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 298-316.

own valorous conduct.<sup>237</sup> He wanted officers to stop fixating on their petty complaints about rank and pay and make inculcating discipline in the troops their priority. Understanding that the code of honor made it difficult to ignore the perceived slights, Washington repeatedly highlighted in his letter the importance of creating new measures to placate the officers. In hopes of preventing congressional delegates from lightly dismissing his opinions, he carefully explained his reasoning behind all the suggested reforms.

The first proposed reform advocated establishing a half-pay and “pensionary” plan for officers and their families. The prominence given to half-pay suggests that Washington believed that this was the crucial reform in preventing more resignations. He understood that some delegates in Congress opposed half-pay plans. In mid-January, Elbridge Gerry notified Washington that “there are many weighty Arguments against” half-pay, “such as the Infant State of the Country, it’s Aversion to placemen & pensioners.”<sup>238</sup> Gerry’s stated opposition to half-pay shaped Washington’s argument to the Committee at Camp. He knew he had to convince Congress that the officers were not being petty but behaving according to the rules of eighteenth-century society. He described the reality of human nature with startling insight:

Few men are capable of making a continual sacrifice of all views of private interest, or advantage, to the common good. It is in vain to exclaim against the depravity of human nature on this account—the fact is so, the experience of every age and nation has proved it, and we must, in a great measure, change the constitution of man, before we can make it otherwise.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Elites believed that they had to maintain a decorous public appearance to inspire the lower sort, in this hierarchical society men believed that they inspired by example. See: Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America*, 22-32; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 14; Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor*, 21-22; and Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty*, 226-228.

<sup>238</sup> Elbridge Gerry to George Washington, January 13, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:219.

<sup>239</sup> George Washington to Camp Committee, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:377.

Washington's candid analysis of the human psyche would have upset many of the radical delegates, who believed that public virtue by itself was sufficient to ensure the stability of a republican society.

Washington continually emphasized that officers wanted and needed public recognition of their wartime sacrifice. If officers believed the public appreciated them, then they would be willing to fight harder and they would be proud of and satisfied with their current rank, and not petition so frequently for a promotion. Washington argued that half-pay provided that recognition and respect because it meant that Congress and the general public appreciated the officers' sacrifice and would reward them with pensions for their service in the Continental Army. Washington never suggested a pay raise for the soldiers because the continental currency was depreciating so rapidly that inflation would have nullified any increase in pay. But a pension could be used to assure officers' creditors that they would eventually receive payment after the war.<sup>240</sup> Still striving to be the model revolutionary, Washington proclaimed that he urged the adoption of this measure only to retain officers, since he would not "receive the small benefit from the establishment, and can have no other inducement for proposing it, than a full conviction of its utility and propriety."<sup>241</sup> Pensions proved to be a major source of contention between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army until the end of the war. Officers insisted on their rights to receive pensions, while Congress worried about creating a professional military social class after the war. By arguing for pensions, officers made half-pay a personal issue and grew resentful when Congress debated the half-pay proposal for several months.

Having addressed the question of pensions, Washington turned to the touchy matters of rank and promotion. He warned the congressional committee "that irregular promotions have

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<sup>240</sup> For more information about the several fiscal crises plaguing the revolutionary war see Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 375-427, and Carp, *To Starve an Army at Pleasure*, 101-135.

<sup>241</sup> George Washington to Camp Committee, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:378.

also been a pregnant source of uneasiness, discord and perplexity in this army. They have been the cause of numerous bickerings and resignations among the officers, and have occasioned infinite trouble.”<sup>242</sup> But, while Washington knew that new rules were needed, he still faced the same problems that had plagued Congress in February 1777. Officers wanted simple guidelines established, with no room for interpretation, a position that left seniority as the best option for determining the recipients and timing of promotions. Washington thought otherwise, believing that, should seniority be the only rule for promotion, officers would be left in “listless security, certain of enjoying the honors and emoluments of progressive rank, let their conduct be ever so undeserving.”<sup>243</sup> He wanted regulations that emphasized seniority while allowing merit to factor into some extraordinary cases. Moreover, he insisted that state quotas should no longer influence congressional decisions in promoting senior generals. His recommendation was quite specific: “[T]hat promotion should be regimental to the rank of Captain inclusively, and from that, in the line of the state to the rank of Brigadier inclusively; proceeding, from that, in the line of the army at large.”<sup>244</sup> Ultimately the new congressional guidelines for promotions were shaped by the military’s preferences. But, the amorphous concept of “merit,” still unresolved, would continue to provoke discontentment among officers.

Washington’s letter to the congressional committee presented the problems plaguing the army in 1777/78 and emphasized key solutions to reduce the officers’ resentment against the national legislature. Having received the army’s demands, delegates fretted about implementing a half-pay pension. The emphasis on public virtue, candidly discussed by Washington in his

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 13:388.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 13:389.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 13:389. With these guidelines, Washington hoped to prevent disagreements between senior generals. Several times, Congress had denied meritorious generals promotion because their state had its full quota of major and brigadier generals. Washington wanted to solve this problem by eliminating state quotas at the brigadier level.

letters and analyzed by Royster in *A Revolutionary People at War*, was fading as the reality of a protracted war settled in at both Valley Forge, and York, Pennsylvania, during winter quarters.

Thomas McKean, a representative from Delaware, arrived in York in late January and was disgruntled to find the town an expensive place in which to live. Attending Congress, he found “only nine States represented, and, including myself, but eighteen members, though five now at the camp, and some others are expected in a few days.”<sup>245</sup> When Congress ignominiously fled Philadelphia just ahead of advancing British troops in late September, many delegates had seized the opportunity to return home, granting themselves a furlough from the national legislature. Henry Laurens, president of the Continental Congress, during the winter and spring months of 1777/78, believed fear “had operated upon many minds.”<sup>246</sup> Delegates who served that winter in York were worried about “the excessive expence attending very bad fare in this Town and partly of a sudden surprize by the Enemy, and certainly had Sir William Howe been a man of enterprize he might have possessed himself of Congress.”<sup>247</sup> Fear blinded some of the delegates from realizing that they shared the same grievances as the officer corps. Many of them also cited health and their personal financial affairs as their reasons for leaving Congress.

Congressional resignations share many similarities with officer resignations, but historians have rarely discussed how often congressmen resigned during the war. Jack Rakove in *The Beginnings of National Politics* argues that historians have focused on discussing delegates who served multiple terms in Congress because they left a long paper trail of their participation and do not challenge the image of patriotic congressmen.<sup>248</sup> Historians ignore the

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<sup>245</sup> Thomas McKean to George Read, February 12, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:82.

<sup>246</sup> Henry Laurens to Rawlins Lowndes, May 1, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:210.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:210.

<sup>248</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 218-230.

problems of explaining why the Continental Congress experienced a high rate of delegate turnover. As Richard Henry Lee observed to his brother, “[T]he members of Congress are so perpetually changing that it is of little use to give you their Names.”<sup>249</sup> Rakove asserts that serving in the national legislature placed a burden on married gentlemen with families to support since their salary did not stretch very far when inflation struck in 1777. Also, many delegates did not want to live in Philadelphia, which was far away from their families and careers.

Congressional resignations occurred more sporadically than officer resignations, and so resigning congressmen did not draw as much attention as officers, who resigned en masse, apart from a few disdainful comments in their colleagues’ personal letters. Officers tended to resign during the winter when not on active campaign, but congressmen resigned from legislative duty at any time of the year, whether Congress was in or out of session. Some legislators did not even write official notices but simply indicated their resignation by their absence from the congressional floor. Then they would notify their state legislatures that new candidates were needed to fill their seat. The problems of absenteeism and unofficial resignations were so serious in May 1778 that Congress attempted to establish “rules for the better conducting business” and resolved that “[N]o member shall leave Congress without permission of Congress or of his constituents.”<sup>250</sup> Perhaps frustration with their own absent colleagues influenced delegates to harshly condemn officers for wanting to resign their commissions. Although Congress passed new legislation stipulating that at least nine states had to be represented to conduct business, delegates could do nothing to physically prevent their fellow revolutionaries from resigning.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>250</sup> May 26, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 11:534-535.

In resigning, congressmen cited the same concerns about their health and private affairs that the officers offered to justify their resignations.<sup>251</sup> William Ellery of Rhode Island, after voting repeatedly against establishing a half-pay pension for officers, wrote to his governor to request that his replacement be sent to York as quickly as possible. Ellery refused to stand for re-election, arguing that his health “and the unhappy situation of my family require that I should be at home as soon as possible.”<sup>252</sup> In citing pecuniary reasons for his resignation, Ellery was no different from many officers who attempted to leave the army. Nonetheless, Ellery condemned the measure that would have provided an incentive for officers to continue serving.

Other delegates resigned to preserve their legal or business careers, some simply grew frustrated with the congressional workload and the political maneuverings at the national level.<sup>253</sup> As Congress grew smaller, personality clashes among its members became more frequent and rancorous. Moreover, many congressmen disliked the reality of political bargaining and the difficulty of getting thirteen state legislatures to agree on important issues.<sup>254</sup> Because Congress relied on committees to conduct legislative business, each of the few delegates present in York found himself assigned to more committees thereby fraying already strained tempers. John Mathews of South Carolina, vented his frustration with Congress to Thomas Bee, the speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives, writing, “I have wrote to you for leave to come home in December; for God's sake procure it for me, & I'll be dam'd if ever you catch

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<sup>251</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 216-239. Rakove provides several examples of resignation letters that all use similar language, citing “health and private financial affairs” as the main reasons why congressmen needed to resign or not to stand for re-election.

<sup>252</sup> William Ellery to Nicholas Cooke, April 25, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:187.

<sup>253</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 235. Thomas Stone truthfully stated, “[B]eing convinced that I cannot attend Congress so constantly, as every delegate ought to do, without giving up the Practice of the Law: I beg Leave to resign the appointment with which I have been honoured.”

<sup>254</sup> “We, mighty Men, totally dependent upon 13 different Legislatures different in Views, for Support in our smallest Endeavors to carry on the War.” James Lovell to Samuel Holton, January 23, 1781, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 5:542. See also Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 216-239, and Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 317-329 for more information on the personality clashes plaguing Congress in 1777/78.

me here again.”<sup>255</sup> He continued his complaint, stating that “those who have dispositions for Jangling, & are fond of displaying their Rhetorical abilities, let them come. I never was so sick of any thing in my life.”<sup>256</sup> Although his characterization was perhaps a bit overdramatic, many delegates shared Mathews’s frustration with the structure of Congress. Gouverneur Morris apologized to Washington for the delay in passing all of his suggested reforms for the army by explaining that “had the several Members which compose our multifarious Body only been wise enough Our Business would long since have been compleated.”<sup>257</sup> He sarcastically observed that “our superior Abilities or the Desire of appearing to possess them lead us to such exquisite Tediousness of Debate that the most precious Moments pass unheeded away like vulgar Things.”<sup>258</sup> Tempers also flared in Congress when major issues were debated. In the winter of 1777/78, representatives of nine states discussed the guidelines for promotions, rules for exchanging prisoners, and the half-pay pension for officers.

The debate over establishing half-pay pensions lasted for two months, aggravating congressmen and frustrating the army. The debate was drawn out because it touched on an ideological nerve in the delegates. The half-pay pension was a practical proposal by Washington to help retain elite gentlemen in the army. But the proposal forced all delegates to confront the possibility that patriotism might not be enough to win the war.

For many radical delegates, the half-pay petition raised the specter of a permanent standing army because officers would receive a government stipend for perhaps the rest of their life. The creation of a separate and distinct group of citizens trained in military drills could

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<sup>255</sup> John Mathews to Thomas Bee, July 7, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 10:236. Mathews concluded his letter by swearing Bee to secrecy, because he did not want to violate the honor code by openly insulting Congress and his fellow delegates, “[T]his is all under the rose tho’, for notwithstanding it’s only my private sentiments of things, yet I would not wish to impress on the mind of any one, the least disrespect of Congress.”

