for most americans it would be unthinkable to view the father of our country otherwise than as a man worthy to take his place beside the other great figures of world history. beginning in his own generation and continuing on down to our own, biographers, historians, poets, journalists, politicians, and washington's-birthday orators have united to shower him with honors which they have not always been willing to bestow upon other american folk-heroes. there have, to be sure, been occasional dissenters. in his own day, there was the anti-washington clique in the army and in the continental congress — the so-called "conway cabal" — which took a dim view of his competence as commander-in-chief. but in the end the "cabal," if such it was, fell ingloriously apart, most of those associated with it hastening to jump on the washington bandwagon. and more recently william e. woodward, that supreme master of the art of debunking, after striving valiantly in washington: the image and the man to reduce the washington reputation to mince meat, capitulated toward the end of the book and conceded somewhat ruefully that the man as well as the image was undeniably great. as calvin coolidge said when asked about the debunkers: "well, i see the washington monument is still there."

what has not been so clear, however, is just why washington was great. for the early filial-pietists — the cherry-tree historians — the explanation was simple enough: he was a demigod. as mason locke ("parson") weems put it, he was pious as numa; just as aristides; temperate as epicurus; patriotic as regulus; in giving public trusts, impartial as severus; in victory, modest as scipio; prudent as fabius; rapid as marcellus; undaunted as hannibal; as cincinnatus disinterested; to liberty firm as cato; as respectful of the laws as socrates. or, to speak in plainer terms, ...

but why go on? how could a man uniting in himself all the virtues customarily distributed by providence with great economy throughout long history be other than great? or, to invert the essentially circular reasoning of the filial-pietists, how could anyone — particularly an american — be great and not possess all these virtues? but in an age like our own, which is more inclined to believe in demidevils than in demigods, such answers are hardly satisfactory; — if, indeed, they do not drive us to seek refuge with woodward. furthermore, we might as well face the awful truth: critical historiography has pretty well disposed of the myth of...
Washington’s infallibility as a man, as a military leader, and as a statesman. It is perfectly proper today, for example, to state that Washington was not a military commander of the first rank and to question whether his insistence on molding the Continental Army into European forms rather than adapting it to American conditions was not itself a huge blunder that prolonged the Revolutionary War unduly. And to a generation of Americans which can apparently take atomic warfare in its stride and still be moved by individual tragedies, Washington’s insistence on flogging in the army seems inordinately heartless. We also know that he was far from being a “democrat” in the modern meaning of the term and that he probably shared his wife’s aristocratic disgust at the spot of dirt which a “dirty democrat” left in his house. In addition, it has been perfectly safe—to cite another example of our modern broad-mindedness—for a former chief executive, whose inclination to discharge his aggressions in public brought on more than one tempest, to remark in 1951 that the Father of Our Country was too stingy to have thrown a coin across the river, without having the nation descend upon him in wrath.

It is possible, in other words, to de-apotheosize Washington, to view him as a human being with all the limitations of his personality, intellect, and background, without denying that he possessed the essentials of greatness. But once the reservations are made about his abilities—and they certainly do have to be made—then the problem of his greatness becomes indeed a difficult one. More than one writer has grappled with the problem and ended in generalities. The late Douglas Southall Freeman, who spent the last years of his life surveying Washington’s career in painstaking detail, cautiously ventured in the fourth volume of his biography that by the spring of 1778 Washington had the “seeds of greatness” in him. These “seeds” consisted of the “innate spirit of freedom” that led him to join the American resistance movement at the outset of the conflict with Britain and the magnificent patience and determination he displayed as Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary forces in the face of a series of maddening difficulties that would have broken the spirit of most men. But may I suggest that there is one reason, apart from all others, why Washington deserves to be considered one of the outstanding figures in the long, toilsome course of human history: his unwavering devotion, at every stage of a long and difficult war, to the civilian purposes for which the Revolution was being waged and the important role he played in helping to establish the principle of civilian supremacy over the military firmly in our American system of government. For this, if for no other reason, Washington deserves our highest respect. Some of the most dramatic episodes in Washington’s life—and, indeed, in our national history—have to do with his tireless efforts to uphold the supremacy of “government of, by, and for civilians” during the Revolutionary War. The story, curiously overlooked in most high-school and college American history courses, is worth retelling.