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:236.

<sup>257</sup> Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, May 21, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:260.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:260.



threaten the government, should they become displeased with its policies. The histories of Rome and seventeenth-century England haunted the radical delegates from New England, who were the most outspoken opponents of the measure. Henry Laurens of South Carolina, president of Congress, joined the radicals in their voluble opposition to half-pay pensions and wrote many letters during the two-month debate, sharing his opinion about why the pensions could set a dangerous precedent. Radicals worried that, if they gave in to the military's pressure this time, then what would happen when the next contested issue arose? Laurens wrote to Washington that "Tis an unhappy dilemma to which we seem to be reduced—provide for your Officers in terms dictated to you or lose all the valuable Soldiers among them."<sup>259</sup> Laurens used "dictated" to emphasize his belief that officers were deliberately and unduly influencing the legislative process. He, however, had appointed himself defender of congressional prerogative. He even warned Washington, that "Republicans will at a proper time withdraw a Grant which shall appear to have been extorted."<sup>260</sup> Such stinging words of criticism provided officers with plenty to complain about and more officers resigned when they realized that Congress was resistant to granting pensions.

Because emotions were running high among the few delegates in York and the vote was evenly split between conservative and radical delegates, conservatives drafted specific legislative rules for their consideration of half-pay pensions.<sup>261</sup> Conservatives wrote the special rules to prevent radicals from killing the measure with every parliamentary tool at their disposal.

Radicals hoped to send the proposal to the individual state legislatures, where other politicians

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<sup>259</sup> Henry Laurens to George Washington, May 5, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 9:608.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:608.

<sup>261</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 215. The authors discuss that delegates took an unusual approach with the controversial proposal by establishing ahead of time a rule for consideration of the resolution. "After debate it was agreed, that amendments be moved and made in the report, but that, after the amendments are made and the report gone through, the whole report, as amended, shall be open to debate, whether it shall be adopted by Congress or be sent to the states, and their opinion taken, previous to the final determination of Congress." April 1, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 10:300.

upset with the military's threatening behavior would surely defeat it. Conservatives hoped to keep the proposal in Congress, but they agreed to the special rules as a compromise to keep half-pay on the legislative docket. Congress conducted multiple votes on the half-pay measure as delegates built coalitions to carry and bury the measure.

Thomas Burke of North Carolina provided a succinct description of the ideological divide between delegates over the pension plan.<sup>262</sup> According to him, conservative delegates agreed with Washington's proposal and argued, "[T]hat it is unjust to sacrifice the time and property of the men whose lives are every day exposed for us without any prospect of compensation, while so many who are protected by their valor and exertions are amassing princely fortunes."<sup>263</sup> Conservatives worried that the army was rapidly disbanding because officers felt insulted by congressional policies. Also, conservatives wanted to preserve the elite officer corps and they believed half-pay pensions would provide officers with an "interest" in their commissions. That is, to retain officers, they were willing to provide them with financial benefits after the war, thereby giving them a tangible reason for continuing their military service. For radical delegates, though, to provide any revolutionary with an "interest" perverted the spirit of '75 because "Officers in the Army are and ought to be actuated by the principles of patriotism and public spirit, and ought to disdain motives of private interest."<sup>264</sup>

Radical delegates worried precedents would be set if they approved the half-pay pension plan. Burke recorded that radicals questioned whether Congress even possessed the power to grant pensions without permission of the states. Many delegates believed that Congress only had the authority to prosecute the war and that pensions for life were beyond the bounds of national authority. Conservatives retorted that the "want of power" was no better an argument against

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<sup>262</sup> Thomas Burke to Richard Caswell, April 9, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 9:393-396.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:394.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:394.

half-pay “than against borrowing money which must be paid and its interest in the mean time kept up by revenues which must continue long beyond the War.”<sup>265</sup> They insisted that Congress had already seized the authority to borrow money on behalf of the United States so the limits on congressional power could be stretched again. They concluded that pensions were necessary to win the war and were willing to pay officers a small stipend for life to achieve independence.

The issue of half-pay actually brought to light the problem of what to do with the army after the end of the war. Delegates had not discussed the situation before because they had been concerned with recruiting more soldiers for the half-filled battalions. In Washington’s half-pay proposal to the congressional committee, he suggested that the officer corps serve as a reserve military guard, allowing officers potentially to supplant the militia system. Radicals became immediately suspicious that the Continental Army wanted to remain a standing army in peacetime. Fear of professional soldiers prevented most of the radicals from realizing that few officers wished to interfere or participate in politics and that most wanted to return home. The pensions would simply allow them to pay off their wartime debts.

Radicals argued that enough officers “will always be found to command our Troops who will deem the service of their Country and its gratitude a very ample compensation.”<sup>266</sup> In saying so, radicals essentially told the officers that they were not behaving honorably and that Congress accepted their resignations. Laurens offered an even harsher evaluation of the officers’ conduct in a letter to Washington:

How superior are many of the Gentlemen now in my contemplation, to the acceptance of an half pay, contributed to by Widows & Orphans of Soldiers who had bled & died by their sides, shackled with a condition of being excluded from the Privilege of serving in Offices in common with their fellow Citizens, bated in every House of Assembly as the

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 9:394.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 9:394.

Drones & incumbrances of Society, pointed at by Boys & Girls- there goes a Man who robs me every Year of part of my pittance.<sup>267</sup>

Laurens's vivid description was designed to shame the officers by painting them as leeches on republican society. Laurens had excused Washington from this behavior but Washington must have had to maintain tight control over his temper when he read this description of his subordinates. Laurens's letter was a part of his private correspondence with Washington but it was shaped by his conversations with other radical delegates who resented the army's insistence on passing the pension measure.

Congressional condemnations would have infuriated the officer corps if they had heard the debate, but conservative delegates counseled patience to their friends in the military as they tried to gather enough votes to establish lifetime half-pay pensions. Gouverneur Morris apologetically wrote to Washington that "I expected before this to have written to you 'Provision is made for the American Officers' but that Thief of Time Procrastination hath kept it off from Time to Time."<sup>268</sup> He subtly criticized the fears of the radical delegates, saying that "it is astonishing that Congress who certainly are not without sufficient *Apprehension* should at so critical a Moment as the present be so supine but this is human Nature and we must bear it."<sup>269</sup> Sanguine though Morris tried to appear in his letter, conservatives were in fact, scrounging for every vote in favor of half-pay at York. In fact, four days prior to writing his placating letter to Washington, Morris had been out of town. William Duer had pleaded with Morris to return because "from a want of Representation in the State of New York, and several other Embarrassments we cannot bring as many members absolutely essential to our Safety, without

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<sup>267</sup> Henry Laurens to George Washington, May 5, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 9:608.

<sup>268</sup> Gouverneur Morris to George Washington, April 18, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:550-551. Morris italicized apprehension in his humorous and gossipy letter to Washington. Morris also snidely intimated "I feel as severely on this Occasion as you can do but it is impossible to make Men of Business out of—All will yet go well."

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:550-551. Italics in the original letter.

you, especially the Establishment for the Army.”<sup>270</sup> Emotions were running so high over establishing pensions and guidelines for exchanging prisoners of war, that on April 12 members drafted a signed statement promising “to meet punctually at the hour of adjournment, to support order and preserve decency and politeness.”<sup>271</sup> They also agreed to speak only twice and not for more than ten minutes during a debate, unless Congress was convened as a committee of the whole house. Sixteen members signed the document but Samuel Chase later struck out his name because he felt that several signers had violated the contract.<sup>272</sup>

On March 26, conservatives had introduced the first official resolution for half-pay pensions and, a month later, Washington still waited to hear if the resolution had passed. Writing to Gouverneur Morris, he pleaded for congressional action: “I wish you could announce the provision for Officers concluded. It seems to me the basis, of all our operations. Resignation after resignation is taking place.”<sup>273</sup> Using the guidelines established early during the debate, congressmen argued about congressional authority and whether the idea of pensions was just and constitutional. Half-pay contradicted the radicals’ reliance on public virtue to win the war, and their insistence on that point made the legislative battle bitter and emotional. With the coming of spring, travel became easier and delegates regularly postponed votes on the half-pay resolution, hoping to earn support (and votes) from returning delegates. On May 11, Gouverneur Morris confided to Robert Morris that “half Pay cannot be postponed (for now we are the Postponers) beyond to Morrow morning,” meaning Robert Morris needed to return to Congress before 11:00 that morning to help swing the vote in the conservatives’ favor.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> William Duer to Robert Morris, April 12, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:164.

<sup>271</sup> Engagement of Members to Meet Punctually, Etc. April 12, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:165.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:165.

<sup>273</sup> George Washington to Gouverneur Morris, April 25, 1778, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:365.

<sup>274</sup> Gouverneur Morris to Robert Morris, May 11, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:230-231.

The official May 15 resolution that granted half-pay to the officers was a compromise between conservatives and radicals. Henry Laurens described the negotiating process to a close friend, stating that “I was Witness to many excellent and some violent strokes in parliamentary Manuevre a long Report of a Committee, ridden by amendments and new Resolves.”<sup>275</sup> The amendments and new resolves stipulated that officers would receive half-pay for a period of seven years, instead of for life. Conservatives agreed to this modification to prevent the resolution from being sent for ratification to the individual states where it would never pass. Radicals compromised on seven years, knowing that Congress possessed the authority to amend any law it passed. Delegates could rescind half-pay pensions in a few years when the threat of mass resignations no longer pressured the civil authority.<sup>276</sup> The seven-year limit also chastised the officers. Delegates wanted to ensure that the military understood that they still possessed the power to limit the military’s demands. The resolution’s language grudgingly bestowed a pension. Also, the infantry were offered a bounty of eighty dollars for serving for the duration of the war.<sup>277</sup> The pension probably did prevent some resignations within the officer corps, but the underlying problem of officers’ desire for public recognition was not resolved. Officers still resented congressional suspicion of their patriotism and their efforts to inculcate institutional pride in the Continental Army.

The procedural odyssey of half-pay did not end in May 1778. The issue was re-introduced in the summer and fall of 1780 after the continental currency collapsed completely.<sup>278</sup> Officers again threatened to resign unless Congress extended the half-pay pensions for life. Washington supported their demands because of the financial strain and anger expressed by the

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<sup>275</sup> Henry Laurens to Rawlins Lowndes, May 17, 1778, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 3:250.

<sup>276</sup> Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 216.

<sup>277</sup> May 15, 1778, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 11:502.

<sup>278</sup> Burnett, *The Continental Congress*, 391-393.

officers in their petitions. Delegates prepared to settle in for another long debate over submitting to pressure from the officer corps when word reached them of Benedict Arnold's treachery. Arnold's betrayal shocked both the Congress and the army, spurring Congress to quickly grant officers half-pay for life on October 21, 1780. The legislators wanted to prevent other officers from becoming susceptible to British bribes. By acceding to half-pay for life, Congress gave officers the public recognition and reward that they had been demanding since July 1775. Of course, half-pay was not permanently settled in 1780. Instead it was a major irritant in promoting the Newburgh conspiracy in 1783.

The debate over pensions revealed how officers and congressmen used resignations as a tool to resolve conflicts over honor during the war. Resignations allowed gentlemen to walk away honorably from a situation that challenged their reputation. Revolutionaries in the army and Congress used resignation to signal a protest or to escape the hardships of service. The culture of honor shaped a revolutionary's decision-making process, and historians should recognize that resignations were a socially sanctioned practice. The winter of 1777/78 exposed anew the deep ideological divide between radical and conservative revolutionaries' visions for an independent United States and the best methods for winning the war. Radicals resented patriots who resigned for pecuniary reasons, and that was why they disliked the half-pay pension measure. They believed patriotism and a willingness to sacrifice all provided Americans with a unique passion that made them capable of defeating the British army. Conservatives would have preferred that patriotism win the day, but they also accepted the fact that military officers wanted public recognition and the promise of future financial stability in return for their service in the army. The code of honor provided guidelines for a revolutionary's conduct during these turbulent times, and a gentleman had three tools at his disposal to deal with affronts to his

character: mediation; resignation; and affairs of honor. When mediation and resignation failed to resolve an issue, some revolutionaries turned to affairs of honor to preserve their reputations.



## Chapter 4:

### Are you sir, a gentleman?

“It is the dignity of America, not the dignity of Congress, we [officers] are fighting to support. Treat us justly, reward us for our services, and don’t let our characters suffer from every idle report.”

John Sullivan, 1777<sup>279</sup>

In June 1777, frustrated by rumors that certain congressional delegates were slandering his name during debate, Muster Master Gunning Bedford sent a note to New Jersey Congressman Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant initiating an affair of honor. Bedford used formulaic wording in his text to emphasize the seriousness of his deep resentment of Sergeant’s behavior. He stated that Sergeant was guilty of reflecting “illiberally” on his character in a public forum “& refusing to give me that satisfaction, which a gentleman is intitled to; without further ceremony I beg you will meet me at 6 o'clock on Friday morning at the Center-House, armed with a Pair of Pistols.”<sup>280</sup> Bedford believed that the only way to rehabilitate his reputation and prove his honor was to challenge Sergeant to a duel. Sergeant, however, did not accept Bedford’s request for a dawn appointment and instead offered a very different interpretation of the culture of honor. Sergeant believed that congressional privilege protected any words he might have spoken concerning Bedford’s character. The exigencies of a war forced genteel Americans to negotiate changing interpretations of the traditional culture of honor. Were affairs of honor a permissible means of gaining satisfaction from an insult to a gentleman’s reputation, and what words or actions could be construed as insults on the new national stage?

The term affair of honor describes the rituals and negotiations that accompanied a challenge to a duel.<sup>281</sup> Most challenges were resolved before the participants met at dawn,

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<sup>279</sup> John Sullivan to John Adams, September 28, 1777, *Letters and Papers of Major-General John Sullivan*, ed. Otis G. Hammond (Concord: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1930), 1:471.

<sup>280</sup> Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to Gunning Bedford, June 11, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:183. All of the information regarding the duel is contained in the footnotes for Sergeant’s reply to Bedford’s letter.

<sup>281</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 167.

especially during the American Revolution, but every participant knew that death was a potential consequence of defending his character. While most revolutionaries would have agreed that “honor was an all-or-nothing proposition,” they disagreed about what constituted an injury to a person’s reputation.<sup>282</sup> The honor culture became subject to new social and political considerations.<sup>283</sup> Peers began negotiating the new codes and, not surprisingly, radical and conservative revolutionaries offered conflicting interpretations that revealed the wide gulf between officers’ and congressional delegates’ views on the honor code.

The negotiation process centered on a new discussion concerning public versus private character and raised an important question: did politics have to be personal? Could revolutionaries question the performance of their peers without insulting a gentleman’s character? The traditional interpretation of the culture of honor held that a man’s public behavior and private behavior were inseparable and that every action was a demonstration of gentility. Following the complex honor code proved that the elite were the best social and political leaders. Thus, adhering to the code conferred legitimacy on them. As battles were lost during the war and patriots resigned, revolutionaries struggled with how to question the decisions of individuals without insulting their honor. Some revolutionaries believed that, instead of honorable behavior being the key characteristic by which to measure a gentleman’s status, it should be patriotic fervor, competence, or an adherence to the concept of republican virtue. Radicals believed that the war offered an opportunity to distance American society from aristocratic and corrupt British customs. Instead, patriots should attempt to live virtuously for the new republic. Honor would be calculated by one’s devotion to a free government, instead of

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<sup>282</sup> Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character*, 52.

<sup>283</sup> Kane, *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland, 1541-1641*, 8. Kane’s discussion of an honor culture adapting to changing circumstances in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has influenced my interpretation of the circumstances that revolutionaries faced in the 1770s. Also Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character*, 52-53.

wearing the proper clothing or displaying good manners. Radical reasoning rankled conservatives, who believed that the combination of the culture of honor and elite authority would provide stability during a time of tumult and transition. Conservatives felt that even though honor disputes provoked many tensions during the war, the code provided a common social language that cut through regional differences and set a communal standard for the future leaders of America. It was expected that the young gentlemen serving in the Continental Army would eventually become politicians and civic leaders.

Delegates used the guidelines of the honor code as a foundation for the legislative structure of the Continental Congress. The emphasis on committee systems and open-floor debate allowed every gentleman's voice to be heard in order to prevent injured feelings. Delegates also hoped to use committees and debate to combat the growth of factions which they believed were detrimental to the political system. In 1774 and 1775, the new national legislature brought together different ideological perspectives and congressmen split into radical and conservative groupings based on their different views about the importance of the honor code and of declaring independence from Great Britain. Legislators acknowledged the diversity of opinions in Philadelphia by instituting and revering congressional privilege. Legislative privilege protected freedom of speech during debates. Politicians thought that they should be allowed to express any opinion during the course of debate and not fear prosecution.<sup>284</sup>

Congressional privilege was a controversial issue in the eighteenth-century honor culture because words could easily damage a gentleman's reputation. Politicians wanted the legislative floor to be an exception to the code, but many challenges were nevertheless issued because of opinions expressed in that public forum. Supposedly, Congress had sworn its members to

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<sup>284</sup> Anonymous, "They Shall Not Be Questioned...": Congressional Privilege to Inflict Verbal Injury," *Stanford Law Review* 3 (1951): 486. Legislative privilege was a legal precedent adopted from the British Parliament that stated that no member could be sued for opinions expressed in debate.

secrecy by having delegates promise not to repeat any comments made during open debate. But the pull of colonial gossip and friendship networks proved too strong. Gentlemen were frequently informed when congressmen criticized their actions or decisions, a violation of the promise of secrecy and congressional privilege. This flow of information created many of the initial problems in the Schuyler-Gates controversy and was the reason Gunning Bedford issued a challenge to Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant for words spoken by the latter in Congress.

As congressmen tried to negotiate congressional privilege and the demands of reputational politics, the military defended the strict guidelines of genteel honor to prove their elite status and bring order to the chaos of military camps. The difference in interpretation between the civil authority and military officials of the stringent requirements of honor created a volatile combination.<sup>285</sup> While some radical revolutionaries were trying to fashion a new American culture, most officers clung ever more tightly to the strictures of an honor code influenced by their reading of eighteenth-century military manuals. These manuals implicitly encouraged duels as a way for officers to prove their elite status and character. Officers' conception of the culture of honor inculcated sensitivity over rank and promotion. Revolutionaries believed public recognition equated with respectability. State legislatures conferred recognition and respect on civilians by electing them to serve as congressional delegates in Philadelphia. Officers craved national renown, as well. When officers were denied promotions or were notified that their reputations were being disparaged on the congressional floor, they grew upset and spoke to their friends about the options available to them to preserve their honor. Communication with friends was a key component of the mediation process, usually the first step in resolving an honor dispute. General Weedon's letter to George Washington in the spring of 1778 highlights how military officers reached out to their friendship networks.

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<sup>285</sup> Carp, *To Starve an Army at Pleasure*, 155-165.

Weedon informed Washington that, because he felt he had been dishonored by a congressional decision, he had “advised with many friends on the Subject.”<sup>286</sup> After conferring with them to discuss his options, Weedon resigned his commission to protest the injury to his reputation.

Weedon chose resignation because he had no direct outlet for his anger; there was no specific congressional delegate to challenge to a duel. If, however, an officer did decide that a duel was the only appropriate action to preserve his reputation, then an affair of honor began.

Duels were a controversial element of the culture of honor and many gentlemen disagreed over whether duels were the apotheosis of elite status or a foolhardy ritual that cut short too many lives. Historians have discussed the divergent views of northern and southern colonists about the supremacy of the duel in resolving disputes.<sup>287</sup> But, as Joanne Freeman in *Affairs of Honor* argues, though many gentlemen may have condemned dueling in the abstract, when faced with a direct challenge, they participated in the ritual to save their public character.<sup>288</sup> Delegates banned the practice of dueling in the original Articles of War to prevent unnecessary casualties. They knew that the close confines of camp could provoke many petty disputes. A year later, Edward Rutledge of South Carolina proposed altering the Articles of War to allow for duels. He wrote, “I proposed to strike out that Article which prevents the sending of

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<sup>286</sup> George Weedon to George Washington, April 13, 1778, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 14:503.

<sup>287</sup> For more on the Southern honor culture and how it influenced national politics see, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* and Charles Royster, *Light-Horse Harry Lee and the Legacy of the American Revolution*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981). Some New England delegates believed dueling was purely a southern phenomenon but, as the war dragged on and reputations were subject to questioning, delegates from every region turned to affairs of honor to validate their character. William Ellery, representative from Rhode Island, confided to Oliver Wolcott, representative from Connecticut, after learning about a duel between Button Gwinnett, president of Georgia and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Brigadier General Lachlan McIntosh, that “we ought to be thankful to our Education and Climate that we are not forced out of Life in this Way.” William Ellery to Oliver Wolcott, June 16, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:199. McIntosh fatally wounded Gwinnett in the duel and was acquitted of murder. He then continued to serve in the Continental Army until the end of the war. For further information about the Gwinnett-McIntosh duel see George Walton to George Washington, August 5, 1777, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 10:513-514.

<sup>288</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 169.

Challenges, and pressed it as a Measure that would tend to make their officers Gentlemen, or at least induce them to act as such, whilst in Company with Gentlemen.”<sup>289</sup> Consistent with eighteenth-century mores, Rutledge believed that knowing a duel was the ultimate outcome of disparaging a person’s reputation forced men to act more genteelly.

While dueling was technically illegal in the Continental Army, many junior officers engaged in affairs of honor throughout the course of the war. Small glimpses of officers dueling can be gathered from Washington’s General Orders in which he either discussed the courts-martial convened to punish duelers or reiterated that the Articles of War prohibited dueling.<sup>290</sup> Major factors that increased the number of duels were soldiers living in close quarters and engaging in heavy drinking. Lieutenant James McMichael recorded in his diary that “our soldiers drank freely of spirituous liquors. They have chiefly got a disorder, which at camp is called the Barrel Fever, which differs in its effects from any other fever—its concomitants are black eyes and bloody noses.”<sup>291</sup> Hard liquor filled soldiers with liquid courage for the battlefield as well as for the dueling grounds. But, many soldiers, after they sobered up, offered the proper apologies to end an affair of honor before shots were exchanged.

The culture of honor stipulated strict guidelines for conducting affairs of honor and gentlemen fought duels to prove that they were worthy of their elite status. Gentlemen believed honor was worth their lives. According to the rules, challenges should never be offered in the heat of the moment but instead reflect a calm, rational consideration fueled by resolute resentment. The eighteenth-century code dictated that a gentleman should never want to kill his

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<sup>289</sup> Edward Rutledge to Robert R. Livingston, August 19, 1776, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 5:26-27. Thomas Stone of Maryland seconded the proposal, but Congress never agreed to legalize dueling in the officer corps.

<sup>290</sup> General Orders, July 10, 1775, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 1:82. General Orders, January 26, 1778, *Ibid.*, 13:349. General Orders, August 31, 1778, *Ibid.*, 16:433. These entries are only a few examples of Washington discussing dueling in his General Orders to the army.

<sup>291</sup> James McMichael, “Diary of Lieutenant James McMichael, of the Pennsylvania Line, 1776-1778,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 16 (1892), 139.

opponent. Killing in a duel was not murder but, rather, a rarefied ritual highlighting the social superiority of the gentry.<sup>292</sup> In fact, an army court dropped the charges of dueling against Captain Silleron because he had issued his challenge “immediately, as it proceeded from the instantaneous Resentment of an incensed Gentleman and was not sent on cool reflection,” which the code of honor demanded. The court-martial was therefore of the “opinion that Captain Silleron has not been guilty of a breach of the Article of War which prohibits sending challenges and do determine that he does not merit Censure.”<sup>293</sup> In other words, senior officers believed Silleron had not issued a true challenge since he had not followed the proper protocol of an affair of honor. The officers of the court understood the technical details of a formal challenge and believed that Silleron had not acted in the proper spirit of a gentleman. In deciding as they did, however, they denied him his genteel status.