The deep-seated respect for civil authority which Washington brought to his position as Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary forces was due in part, no
doubt, to his long experience with the procedures of civilian government prior to taking command. For all his military experience, he was not exactly what we would call a professional soldier. He did have military ambitions in his youth, and he served as an officer during the French and Indian War. Yet his dissatisfaction with the position of colonial officers vis-à-vis the British regulars led him to abandon the military profession before the end of the war and return to Mount Vernon, where for the next seventeen years he devoted himself to the building up of his plantation and — as vestryman, county justice, and member of the House of Burgesses — became completely engrossed in civilian pursuits. When the "cold war" with Britain followed fast on the heels of French defeat in the New World in 1763, Washington immediately joined the anti-British movement and was elected as a matter of course to the First and Second Continental Congresses where he gained further familiarity with the processes of deliberative assemblies. When, therefore, he was elected Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary armies on June 15, 1775, it is not too much to say that his experience as a citizen far outweighed his experience as a soldier. He had much to learn as a soldier when he started north to assume command of the forces at Cambridge, but he was thoroughly conversant with the procedures of civilian government. Even before reaching Cambridge, he had occasion publicly to state his conception of the role to which Congress had assigned him. "When we assumed the soldier," he told the provincial congress of New York,

we did not lay aside the citizen; and we shall most sincerely rejoice with you in that happy hour when the establishment of American liberty, upon the most firm and solid foundation, shall enable us to return to our private stations in the bosom of a free, peaceful, and happy country.

To the end of the war, he remained loyal to this declaration, and the fears of some Americans that he might overstep his bounds proved completely unfounded.

But there were fears. Provincial leaders, as well as members of the Continental Congress, were extremely "jealous" of the army throughout the Revolution. One of the charges against the British before the war was that Britain was plotting to establish a military despotism in America, and the Declaration of Independence specifically accused George III of stationing an army in the colonies in order "to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power." The British occupation of Boston, 1768-70, and the establishment of military rule over Massachusetts under General Gage following the Boston Tea Party had made the threat of military tyranny one of the important rallying cries for the Patriots. No doubt the Patriots exaggerated this threat. It is difficult to believe that the British, with their own constitutional traditions, had any intention of proclaiming a military dictatorship over the colonies. Still, the fear of military domination was very real to eighteenth-century Americans, and once the Revolution commenced, they began eyeing their own army with the same kind of suspicion which they had previously directed toward the British army. At times they even appeared to fear their own army more than they did the British,
although in emergencies they usually relaxed these fears.

Occasionally this suspicion was extended by some of the Congressional delegates to Washington himself, despite his absolutely correct behavior toward Congress and toward the various provincial officials with whom he had to deal. As his prestige mounted throughout the land after the British evacuation of Boston, there was grumbling in Congress that too many Americans were forgetting that the army and its commander were, after all, creatures of Congress. John Adams complained more than once of the “superstitious veneration” paid to Washington: “Although I honor him for his good qualities, yet in this house I feel myself his superior. In private life I shall always acknowledge that he is mine. It becomes us to attend early to the restraining our army.” As he told General Gates, “We don’t choose to trust you generals, with too much power, for too long time.” And Richard Henry Lee, a perpetual worrier about Washington’s “infallible divinity,” questioned whether it was not dangerous “to inculcate and encourage in the people, an idea, that their welfare, safety, and glory depend on one man.”