Though Congress had declared dueling illegal, officers found loopholes by which to escape prosecution. Toleration of the loopholes indicated the army’s willingness to abide by the terms of the honor code in spite of legal sanctions. Washington, as commander-in-chief, tacitly encouraged the use of duels by rarely punishing officers for affairs of honor.<sup>294</sup> Custom dictated that duels should be carried out discreetly to avoid the attention of others until the conflict was resolved. Officers were only prosecuted if caught flagrantly violating the Articles of War or if a duelist died. Patrick Henry interceded on behalf of a family friend who had killed his opponent in a duel, asking Washington if the junior officer would face prosecution upon returning to the

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<sup>292</sup> Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*; Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor* discussed the ways in which the rituals involved in dueling upheld the honor code and how by allowing affairs of honor fed into the elite’s desire to preserve public character. Also Pieter Spierenburg, “Masculinity, Violence, and Honor: An Introduction” in *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*, 8-9.

<sup>293</sup> General Orders, August 3, 1778, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 16:224. Washington approved the court’s judgment and the senior officers’ interpretation that Captain Silleron’s actions violated the code of honor and therefore, it was not a legitimate challenge.

<sup>294</sup> Michael Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence Was Fought*, 75. Stephenson discussed how “Gerard de Rayneval, the French Minister to the United States wrote in March 1779 that ‘The rage for dueling here has reached an incredible and scandalous point.’”

army. Rather than condemning the duel, Washington replied that, “If Mr White returns to the Army I must be under the necessity of taking notice of his unhappy Affair with Mr Greene—I cannot say whether the friends of the deceased will appear to prosecute, if they do not, I shall have discharged my duty and the thing will pass off.”<sup>295</sup> Occasionally Washington publicly denounced dueling in his general orders, most likely because dueling depleted the officer corps. In January 1778, he worried that granting pardons to duelists condoned their behavior and he reiterated in official orders that affairs of honor were “directly repugnant to our own Articles of War but discouraged by all Military Nations as subversive of good order, discipline and harmony.”<sup>296</sup>

Even as Washington proclaimed dueling illegal, several of his aides-de-camp engaged in affairs of honor to preserve Washington’s public reputation. As commander-in-chief, Washington presented a façade that adhered to the Articles of War crafted by congressional committee, but privately he accepted that challenges were necessary to protect a man’s reputation. Washington’s aides-de-camp and junior officers actually engaged in duels on his behalf. While the aides-de-camp most likely hero-worshipped Washington and were willing to sacrifice their lives for him, Washington also represented their opportunity for power and prestige.<sup>297</sup> Their military fortunes were tied to Washington’s success. If he had been replaced as commander-in-chief, they would have lost access to power because Gates already had his coterie of officers to whom he gave preference and promotion. Colonel John Laurens, the son of

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<sup>295</sup> George Washington to Patrick Henry, October 14, 1778, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 17:374. White returned to camp and Washington decreed that he needed to be prosecuted according to the Articles of War, but no record of charges or a court trial have been found.

<sup>296</sup> General Orders, January 26, 1778, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 13:350.

<sup>297</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 182. Freeman discusses the role of political chiefs in the early republic and how their followers, in exchange for patronage, defended their chiefs in person, in print, and on the field of honor. Aides-de-camp displayed similar behavior during the revolution for their senior officers. See also, Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 140-181, for a discussion of the officers’ loyalty to Washington and more details on the Conway Cabal.



Henry Laurens, a former president of the Continental Congress, fought a duel with Major General Charles Lee over Lee speaking about “General Washington in the grossest and most opprobrious terms of personal abuse.”<sup>298</sup> Brigadier General John Cadwalader also initiated an affair of honor with Major General Thomas Conway because of remarks that Conway had made about Washington to Gates in a private letter. Cadwalader shot Conway through the mouth and bragged that, although the duel did not end in death, he had “stopped the damned rascal’s lying tongue at any rate.”<sup>299</sup>

The confrontation between Colonel Daniel Morgan and Richard Peters, the secretary of the Board of War, discussed earlier, is another example of officers’ loyalty to Washington, their commander-in-chief. To Colonel Morgan, Peters was the symbol of the Conway Cabal and one of the sources of the rumors that Congress was attempting to replace Washington with Horatio Gates. After that confrontation with Morgan, Peters, exasperated, fumed that “I don’t see how any Man of Feeling or Sentiment can continue in a public Department where every measure is looked upon with a jaundiced Eye and of course all Mistakes are magnified into Sins political and moral.”<sup>300</sup> Peters’s complaint reflected a growing problem in Congress because delegates who wished to discuss openly why the war was going so poorly, found it difficult to do so without stirring up resentment in the military. Of course, trying to divorce a gentleman’s public reputation from his private character was not something every delegate wished to see accomplished.

Proposals to replace the honor code with the principles of republican virtue as the key guideline for conduct prompted considerable debate in both Congress and the army. Should the

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<sup>298</sup> John Fell, delegate from New Jersey, briefly described the cause of the duel between Laurens and Lee in his diary on December 23, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 11:372. He then discussed the ongoing investigation of William Thompson’s altercation with Thomas McKean in a coffeehouse, which will be analyzed shortly.

<sup>299</sup> Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 162.

<sup>300</sup> Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography*, 171.

military be disciplined for challenging congressmen over words spoken in debate? Did congressional privilege create a loophole in the culture of honor under the guise of protecting freedom of speech? Legislators argued that congressional privilege promoted a code of behavior that allowed for open discussion.<sup>301</sup> True gentlemen would not abuse congressional privilege to harm their opponents' reputations, but as always, there was room for interpretation of what specifically, constituted an insult to a man's character. Gentlemen brought with them to Congress and the army their own notions about congressional privilege and the honor code. The premium placed on freedom of debate clashed with the military's increasing sensitivity over their underwhelming wartime performance. This situation was a recipe for trouble and affairs of honor appealed to officers who believed that certain delegates had stretched the boundaries of congressional privilege with an aim to harm their reputations.

When Gunning Bedford wrote his initial challenge to Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant, he emphasized that Sergeant had refused to give him the satisfaction "which a gentleman is intitled to."<sup>302</sup> Sergeant's response to Bedford's initial letter seemed calculated to add insult to Bedford's injury because, instead of apologizing, he wrote "I do not recollect mentioning your Character or Name on any Occasion unless in Congress in the Course of Business. For my Conduct there, I conceive I am answerable only to that Body & to my Constituents."<sup>303</sup> He then offered a brief, apologetic statement, saying that "I flatter myself however that no illiberal Expressions have escaped me there respecting either You or any other subject." By most standards, Sergeant's words would not have been considered a thorough enough apology to end the affair of honor. In fact, it seems that Bedford did not want an apology to end the crisis.

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<sup>301</sup> Kane, *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland, 1541-1641*, Kane's text shaped my understanding of how the concept of honor was used to create a community among the elite. The elites then created a code of behavior to regulate their relationships.

<sup>302</sup> Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to Gunning Bedford, June 11, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:183.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:183.

Instead, he wanted a duel to prove his honor to all of his opponents in Congress. Unfortunately, the words that actually provoked Bedford's challenge have not been preserved for the historical record. Bedford, however, had written Washington six months before his problems with Sergeant and discussed his unhappiness with his job in the Muster Master Department. He believed that "the Congress, from their little attention to the department, I am convinced, must in a great measure be ignorant of the nature & importance of it."<sup>304</sup> His complaint about congressional inattention was the result of his opinion that "the pay annexed to the office, is by no means such as will support the dignity of it, or even the character of a gentleman; & what is more mortifying, every Deputy in the Department, receives the same, down to Deputies of Deputy; they make no distinction."<sup>305</sup> Clearly a conservative gentleman, Bedford wanted a promotion to the rank of colonel to enhance his social status and receive a pay raise. Perhaps a debate in Congress over Bedford's performance in the Muster Master Department or a comment questioning his petition for promotion triggered his resentment against Sergeant.<sup>306</sup>

After receiving Sergeant's reply, Bedford wrote another letter in even harsher terms to his opponent. Bedford's letter merits careful examination because it combines the traditional, ritualistic language of a challenge to a duel with an expression of the military's resentment of congressional privilege. He began by reiterating that "[T]he reputation of a gentleman is not to be trifled with; you have attempted to injure mine, for which I expect the satisfaction of a man of honor."<sup>307</sup> He then explained his resentment against Congress and the delegates' behavior. He

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<sup>304</sup> Gunning Bedford to George Washington, January 20, 1777, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 8:112.

<sup>305</sup> Gunning Bedford to George Washington, January 15, 1777, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 8:73.

<sup>306</sup> Gunning Bedford to George Washington, January 20, 1777, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 8:112. "Col. Moylan has told me, you were so good, as to tel[I] him you would get him the pay & rank of Colonel, if he continued in the Office. If your Excellency could think proper to make that the line with respect to me, I should think myself under many additional Obligations."

<sup>307</sup> Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant to Gunning Bedford, June 11, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:183.

believed that Sergeant's letter was a "mean & pittiful" evasion and "so far from being an extenuation of the insult, the place where the aspersion was made rather heightens it. I have been much abused & illtreated by the arbitrary & ungenerous conduct of that house."<sup>308</sup> Bedford confessed that he had "long wished to lay my hands on some one particular member, whome I could prove had traduced my character; I am at length so happy as to have fixed on one; & could only wish he was an object more worthy of resentment." Although he focused on deliberately insulting Sergeant, Bedford was also attacking the civil authority. He was clearly looking for an opportunity to challenge any delegate to avenge his honor, behavior that bent the rules of the honor code. Sergeant eventually became the target of his anger but, really, Bedford was already predisposed to dislike Congress because of his dissatisfaction in the Muster Master Department. He ended his letter by insisting:

I am by no means satisfied, Sir, with your answer. I will accept of no excuse whatever, & shall expect no further trouble in the matter. If you refuse to make me the satisfaction I ask, or to meet me at the place appointed, remember I shall treat you as a scoundrel wherever I meet you, & publish you to the world as a person destitute of every spark of honor, a poltroon & a coward.<sup>309</sup>

The last paragraph of the letter was meant to impress Sergeant with Bedford's resolute resentment, by demanding that Sergeant acknowledge that this was an affair of honor between gentlemen. The threat of publishing Sergeant as a person devoid of honor was the ultimate insult in the eighteenth century. If he published an account of the disagreement, Bedford would have been publicly defending his honor and would have destroyed Sergeant's reputation.<sup>310</sup> Sergeant

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 7:183.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 7:183.

<sup>310</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 172-173. Freeman discusses the option of publicly proclaiming your enemy lacks honor in a newspaper. Sometimes this action could provoke the affair of honor that the challenger wanted, since it notified the world that the code of honor was being violated. Washington knew the power of newspapers to destroy public reputations and created a specific punishment for officers found guilty of cowardice or fraud, the officer was cashiered from the army and "the Crime, Name, Place of Abode & Punishment of the Delinquent be published in the News Papers in & about the Camp & of the Colony from which the Offender came...it shall be deemed scandalous

had probably always intended to submit Bedford's first letter to Congress to ask how to deal with the situation because it involved a challenge to the sanctity of congressional privilege. But, after the second letter threatened to charge him publicly with cowardice, he eagerly brought Bedford's letters to the attention of other congressmen.

Bedford's challenge sparked a horrified and explosive reaction among Sergeant's congressional colleagues on June 12, 1777. Members drafted several resolves to express their anger at Bedford's conduct and that reiterate the importance of congressional privilege. That day, passions grew so heated that Thomas Burke had to propose a motion to prevent Congress from voting on any of the resolutions until the next day, to prevent overly harsh action against Bedford.<sup>311</sup> One of the resolves proposed that "the said Gunning Bedford Esqr. be taken into Custody of the Door keeper of this Congress, and committed to the Prison in this City, for his Contempt and Breach of Priviledge aforesaid, untill the further order of Congress."<sup>312</sup> Although that proposal was voted down, it reflected congressmen's hostility toward the officer corps' continual complaints.<sup>313</sup> Delegates commended Sergeant's actions for refusing to participate in an affair of honor, and offered a resolution that "the said Member, in laying the said Letters before Congress, did what his Duty to this House and the State he represents required of him."<sup>314</sup> They voted to denounce publicly Bedford's behavior, agreeing that "the Letter...contains false, and scandalous Imputations against this House, unbecoming the Character of a Person who would wish to be considered as a Friend to the Liberties of America." Clearly, delegates were

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for any Officer to associate with him." Minutes of the Conference, October 18-24, 1775, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 2:195.

<sup>311</sup> June 12, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:459.

<sup>312</sup> John Adams proposed this harsh measure against Bedford. June 13, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:460.

<sup>313</sup> Other resolves insisted, "That it is the Right and the Duty of this Congress, to vindicate its own Authority from Contempts, and the Priviledges of all its Members," or "That the Freedom of Speech and Debate in Congress ought not to be impeached or questioned in any Court or Place, out of Congress." *Ibid.*, 8:459.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:459.

incensed that military officers were not recognizing and respecting congressional privilege and were challenging the civil authority. Bedford, for his part, argued that freedom of debate did not allow congressmen to question an officer's reputation and that such behavior was not protected by legislative privilege.

On June 13, Congress officially resolved to summon Bedford the next day to appear before Congress and explain his conduct.<sup>315</sup> When Bedford arrived, Congress was ready and eager to defend its honor. In this tense atmosphere, Bedford tried to explain his reasons for the challenge. Congressmen then vigorously debated the appropriate disciplinary measures to impose on him for his challenge to the civil authority. The official resolution declared that "Bedford has been guilty of a high breach of the privileges of this house, in sending a challenge to one of the members of this house, for words spoken by him in this house, in the course of debate: Ordered, That Mr. G. Bedford...is expected he will ask pardon of the house, and of the member challenged."<sup>316</sup> Bedford offered his apologies to Congress and Sergeant, probably still furious that he would not receive the traditional satisfaction accorded to gentlemen by the honor code.

The lengthy war for independence created circumstances that encouraged the military to develop an understanding of honor that differed markedly from that of Congress. These divergent conceptions of the culture of honor exacerbated the tensions between officers and delegates. Congress had just defended its authority to protect "members from insult for any thing by them said or done in Congress, in the exercise of their duty, which is a privilege essential to the freedom of debate, and to the faithful discharge of the great trust reposed in them

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<sup>315</sup> June 13, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:461.

<sup>316</sup> June 14, 1777, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 8:466.

by their constituents.” But, the matter was not settled, and shortly after the end of the Bedford-Sergeant affair, a new dispute broke out between another military officer and a congressman.

In the fall of 1777, Thomas Burke expressed his doubts in Congress about Major General John Sullivan’s ability to lead troops, doubts that sprang from Burke’s having witnessed him in action at the battle of Brandywine.<sup>317</sup> Burke’s comments started a three-year affair of honor between him and Sullivan. Sullivan adhered to the traditional culture of honor and believed that the code provided guidelines and stability for the officer corps. His adherence to the traditional guidelines got him into trouble several times, first while he served first as a major general in the Continental Army and then as a congressman from New Hampshire. As he once told Washington, “I am by no means an Enemy to Duels & most Sincerely wish that Congress had Encouraged Instead of prohibiting them.”<sup>318</sup> His belief in using affairs of honor to resolve disputes actually caused him trouble early in his career because he ignored or was ignorant of the rules that dictated who was a proper opponent to challenge to a duel. At the start of his military service he had “agreed to meet an officer of Inferiour Rank at a Time & place he was pleased to appoint for doing what he upon the Spot Acknowledged was Strictly my Duty for this I was Blamed by officers of my own Rank.”<sup>319</sup> Senior officers chastised Sullivan because they worried that his behavior established “a precedent in our Army unknown in others & which would Effectually destroy all Distinction of Rank & Superiority in Commission.”<sup>320</sup> The senior officers were not worried that his conduct violated the Articles of War; instead, they were concerned that his conduct ignored the rules of the honor code. Affairs of honor were reserved

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<sup>317</sup> John Sayle Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 83-88. Watterson describes the 1777 confrontation between Burke and Sullivan but he does not discuss the controversy over congressional privilege or what role honor played in the dispute.

<sup>318</sup> John Sullivan to George Washington, July 5, 1777, *Papers of George Washington. Revolutionary War Series*, 10:202.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:202.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:202.

for gentlemen of equal rank to prove their elite status, and junior officers needed to earn the privilege and a promotion to participate. Sullivan discussed this particular story with Washington to explain why he needed Washington's approval in his dispute with a staff surgeon.<sup>321</sup> Sullivan wanted Washington to validate his actions, as proof that he had acted honorably and within the guidelines of the military, because he could not challenge the irksome doctor, his social inferior.<sup>322</sup> Sullivan's sensitivity to slights against his character was shaped by his belief that his decisions and actions as a major general were inextricably linked to his public reputation. His temper, then, exploded when he began to receive reports from his friends in Congress that Burke was publicly questioning his military ability.

Burke argued that Sullivan's tactical mistakes during the battle had "snatched from my Hopes the Glory of a Compleat Victory which was certainly in our Power if Sullivan had not by his Folly and misconduct ruined the Fortune of the Day."<sup>323</sup> Burke witnessed Sullivan's troops being outflanked and overrun by the enemy. He attributed Sullivan's "[M]iscarriages" to a "total want of Military Genius, and to One of that sort of understandings which is unable to take a full comprehensive view of an object, but employs it's Activity in Subtle Senseless refinement."<sup>324</sup> After criticizing Sullivan's military performance, Burke proposed a formal resolution recalling Sullivan "from the army, until the enquiry, heretofore ordered into his conduct, shall be duly made."<sup>325</sup> Burke's proposal was drastic because it would order the recall of a major general during the fight to save Philadelphia. Although Burke was frustrated with Sullivan's leadership

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 10:202. The staff surgeon was upset because Sullivan had forwarded complaints about the surgeon's management of the medical staff to other medical officers without allowing the surgeon the opportunity to defend himself. Sullivan told the surgeon that he was following military protocol and had not intentionally insulted the surgeon.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 10:202. Sullivan concluded his letter by stating, "I am always prepared to Defend myself against personal Attack but I think this an Insult of Such a kind as Deserves a publick Decision. I Therefore Take the freedom to apply to Your Excellency for that purpose."

<sup>323</sup> Thomas Burke to Richard Caswell, September 17, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 7:680.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 7:680.

<sup>325</sup> September 14, 1777, *Journals of Continental Congress*, 8:742.



at Brandywine, delegates decided that the formal military inquiry would investigate his decisions at the Battle of Staten Island in August 1776.<sup>326</sup> Delegates may have believed that Brandywine was too recent and confusing to discuss rationally. They also may have wanted to establish a record of Sullivan's incompetence before dismissing him from military service.<sup>327</sup> Many delegates and military officers believed that Burke was guilty of character assassination because he leveled serious charges against Sullivan's reputation without proof from an inquiry. Because delegates were unsure about the validity of Burke's accusations, they agreed to Washington's request that Sullivan's recall be left to his discretion and judgment.<sup>328</sup> Sullivan pushed for an inquiry at the earliest possible date to clear his reputation. He also threatened to resign, in order to announce publicly his frustration and unhappiness with Congress.

News spread quickly of Sullivan's struggle to protect his reputation. He wrote letters to friends, asking for their support in his battle against Congress. Other frustrated officers willingly pledged to support him because they were also dissatisfied with Congress's treatment of the military. As Major William Willcocks promised, "I had determined, so far as my influence, and knowledge of the facts enabled me, to rescue your reputation, from the undeserved calumny thrown upon it by the captious and ungenerous multitude."<sup>329</sup> To fight Burke's accusations, Sullivan collected letters that testified to his gentlemanly character and military ability. He sought to save his reputation with the dedication of a lawyer (which was his occupation before

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<sup>326</sup> Court of Inquiry, October 10, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:482-532, and Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 84.

<sup>327</sup> I suggest this motive, influenced by Rossie's research in *The Politics of Command*. Rossie explains that delegates wanted a formal inquiry before dismissing Schuyler in July 1777 because they were worried about offending his honor, but they also wanted proof of his incompetence to make their decision easier, see pages 162-164.

<sup>328</sup> September 16, 1777, *Journals of Continental Congress*, 8:749.

<sup>329</sup> William Willcocks to John Sullivan, September 25, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:457. Another example is Adam Stephen's letter of September 20 in which Stephen wrote, "I am astonished, at a Report in Camp, whispering, that you are Suspended by a Resolve of Congress; and That your Intention is to resign. — It is alarming to me, and I suppose to ev'ry Officer of Spirit, & Reputation: — If the Congress have taken upon themselves to suspend you; they seem to have forgotten from whence the present Evil, partly, Originated; Namely the Determination of British Government, to Condemn Americans without being heard." *Ibid.*, 1:455.

the war), compiling a legal brief for court. In a lengthy public letter to John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, Sullivan explained his military decisions at both Brandywine and Staten Island. In the letter, his frustration and resentment are palpable as he struggled to acknowledge the civil authority's right to investigate the military while still protecting his honor from what he considered unwarranted slander. He warned Hancock and other delegates that, "if the Reputation of General officers is thus to be sported with upon Every vague & Idle Report Those who set Less by their Reputation than myself must Continue in the Service."<sup>330</sup> He portrayed Burke as a troublemaker, who "Don Quixot Like pranced at a Distance from the fight & felt as Little of the Severity of the Engagement as he knows about the Disposition of our Troops or that of the Enemy."<sup>331</sup> By linking Burke to Don Quixote, Sullivan suggested that Congress was currently acting upon the words of a delusional delegate who was unable to comprehend the reality of war and the imperatives of honor.

After finishing the public letter to Congress, Sullivan also wrote to John Adams, begging him to make sure that his letter was, indeed, read aloud to all the delegates. Sullivan relied on his friendship network in Congress to keep him informed and to help him in his fight against Burke's accusations. Sullivan asked Adams to "call upon Congress to do me justice, and restore me that reputation which they have in some degree deprived me of."<sup>332</sup> Sullivan was so resentful that he threatened that, if he failed to redeem his character at the inquiry, he would "quit the service, and employ my tongue, my pen, and every other engine that may be found necessary, to save my reputation."<sup>333</sup> He even warned Adams that other officers were frustrated with recent congressional policies and actions because they worried that their reputations, too, could be

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<sup>330</sup> Sullivan to John Hancock, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:462.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:462.

<sup>332</sup> John Sullivan to John Adams, September 28, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:470, and Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 86.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:470.

damaged without proof. Sullivan and his fellow officers believed that congressmen were violating the culture of honor and that there should be consequences for these offenses. Sullivan ended with a personal appeal: “I know that, as a friend, you will make the proper allowances for my feelings. I rely upon your exertions to bring Congress to do justice to your much injured friend and humble servant.”<sup>334</sup> Sullivan’s letter is an example of a gentleman asking a friend to engage in mediation on his behalf. The mediator could help resolve an affair of honor before a challenge to a duel became the only outcome of the dispute. Sullivan most likely knew that Gunning Bedford had been severely chastised only a few months before for challenging Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant and that therefore a duel was not an option in September 1777. He could only fight Burke with words and the support of his friends in Congress.