Most delegates in Congress, however, had complete confidence in Washington. They realized that he was no Caesar, lust ing to take over. Few would have disagreed with the entry Landon Carter made in his diary in May, 1776: “I never knew but one man who resolved not to forget the citizen in the soldier or ruler and that was G. W., and I am afraid I shall not know another.” Washington did have occasional brushes with provincial authorities. In December, 1775, for example, there were complaints that his treatment of Massachusetts officials left something to be desired. “I cannot charge myself with incivility...to the gentlemen of this Colony,” declared Washington when he heard of the criticism, “but if such my conduct appears, I will endeavor at a reformation, as I assure you...that I wish to walk in such a line as will give most general satisfaction.” Apparently in the end he did give “general satisfaction,” for before he left Boston, Massachusetts officials made a special point of praising him for the respect he had shown the civil constitution of the colony.

A similar respect characterized Washington in all his dealings with the Continental Congress. He was in constant correspondence with Congress, and numerous Congressional committees—many of them set up at his own suggestion—conferred with him on policies throughout the war. Invariably he sought the advice of the delegates on major decisions, and when he had to act on his own in emergencies he always promptly reported on what he had done and requested Congressional approval. “I am not fond of stretching my powers,” he explained; “and if the Congress will say, ‘Thus far and no farther you shall go,’ I will promise not to offend whilst I continue in their service.”

In the crisis of December, 1776, he was forced to take measures for recruiting without first clearing through Congress. In reporting to Philadelphia, he outlined the desperate situation that had forced him to act without prior consultation. Then he added:
It may be said that this is an application for powers that are too dangerous to be entrusted. I can only add, that desperate diseases require desperate Remedies; and with truth declare, that I have no lust after power but wish with as much fervency as any man upon this wide and extended Continent, for an opportunity of turning the Sword into a plow share.

Congress did more than authorize the steps he had taken. About to flee Philadelphia in anticipation of the arrival of British troops, it quickly passed a resolution granting him “full, ample, and complete powers” for six months to meet the emergency. In granting these extraordinary powers—powers which Lord George Germain declared made Washington the “dictator of America”—Congress stated: “Happy it is for this country that the General of their forces can safely be entrusted with the most unlimited power, and neither personal security, liberty or property be in the least endangered thereby.” Washington’s response was characteristic:

Instead of thinking myself freed from all civil obligations by this mark of confidence, I shall constantly bear in mind that as the sword was the last resort for the preservation of our liberties, so it ought to be the first to be laid aside when those liberties are firmly established.

Ironically, Congress felt compelled at one point to administer a gentle rebuke to Washington for his “delicacy” in the use of the powers granted him. At the end of 1777 a series of resolves was passed in Congress expressing “deep concern” over the breakdown in the army supply system. After referring to Washington’s restraint in exercising the powers vested in him earlier that year, Congress went on to attribute the supply crisis in part “to a delicacy in exerting the military authority on the citizens of these states; a delicacy, which though highly laudable in general, may, on critical exigencies, prove destructive to the army and prejudicial to the general liberties of America.” James Lovell, an indefatigable sniper at Washington, was delighted with the reprimand. “You could not expect more smartness in a Resolve which was meant to rap a Demi-G over the knuckles,” he told Samuel Adams. Washington accepted the rap with good grace. Apologizing for his “delicacy,” he explained, with a trace of irony,

I confess I have felt myself greatly embarrassed with respect to a vigorous exercise of Military power. An ill-placed humanity perhaps and a reluctance to give distress may have restrained me too far. But these were not all. I have been aware of the prevalent jealousy of military power, and that this has been considered an Evil much to be apprehended even by the best and most sensible among us. Under this idea, I have been cautious and wished to avoid as much as possible any Act that might improve it.