Sullivan’s military inquiry was held on October 10, 1777, several days after the battle of Germantown. After two days of testimony, the court acquitted Sullivan “of any unsoldier like Conduct in the expedition to Staten Island”.<sup>335</sup> After the military court cleared his reputation, Sullivan’s friends in Congress also denied Burke’s charges of incompetence. Elbridge Gerry then encouraged Sullivan to retract his threat of resignation. Gerry, a supporter of congressional privilege and a more ideologically radical delegate, disliked the military’s reliance on resignation as a form of protest. He valued republican virtue over honor as a measure of a gentleman’s status, and equated resigning with cowardice. He wrote to Sullivan that he would “prove a Coward” if he “sank under unjust reproach” and submitted “to the servile humiliating Terms of your Cruel foes, who have Attacked you with the poisonous darts of Calumny in order to effect the very purpose of your quitting the Army which in the close of your letter you tamely yield to

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 1:471.

<sup>335</sup> Eliphalet Dyer to John Sullivan, October 11, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:532, and Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 85.

them.”<sup>336</sup> Gerry and Sullivan possessed two different understandings of the culture of honor, but they both acknowledged the importance of public reputation. They disagreed, though, on how men earned and protected their reputations.

On October 12, the same day the military court acquitted Sullivan, Burke wrote to him to explain why he believed Sullivan was an incompetent officer. In his letter, Burke tried to divorce the personal from the professional. He argued that his critique of Sullivan was not a character assassination but a rational and logical attempt to weed out bad generals to help the war effort. Burke considered “it as one Essential part of my duty to Attend to the Appointments of the Army, and where I perceive that any person so unqualified as I deem you to be has got into a Command, where Incompetence may be productive of disasters and disgrace, it is my duty to Endeavour at removing him.”<sup>337</sup> In language guaranteed to infuriate an already sensitive military officer, Burke reiterated that he had not attacked Sullivan’s personal courage because “I had no knowledge of it, and I was Cautious to Say nothing unjust or unnecessary.”<sup>338</sup> He insisted that his primary objection to Sullivan was his “want of Sufficient Tallents, and I consider it as your misfortune, not fault. It is my Duty, as far as I can, to prevent its being the Misfortune of my Country.”<sup>339</sup> Burke concluded by warning Sullivan that he had not appreciated his words about Burke’s behavior at Brandywine. He felt Sullivan’s Don Quixote comparison had attacked his private character and made insinuations about his honor.<sup>340</sup> He further asserted that “the manner of those Expressions which I suppose you meant for Wit and Sarcasm are as unbecoming the

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 1:532. Gerry also engaged in a bit of a conspiracy theory when he tried to protect Sullivan’s commission. He hinted that Burke was attacking Sullivan as retaliation because the New England delegates had pushed for Schuyler’s replacement. Now, Schuyler’s friends wanted their revenge: “Sch—ler and St—C—r were continually brot on the stage, and no one but a N E—d could satisfye their resentments, and to have taken one of a low Carracter, would not answer their purpose.”

<sup>337</sup> Thomas Burke to John Sullivan, October 12, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:535.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 1:535.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 1:536.

<sup>340</sup> Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 86.

Soldier as the Gentleman, and Inconsistent with that plain and dignified Simplicity which ought to be the Stile of persons in either rank.”<sup>341</sup> With Sullivan offended and Burke resentful of his words, their lengthy affair of honor began.<sup>342</sup> Even though Burke believed that a man’s personal and public characters should be kept separate, he was unable to practice his own advice.

Sullivan never accepted the notion of the sanctity of congressional privilege because it violated his understanding of the culture of honor. As a military officer and social conservative, he believed that there should be no distinction between one’s private and public reputations. As he complained to Alexander McDougall, another major general in the Continental Army,

I am not Clearly convinced that a member of Congress has a right to Take...Liberties...with the Character of an officer and I think I can never be brought to believe that he can have a Priviledge of writing to any Gentleman *Accusing* him of want of Capacity & Every thing that would make him contemptible in the Eyes of the World & the other be Barred from replying with Spirit because his Accuser was a member of Congress...I therefore considered myself at full Liberty at Least to return Acrimony for Acrimony.”<sup>343</sup>

Sullivan rejected the delegates’ claims that congressional privilege was necessary to protect their freedom of debate, arguing that they were abusing the system deliberately to attack the honor of military officers. After the Bedford affair, Sullivan knew that he could not directly challenge Burke to a duel, but he did not hesitate to say that, when the war was over or when he was no longer an officer, he would be glad to meet him on the field of honor.<sup>344</sup> In his response to Burke’s letter, Sullivan deliberately insulted him by claiming “as to your opinion of my Military abilities, it can give me no uneasiness untill you give me better evidence of your Capacity to judge in matters of this nature.” As Sullivan had warned his friend, he would gladly exchange

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 1:537.

<sup>342</sup> Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 86.

<sup>343</sup> Quoted in Kohn, “American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint” in *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War*, 112; italics in the original letter.

<sup>344</sup> John Sullivan to Thomas Burke, October 27, 1777, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 1:566. “but give me leave to assure you, it is not the Last thing I shall say against those who have meddled with my character.”

acrimony for acrimony with Burke.<sup>345</sup>

In April 1778, Sullivan attacked Burke's personal character again, this time by emphasizing that he was not a gentleman of "[C]andor Honor or veracity."<sup>346</sup> This was a direct insult, calculated to fuel the fires of their mutual resentment. He ended his letter ominously, hoping "that Some Fortunate Event may bring us within Reach of Each other when I Shall Take Those measures which appear to me most proper for the person who has so maliciously Endeavoured to injure the Reputation of Sir your most obedient servant."<sup>347</sup> When Burke finally responded to Sullivan's provocative letter in the early fall of 1780, he detailed how long they had been taunting each other with insults and pledged to end the resentment with a dawn appointment. Burke, true to form, could not resist taunting Sullivan with even more pointed commentary about their respective levels of gentlemanly conduct: "I hope you will perceive that, if I exceed you in nothing else, I do in temper and the manners of a Gentleman."<sup>348</sup> He concluded by taunting Sullivan that he understood that "the Idea of your own Eminence is very pleasing to you; I wish not to deprive you of it. Enjoy it, Sir with my hearty good will."<sup>349</sup>

Then, as coincidence and state legislatures would have it, Burke and Sullivan were elected to serve in the Continental Congress at the same time in late 1780 and early 1781, respectively. After meeting in the chamber, they appointed seconds to negotiate the details of their affair of honor, taking a further step closer to exchanging fire. Hugh Shiell acted as

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 1:566.

<sup>346</sup> John Sullivan to Thomas Burke, April 18, 1778, *Letters and Papers of John Sullivan*, 2:35. Unfortunately, several letters between these two battling revolutionaries have been lost to the historical record.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 2:35.

<sup>348</sup> Thomas Burke to John Sullivan, September 28, 1780, *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 15:86. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr15-0057>. Watterson, in *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, argues that the letter is incorrectly dated and that Burke probably wrote it in 1778 because Sullivan was stationed in Rhode Island, footnote 59, 239.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 15:89.

Burke's second and Alexander McDougall served as Sullivan's second.<sup>350</sup> Burke and Sullivan asked their close friends to serve as seconds to keep the affair of honor a secret because dueling was illegal. According to the *code duello*, seconds acted as mediators and tried to negotiate an apology to end the dispute between the two angered parties. If affairs of honor reached the dueling ground, then mediation had failed, usually because one participant was determined to fight to prove his honor or because the insult was so severe that not even an apology would suffice. Seconds also served as witnesses to testify to each participant's honorable or dishonorable conduct.<sup>351</sup>

Sullivan and Burke left all matters of mediating their affair in the hands of their seconds. The only hint of these negotiations is a single letter from Burke to Shiel, in which he discussed why he was angry with Sullivan and explained on what terms Sullivan must apologize to prevent the duel. Burke insisted that "[T]o prevent, also, all pretence for refinements in future, I will here state the Questions which alone I will agree to submit. Was my Conduct as a member of Congress sufficient provocation for the affront given by General Sullivan in his letter to Congress" and "[W]ere any Asperities in my letters sufficient to Justify the reproachful language in General Sullivan's answers?"<sup>352</sup> Fortunately, the mediators successfully negotiated apologies that were acceptable to both participants, which precluded a dawn appointment.<sup>353</sup>

Burke's and Sullivan's three-year dispute yielded to mediation, but the protracted length of their affair of honor reveals the difficulties that revolutionaries faced in defining public and private characters. Did politicians have the right to declare the privilege of congressional speech

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<sup>350</sup> John Sayle Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 255.

<sup>351</sup> For a detailed account of the role of seconds in a duel, see Freeman's discussion of the Burr-Hamilton duel in *Affairs of Honor*, 176-198; also see Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*, 63-65, and Victor Stater, *Duke Hamilton is Dead!: A Story of Aristocratic Life and Death in Stuart Britain* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

<sup>352</sup> Thomas Burke to Hugh Shiel, Undated 1781(?), *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 15:85-86.

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr15-0056>

<sup>353</sup> Watterson, *Thomas Burke, Restless Revolutionary*, 159.

when they criticized the efforts of patriotic gentlemen in uniform? Burke, who clearly prized freedom of debate, could not forgive Sullivan for his rude comments in public letters and that was why he agreed to meet Sullivan to defend his reputation with pistols. The importance of public reputation drove many of the seemingly irrational decisions of military and civil authorities during the war.<sup>354</sup> The culture of honor constrained the ability of revolutionaries to question incompetent officers and politicians because every critique ultimately devolved into a matter of character.<sup>355</sup>

Still another clash between an officer and a congressman began with a loud altercation in a coffee house between Brigadier General William Thompson and Representative Thomas McKean. Their affair of honor highlights again the importance of congressional privilege, but also addresses the question of whether there could be a distinction between a public and a private quarrel. One evening in November 1778, Thompson deliberately set out to find McKean, intent on confronting him about recent developments concerning prisoner exchange. Thompson's and McKean's verbal exchange has been preserved in the historical record because delegates investigated, for over a month, the words shouted during the altercation. Members of Congress wanted to know if Thompson had deliberately insulted their honor and challenged congressional privilege when he yelled at McKean in the public sphere. Congress interviewed seventeen witnesses to try and reconcile Thompson's and McKean's different memories about what each

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<sup>354</sup> Freeman influenced my argument through her discussion of why Hamilton and Burr were willing to fight a duel in 1804 and why many physical fights broke out in Congress during the 1790s. See her *Affairs of Honor*, 159-198. Kane's *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland* also shaped my understanding of the culture of honor and how important public reputation was to gentlemen. See also Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War for American Independence Was Fought*, 75, Royster, *Light-Horse Harry Lee and the Legacy of the American Revolution*, 30-32.

<sup>355</sup> Carp, in *To Starve the Army at Pleasure* points out that reputational politics played an important part in the attempts by Congress and Washington to reform the quartermaster department in the later years of the war, see especially pages 155-165.



man had said.<sup>356</sup> Witnesses' memories and testimony were, of course, heavily influenced by their friendships with the men involved.

Brigadier General William Thompson stormed into the coffeehouse intent on picking a fight with McKean if for no other reason than that they had a history of conflict. Thompson resented McKean for two reasons: he had once publicly accused Thompson of harboring a deserter from the army (the Carlisle Affair) and McKean had prevented Thompson's exchange as a prisoner of war in September 1778.<sup>357</sup> On November 18, Thompson had just received word that the British army had revoked all Continental Army officers' parole and the officers had to return to New York City. Upon hearing the news, Thompson blamed McKean for his continued prisoner of war status and he began a search for him at coffeehouses popular with congressional delegates.

Parole in the eighteenth century was a military convention that explicitly relied on the honor code to govern the behavior of prisoners of war.<sup>358</sup> Parole was only available to officers and its terms were premised on the assumption that gentlemen should not be forced to endure the same prison conditions as common soldiers.<sup>359</sup> Officers lodged with local families or in boarding houses and received liberty to walk around and visit with one another.<sup>360</sup> Thompson, as a brigadier general, had been allowed to return to his family in Pennsylvania after he swore an oath that he would not fight until he had been exchanged and granted his freedom.<sup>361</sup> To break

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<sup>356</sup> G.S. Rowe, *Thomas McKean: The Shaping of an American Republicanism* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1978), 149.

<sup>357</sup> Rowe, *Thomas McKean*, 147-148.

<sup>358</sup> The workings of the parole system for American officers are discussed in: Betsy Knight, "Prisoner Exchange and Parole in the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991) 201-222; and Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>359</sup> Caroline Cox, in *A Proper Sense of Honor*, argues that this differentiation in prison conditions was predicated on the same belief that established different disciplinary measures for officers and foot soldiers.

<sup>360</sup> Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 73-90.

<sup>361</sup> In Congress, November 23, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 247-248

the terms of parole would have drawn censure from both British and American officers and damaged his reputation.<sup>362</sup>

The issue of prisoner exchange was difficult because Washington and Congress had different ideas about how to negotiate with the British. Washington insistently called for establishing exchange guidelines, but Congress was more reluctant to engage until the British recognized the independence of the United States.<sup>363</sup> Washington also wanted to regain commanders, such as Thompson, who had been on parole for over two years after surrendering in the field during the retreat from Canada in the summer of 1776.<sup>364</sup> Congress, however, appreciated receiving British specie for the upkeep of British prisoners of war and was reluctant to lose this source of reliable revenue.<sup>365</sup> While Congress's reluctance to move forward on prisoner exchange seemed callous to Washington, who wanted to liberate all American prisoners of war, the hard reality that many delegates understood was that, when American soldiers were exchanged, most went home rather than returning to duty. Many American soldiers were physically incapacitated after living on British prison ships and refused to re-enlist if their original terms of enlistment had expired. In contrast, British soldiers released by the United States returned to the field because they served lengthy enlistments.<sup>366</sup>

In September 1778, Thompson had hoped that he would be exchanged for Benjamin Franklin's estranged son the royal governor of New Jersey, but McKean and several other congressmen blocked that proposal and, instead reclaimed John McKinly, president of Delaware, from British custody.<sup>367</sup> Thompson wanted to be exchanged for several reasons: he wished to be

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<sup>362</sup> Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies*, 79.

<sup>363</sup> Knight, "Prisoner Exchange and Parole in the American Revolution," 201.

<sup>364</sup> Rossie, *The Politics of Command* discussed Thompson's battle at the Three Rivers and that he would not be exchanged for several years after his surrender, 99.

<sup>365</sup> Knight, "Prisoner Exchange and Parole in the American Revolution," 204-205.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>367</sup> Rowe, *Thomas McKean*, 147.

able to command troops again; he wanted to receive pay because, as a paroled officer, it was difficult for him to receive his salary; and he had been passed over for promotion while a prisoner of war and he wanted the higher rank to which he felt entitled.<sup>368</sup> After receiving the news that he would have to return to New York City, Thompson decided to vent his frustration on a specific target, perhaps with the aim of provoking a duel.

The investigation started on November 19, 1778, after McKean submitted to Congress a memorial that described Thompson's behavior the previous night in the crowded coffeehouse. He stated that Thompson's behavior was "a breach of Privilege, to have a tendency to destroy the freedom of voting in Congress, and to be a gross insult upon this Honourable Body from one of their officers, and that in so public a place, thinks it his duty as a Member to communicate it to Congress."<sup>369</sup> In his lengthy memorial, McKean repeatedly stressed that throughout the confrontation, Thompson spoke in a loud tone and seemed visibly upset. In contrast, McKean asserted he had conducted himself in a calm and civil manner. According to McKean, his own behavior served as a model of gentility, while Thompson exhibited all the traits of an uncouth military officer who derided congressional authority. McKean also reported that Thompson had in a loud and "imperious tone further said, that the Congress were a parcel of damned Rascals, and that he Mr. McKean was so in particular, which he repeated twice," a key statement that McKean knew would upset the delegates.<sup>370</sup> That sort of language was a harsh insult in the

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<sup>368</sup> Knight, "Prisoner Exchange and Parole in the American Revolution," 211-212. James Wilson to Arthur St. Clair, February 20, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:333, in which Wilson discussed Thompson's predicament: "I am exceedingly hurt that Our deserving Friend General Thompson was passed over: It is Misfortune sufficient to be a Prisoner. I am, however, willing to believe that the only Reason, with many Gentlemen, for omitting him was on Apprehension that a Promotion would increase the Difficulty of his Exchange."

<sup>369</sup> Thomas McKean's Memorial to Congress, November 19, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 11:227.

<sup>370</sup> Thomas McKean's Memorial to Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 11:226.

eighteenth century because it implied that an individual lacked honor and that his conduct was not governed by any moral restraints.<sup>371</sup>

Thompson then escalated the drama of that night by asking McKean “if he was a Gentleman, which Mr. McKean considered to be intended for a challenge, and he then came up to him in an angry manner and touching his shoulder repeated the question.”<sup>372</sup> McKean’s response to this unmistakable invitation to a duel displayed his belief that Thompson was violating congressional privilege: “Mr. McKean told him, that he did not think him a gentleman, that he was his inferior, and behaved like a Bully and a Brute, and that he should make him repent of his conduct.”<sup>373</sup> Professing to be horrified by Thompson’s behavior, McKean announced in Congress his intention to make him repent. Other delegates were also appalled, which was the reason a month-long congressional investigation to determine exactly what Thompson had said that night. Had a military officer directly impugned the honor of Congress in front of the people out of doors?

In a memorial that served as a direct rebuttal to McKean’s testimony, Thompson declared that he had not meant to insult congressional honor. He insisted his altercation with McKean was a private quarrel and bluntly stated, “as to the Charge of calling the Honorable Mr. McKean a Rascal and a villain your memorialist readily acknowledges it.”<sup>374</sup> Congress did not appreciate Thompson’s distinction between a private and public quarrel, especially because the dispute involved a general and a congressman.

The delegates’ investigation into the Thompson-McKean altercation highlights the importance of words to the eighteenth-century revolutionaries. Their primary concern was a

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<sup>371</sup> Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, xvi.

<sup>372</sup> Thomas McKean’s Memorial to Congress, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 11:226.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:226.

<sup>374</sup> William Thompson’s Memorial, November 23, 1778, *Papers of the Continental Congress*, reel 178, 316.

determination of whether Thompson had publicly disparaged Congress during the heated exchange. McKean insisted that Thompson had either said there was a damned set of Rascals in Congress or that Congress was a damned set of Rascals, two phrases that meant very different things to irate congressmen. The first phrase cast aspersions on the honor of the delegates currently serving in Congress by directly stating that there were rascals in Congress. The meaning of a phrase could turn on a preposition for gentlemen sensitive to nuance.<sup>375</sup> If Thompson had uttered the first phrase, then he would have been the third general in two years who had directly challenged the authority of Congress. Also, delegates were keenly aware of all the grumbling about Congress that was common in the army's camps and in the personal letters of its officers. The second phrase was acceptable as a common, if crude, complaint about government and politicians. Though delegates may have resented the implication that Congress was a damned set of rascals, the sentiment would not have directly challenged their collective and individual honor.

On November 23, members of Congress questioned thirteen witnesses about the dispute between Thompson and McKean. The witnesses can be split into three groups: friends of Thompson; friends of McKean; and casual acquaintances who had witnessed what had almost been a brawl. All witnesses were first asked to testify if they had heard "any expressions reflecting upon Congress?"<sup>376</sup> The majority of witnesses declared that they had never heard Thompson mention Congress and that his heated words were only directed at challenging McKean's honor. Many witnesses concurred with Thompson's description of the event, which emphasized that his insults were designed for a private quarrel with McKean. But McKean, like Burke and Sergeant, believed that words spoken in debate could not be used to initiate an affair

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<sup>375</sup> Trees, *The Founding Fathers and The Politics of Character*, 53.

<sup>376</sup> In Congress, Testimony of John Purviance, November 23, 1778, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 11:242.

of honor. Military officers were stymied by this creation of a loophole in the code of honor, which challenged their understanding of genteel conduct and led to much resentment.

The witnesses were divided in their testimony between Thompson's friends, who emphasized the private quarrel aspect, and McKean's friends, who heard Thompson say that he had been "treated in a rascally manner by Congress."<sup>377</sup> Almost all witnesses agreed that it was hard to recall the specifics of the argument because it had escalated so rapidly. Colonel Joseph Deane, in describing the coffeehouse confrontation, recalled how "the House was in Confusion. I thought the gentlemen would come to blows. Upon which I went up and stepped in between them. Many words passed, but cannot particularly recollect them, my attention was taken up to prevent their getting together."<sup>378</sup> Other witnesses tried to avoid repeating the language used by both gentlemen since it was heated and did not reflect well on either Thompson's or McKean's gentility and dignity. One witness recalled how "I heard him [Thompson] say several times to Mr. MK. you are no gentleman and touching him on the shoulder ask him are you a gentleman. Mr MK said not in the sense you mean. I will make your heart ake for this. Genl. T. said, I will make your bones ake for this."<sup>379</sup> The witness then described the heated words relating to the issuance of a summons about the Carlisle Affair: "Gen T[hompson] told Mr MKean he had used him ill, he had sent A summons for him. Mr MK said it was not a summons. Gen. T. said it was. Mr MK said it was not. G T. said it was. Mr MK said, well produce it. G T. said I have not got it. M MK said, What have you done with it. Gen T. said I wiped my arse with it."<sup>380</sup> The witnesses' testimony shows that McKean was not as calm as he had claimed to have been in his memorial to Congress.

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<sup>377</sup> In Congress, Testimony of John Evans, November 23, 1778, *Ibid.*, 11:241.

<sup>378</sup> In Congress, Testimony of Joseph Deane, November 23, 1778, *Ibid.*, 11:241.

<sup>379</sup> In Congress, Testimony of Thomas Bradford, November 23, 1778, *Ibid.*, 11:242.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:243.

After all eyewitnesses had presented their testimony on November 23, Thompson gave a speech in which he described his service in the Continental Army and his frustration over not being exchanged. He ended his speech by reiterating that his confrontation with McKean was personal, not political. That night, he said, “his patience” had “deserted him and under those circumstances he is sensible he expressed himself with some asperity against that gentleman.”<sup>381</sup> Thompson then promised that, “whatever his expressions might be or however they might strike others, he solemnly declares he never meant to abuse or reflect upon the honourable Congress or any of its Members; And is heartily sorry that under any circumstances any expressions could be extorted from him which could be construed to give this house offence.”<sup>382</sup> What Thompson failed to understand and acknowledge in his speech was that delegates were worried about any challenge that was even vaguely connected to words spoken in the congressional chamber. Private quarrels would not be tolerated, whether the disputes pertained to prisoner exchanges or to decisions made by Congress.

On December 7 and December 23, four more witnesses testified, an indication of just how zealous the delegates were in trying to determine what words were spoken at the coffeehouse. After a day of debate, Congress accepted Thompson’s apology but found him guilty of a breach of privilege. In this ruling, they sided with Thompson’s version of the story, in which he stipulated that he had never cast aspersions on congressional honor, but they publicly denounced his interpretation of the culture of honor. He was not allowed to challenge a congressman for his actions in deciding prisoner exchanges. Thompson accepted his public rebuke from Congress, though he could not forget McKean’s role in his public chastisement. Thompson still believed that his dispute with McKean was a private quarrel and that belief and

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<sup>381</sup> In Congress, William Thompson’s Speech, November 23, 1778, *Ibid.*, 11:248.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:249.

the fact that he had received no satisfaction or apology from McKean; prompted him to publish an account of his affair of honor in a Pennsylvania newspaper, the *Packet*.<sup>383</sup> There he asserted that, “Chief Justice McKean has, in an affair which does not relate to his conduct in Congress, and which is of a private nature, behaved like a liar, a rascal, and a coward.”<sup>384</sup> McKean then brought a suit for libel against Thompson and the newspaper editor of the *Packet* and won damages in the spring of 1781.<sup>385</sup>

The war for independence complicated the revolutionaries’ understanding of the culture of honor and the importance of protecting their reputations. Affairs of honor were technically illegal in the Continental Army, though officers routinely used challenges to highlight their social standing and assert their claims to gentility. The code taught gentlemen to be sensitive to any hint of an insult and this hypersensitivity occasionally made it difficult for congressmen to ask why things were going wrong or who was at fault. Promotions and pensions were also linked to honor and calling into question a person’s decision could result in a challenge even when no insult had been intended. Nevertheless, revolutionaries used the *code duello* to provide strict guidelines to determine when it was appropriate to initiate an affair of honor. That punctilious regard for propriety was intended to ensure that the form of punishment was commensurate to the offense. While liquor consumption probably fueled a number of challenges, mediation was built into the structure of a duel and the seconds could usually get the duelists to offer and accept apologies.