Was Washington too cautious? And was the “prevalent jealousy of military power” by civilian officials carried too far? Was Samuel Adams being ridiculous when he warned in 1776 that a “standing army, however it may be at sometimes, is always dangerous to the liberties of the people” and that it should be “watched with a jealous eye”? Or Benjamin Rush when he asked whether there were not “Caesars” and “Cromwells” in the country? James Lovell’s sarcastic proposal that Washington be given a blank check to do anything he pleased is unquestionably unfair to the
Commander in Chief. It is also difficult not to marvel at John Adams’ glee over the fact that Washington had not taken part in the victory at Saratoga: if he had, "idolatry and adulation would have been unbounded: so excessive as to endanger our liberties, for what I know." Was this fear of military tyranny simply a bogey conjured up by small-minded men, motivated more by sectional prejudices and jealousies than by a sincere devotion to the Revolutionary cause? It is clear that there was nothing to fear from Washington. Would it not have been wiser for Congress to put aside its distrust of the army and concentrate solely on winning the war?

It is, of course, impossible to know what the upshot would have been had Washington and Congress followed a different course from that which they did follow. To the end of the war, the "best and most sensible" of the Patriots, to use Washington’s words, remained eternally vigilant over the military. In the end their vigilance was fully justified. For the time finally came when Washington’s "delicacy" and Congressional "jealousy" were put to a severe test.

The Revolution, it is, too often forgotten, was far from being an easy war. The American colonies, without an effective central government, without a well-organized army or treasury, had taken on the strongest power in the world when they resorted to arms in 1775. The Continental Army, because of short-term enlistments, was perpetually on the brink of disintegration. The supply problem was baffling throughout the war and Valley Forge, familiar to every schoolboy, appears to have been the rule rather than the exception. Provincial jealousies weak-ened the authority of Congress, and the gradual decline in the caliber of the delegates brought its prestige to an increasingly low level as the war went on. By the end of the war the national treasury was bankrupt, inflation was rampant, the army was unpaid, and Congress was helpless to raise enough funds even to disband the army. There were, in other words, fertile grounds for a surge toward dictatorship as a means of bringing order out of chaos. The period between the defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 and the final conclusion of peace with Britain in 1783 was especially dangerous. In many respects it was the truly "critical period" of American history. Amid the confusions and uncertainties of this period, men like General James Varnum began to suggest that only an "absolute Monarchy, or a military State" could save the country. And there were others fully prepared to translate these words into a plan of action.

No doubt the best known of these plans—or "schemes," as Washington called them—occurs in the letter which Colonel Lewis Nicola of Pennsylvania wrote Washington on May 22, 1782, proposing that the Commander-in-Chief, with army backing, seize power and establish a strong, stable government with himself as king. Though it is extremely misleading to apply contemporary concepts to past historical situations, it seems fair to say that what Nicola was actually proposing was essentially a kind of fascist coup akin to Mussolini's march on Rome. Doubtless it would be inaccurate to call the Colonel the prototype of the modern fascist, though his lack of faith in civilian procedures is clear enough. Eminently
respectable, so far as we know, he was neither fanatic nor demagogue, and he appears to have had no lust for sharing in the power which he wanted Washington to seize. Rather he appears to have been the kind of timid citizen who has existed at every stage of American history and who is always ready to scuttle constitutional processes at the first sign of an emergency.

Conditions in America at the time he wrote Washington were certainly far from reassuring, and the grievances of the army, foremost in his mind, were impressive enough. Army pay was months in arrears, and since Congress seemed incapable of meeting its financial obligations, Nicola, like many others, felt that he was confronted with the “dismal prospect” of returning to civilian life, upon the disbanding of the army, in a state of “beggary.” A man of sixty-five with a family to support, he reflected the growing unrest in the army during the “critical period” after Yorktown when the issue of war or peace still hung in the balance. Apparently on his own — though his views were shared by many of his fellow-officers — he composed for Washington’s consideration a scheme by which the army might get its just dues and the government of the country be placed on a firm foundation. In a seven-page document, he reviewed the grievances of the army and warned that there was a growing sentiment “not to separate, after the peace, till all grievances are redressed, engagements & promises fulfilled.” Aside from army pay, one of the “engagements” Congress made in 1780 and showed signs of deserting on was the promise of half-pay for life on retirement to all officers enlisting for the duration of the war. But even apart from these considerations, Nicola judged Congress a miserable failure. After all, the army hadn’t been consulted on the kind of government under which they were living, he told Washington. Was it not time for army men, under Washington, to take a hand in devising measures for governing the country?