All politicians appreciated that the purpose of congressional privilege was to provide for freedom of debate, but some radicals and conservatives disagreed over how far that freedom’s

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<sup>383</sup> Rowe, *Thomas McKean*, 150.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 152, McKean was rewarded £5,700 and he released his claim to the damages, asserting that “he only wanted to see the law and the facts settled.” McKean clearly wanted the public validation of his reputation and wanted William Thompson publicly chastised for his rude words.



permissible boundaries stretched. Most Continental Army officers adhered to a traditional interpretation of the culture of honor and senior officers often clashed with delegates over the limits of free speech, when character and reputation were at stake. Whenever, a general attempted to initiate an affair of honor with a congressman, he was quickly shown the might of civil authority in the form of public censure for his conduct. For all the fear of a standing army espoused in 1775, delegates proved in 1777 and 1778 that they controlled the military, and many officers grudgingly accepted the civil authority's power. No pistols at dawn were needed to prove Congress's control over the Continental Army.

## **CONCLUSION: The Newburgh Conspiracy**

“And you will, by the dignity of your Conduct, afford occasion of Posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to Mankind, ‘had this day been wanting, the World had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.”

George Washington, 1783<sup>386</sup>

Faced with a mutinous officer corps in early March 1783, Washington drafted a strongly worded speech, intending to nip the incipient rebellion in the bud. He warned his officers that pamphlets were being circulated in their quarters at Newburgh, New York, “addressed more to the feelings and passions, than to the reason and judgment of the Army.”<sup>387</sup> In the late winter, officers had begun to grow concerned that they would not get paid after the army disbanded, and so they had begun to discuss different strategies to pressure Congress into paying their postbellum pensions.

Historians have argued that a small minority of congressional delegates actively encouraged the officers to begin grumbling about the inefficiency of the Continental Congress. These delegates hoped that rumors of a military coup would induce reluctant states, such as Rhode Island, into giving Congress more power and money through the granting of an impost duty.<sup>388</sup> The delegates who advocated a strong national government, such as Robert Morris and Alexander Hamilton, issued dire warnings to their friends in the officer corps, hinting that Congress was planning to renege on the vote that had granted half-pay pensions for life in 1780.<sup>389</sup> Hamilton and Morris wanted their military friends to declare loudly their unhappiness with Congress and start a public discussion of drastic measures to scare other delegates into

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<sup>386</sup> Address to the Officers, March 1783, *The Writings of George Washington*, Ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1891), 10:174.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:170.

<sup>388</sup> See: Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 317-324; Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 228-235; Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 333-341; Martin and Lender, 186-194.

<sup>389</sup> Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, 317-324, and Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 228-235.

agreeing with the nationalists. This complicated strategy failed in the end, though it did have the benefit of gaining officers a commutation of their half-pay pensions into a one-time payment equal to the amount of their salary for five years.

When Washington strode into the Temple of Virtue, he faced an officer corps, some members of which seriously contemplated overthrowing the authority of the national legislature.<sup>390</sup> Washington knew that all of the officers present had read the Newburgh Address, an anonymous pamphlet, and he wrote a speech to refute the pamphleteer's logic. Major John Armstrong Jr., Horatio Gates's aide-de-camp, wrote the Newburgh Address to urge the army to take decisive action against civilian ingratitude.<sup>391</sup> He proposed two ideas to force Congress into paying the pensions: "If War continues, remove into the unsettled country...and leave an ungrateful Country to defend itself," or, "If Peace takes place, never sheath your Swords Says he[Armstrong] until you have obtained full and ample justice."<sup>392</sup> In his speech, Washington mentioned the polite fiction that the Address must have been written by the enemy, "some Emissary, perhaps from New York."<sup>393</sup> Washington's speech at Newburgh provided a summary of his interpretation of the culture of honor and the meaning of the American Revolution.

He began by warning the officers "that the Address is drawn with great Art, and is designed to answer the most insidious purposes." The author's purpose was "calculated to impress the Mind, with an idea of premeditated injustice in the Sovereign power of the United

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<sup>390</sup> See: Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 337-338; Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 228-235; and Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 186-194. Officers used the newly built Temple of Virtue to socialize during the winter quarters at Newburgh. The Temple represented a stark contrast to the army's winter quarters at Valley Forge in 1777/78. The Temple was a large building and therefore, when Washington delivered his rebuttal to the Newburgh Address, he was speaking to a majority of the officers in the Continental Army.

<sup>391</sup> Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 191 and Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 231-232.

<sup>392</sup> Address to the Officers, March 1783, *The Writings of George Washington*, 10:171. I used Washington's succinct summary of the Newburgh Address because this is how he understood the pamphlet and the ideas he was arguing against.

<sup>393</sup> He most likely blamed the Newburgh Address on the enemy, so that he could write a scathing rebuttal and not publicly challenge the honor of one of his officers, the actual author, who would have been present in the room. He also did not want to have to search for and punish one of his own officers for his potentially treasonous words. It was easier to blame British agents. *Ibid.*, 10:172.

States, and to rouse all those resentments which must unavoidably flow from such a belief.” In his speech, Washington pledged to act as a third-party mediator to resolve the issues between the angry officers and Congress. He shamed the officers into acting like gentlemen, by recalling his own sacrifices for the war effort. He declared,

If my conduct heretofore, has not evinced to you, that I have been a faithful friend to the Army, my declaration of it at this moment would be equally unavailing and improper. But, as I was among the first, who embarked in the cause of our common Country; as I have never left your side one moment, but when called from you on public duty; as I have been the constant companion and witness of your Distresses, and not among the last to feel, and acknowledge your Merits; as I have ever considered my own Military reputation as inseparably connected with that of the Army; as my Heart has ever expanded with joy, when I have heard its praises, and my indignation has arisen, when the mouth of detraction has been opened against it; it can scarcely be supposed, at this late stage of the War, that I am indifferent to its interests. But how are they to be promoted?<sup>394</sup>

He counseled patience, arguing that Congress was subject, “like all other large Bodies, where there is a variety of different Interests to reconcile,” to slow and lengthy deliberations.<sup>395</sup>

Washington, as a former delegate to the Continental Congress, knew how the committee system could hold up legislation. He warned that to listen to the Newburgh Address’s suggestions would “tarnish the reputation of an Army which is celebrated thro’ all Europe, for its fortitude and patriotism.”<sup>396</sup> Washington deliberately emphasized the loss of public reputation to prevent the officers from following through on their resentment. If the officers mutinied in March 1783, Washington worried that their actions would also destroy not only the army’s reputation but his own, as well.

He ended his speech by using the language of the honor code to shame the officers into rejecting the Newburgh Address and the idea of a coup d’état. He reiterated his pledge to act as a mediator between the army and Congress and encouraged the officers to place their “full

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 10:171.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 10:173.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 10:173.

confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress; that previous to your dissolution as an Army they will cause all your Accounts to be fairly liquidated.”<sup>397</sup> He then asked the officers as gentlemen,

in the name of our common Country, *as you value your own sacred honor*, as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the Military and National *character* of America, to express your utmost horror and detestation of the Man who wishes...to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood Gates of Civil discord, and deluge our rising Empire in Blood.<sup>398</sup>

This strongly worded statement exposed Washington’s barely concealed anger at the proposed mutiny. His words also revealed his belief that, by invoking the honor code, he could persuade the officers to value their reputation over financial gain. He promised that if the officers voted against the Newburgh Address, they would provide “one more distinguished proof of your unexampled patriotism and patient virtue,” to the world.<sup>399</sup>

Washington’s appeal to the code of honor and his dramatic gesture of putting on eyeglasses to read a letter put an end to the Newburgh Conspiracy.<sup>400</sup> In the spring of 1783, his officers accepted his argument and publicly agreed with his interpretation of eighteenth-century society and politics, that is, that society and its workings were essentially conservative in character. This meant that honor would still influence how political leaders conducted themselves in the public sphere and that the new republic would not be free of all deference. Conservatives in 1783 believed that the culture of honor provided the necessary outlets to handle the continuing ideological disagreements over the strength and power of the national

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 10:173.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 10:173-174. I added the italics.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 10:174.

<sup>400</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 141-144. Ellis argues that this speech was “the most impressive speech he [Washington] ever wrote,” and that Washington deliberately linked his reputation and the “abiding goals of the American Revolution” together in this speech to prevent the officers from mutinying, 142. I agree with Ellis’s assessment but I think he ignores the repeated references to the culture of honor that Washington used to shame the officers. Ellis also discusses the symbolic act of Washington putting on his eyeglasses to prove how much he had sacrificed for the war effort.

government. While radicals had wanted to create a society modeled on ancient Sparta and republican Rome, conservatives actively incorporated elements of continuity from the old colonial social structure into the new independent society to ensure their retention of political power. The American Revolution exposed many competing theories and philosophies about government and society but, in 1783, Washington's speech showed that conservatives were in charge of the national government and the army and that their beliefs would continue to shape American society until the constitutional convention.

The eighteenth-century culture of honor acted as "social glue" that helped revolutionaries win the war for independence and facilitated the operations of a continental congress binding together thirteen distinct and different colonies.<sup>401</sup> The ideal of honor created a code of genteel behavior that allowed political elites to arrive in Philadelphia and reference a common set of behaviors and social norms, which they used to guide debates over establishing an army and declaring independence. Character and reputation mattered to these gentlemen because they needed to prove that they possessed the legitimacy to become the leaders of a newly independent nation. Many congressmen wanted a genteel officer corps to help win the war because gentlemen officers also adhered to the honor code and were willing to accept the civil authority's supremacy over the Continental Army.

Through the battles over promotions, pensions, and congressional privilege, revolutionaries demonstrated the importance of honor in their everyday lives and decision-making. While historians have endlessly debated the influence of the Enlightenment on the patriots' political philosophy and system of government, they have not always paid attention to how the participants described their own actions and motivations. Not every revolutionary believed in the importance of the honor culture, but they had to acknowledge that the code

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<sup>401</sup> Kane, *The Politics and Culture of Honour in Britain and Ireland*, 10.

influenced their peers' behavior. Before the advent of organized political parties, gentlemen used the culture of honor to channel their ideological disagreements through three different means of conflict resolution: mediation; resignation; or affairs of honor. Third-party mediation operated through the extensive friendship networks that existed between the Continental Army and the Continental Congress. These friendship networks suggest that there was never any true danger that the army would overthrow the national legislature; many officers and politicians had been friends before the war and remained friends after it. Resignations and affairs of honor reveal the inherent problems of a political system in which reputations conferred legitimacy on public leaders. There was accordingly, a heightened sensitivity to any insult, which could have led to a breakdown of the system. Fortunately, however, mediation was built into every part of the resignation and dueling process.

In a period of flux, revolutionaries turned to the honor code to prove their legitimacy to the American public. Politics were based on character and reputation, both of which had to be carefully maintained. These common social assumptions even informed the oath that delegates signed at the end of the Declaration of Independence where they mutually pledged "to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor," highlighting their status as elite gentlemen.

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