“I own I am not that violent admirer of a republican form of government that numbers in this country are,” Nicola confessed. Even absolute monarchy was “more beneficial to the existence of a nation,” although there was something to be said for the “mixed government” of England. Perhaps the best solution to the difficulties confronting the country would be the establishment of a western colony under army auspices, “to be formed into a distinct State under such mode of government as those military who choose to remove to it may agree on.” In any case, the “war must have shewn to all, and to military men in particular, the weakness of republics, and the exertions the army has been able to make by being under a proper head.” Nicola finally got to the heart of the matter: Washington, victor in war, should “conduct and direct us in the smoother paths of peace.” It may be expedient for Washington to refrain from calling himself king, because many Americans find it difficult to separate the ideas of tyranny and monarchy; at any rate, Washington should lead the army in a movement to reconstitute the government of the land under any title he might choose to assume. “Republican bigots,” concluded Nicola, would undoubtedly consider his plan as “meriting fire and fagots” if they got wind of it, but he
trusted Washington to keep it in strict confidence until the time came to act.

One would like to have seen Washington’s face as he read this communication at his headquarters in Newburgh. Nicola had misread his man completely. None of the “delicacy” with which Washington dealt with civilian authorities was present in his response to Nicola’s scheme. If he did not at once consign Nicola to “fire and fagots,” he reacted in a tone of anger and disdain that would have warmed the hearts of “Republican bigots” throughout the land. Shocked that such ideas as Nicola outlined should be circulating in the army, Washington replied immediately and also took the unusual precaution of having his two aides countersign the file draft of his letter. His reply is, according to the historian Channing, “possibly, the grandest single thing in his whole career,” and it deserves to be quoted in full:

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

I am much at a loss to conceive what part of my conduct could have given encouragement to an address which to me seems big with the greatest mischiefs that can befall my Country. If I am not deceived in myself, you could not have found a person to whom your schemes were more disagreeable; at the same time in justice to my own feelings I must add that no Man possesses a more sincere wish to see ample justice done to the Army than I do, and as far as my powers and influence in a constitutional way may extend, they shall be employed to the utmost of my abilities to effect, should there be any occasion.

Let me conjure you then, if you have any regard for your Country, for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your Mind, and never communicate, as from yourself, or any one else, a sentiment of like nature.

Nicola did indeed communicate with Washington again. But there were no further references to “sentiments of like nature.” In a state of extreme agitation, he dashed off a letter of apology for having made such proposals. Then, worried lest this letter had been too confused, he sent off another imploring Washington to clear him of “every suspicion of harbouring sinister designs.” Still reeling from the impact of Washington’s reply, he wrote again to disavow the ideas he advanced in his original letter. At this point we can take our leave of the unhappy Colonel Nicola. He was notably absent in the crisis that developed at Newburgh, New York, a few months later.

The Newburgh crisis of March, 1783, grew out of the same conditions that had impelled Nicola to broach his scheme of the previous May. The army was still unpaid, nothing had been done about the promise of half-pay to the officers, and a majority of the soldiers, with the conclusion of peace and disbanding of the army in sight, faced the prospect of returning home without money, credit, or jobs. Washington, as he reminded Nicola, was by no means insensible to the plight of the army. Again and again he wrote Congress urging prompt action, and to his brother he revealed his own growing impatience.
with the dilatoriness of Congress. "The army as usual is without pay, and a great part of the soldiery without shirts, and tho' the patience of them is equally threadbare, it seems to be a matter of small concern to those at a distance." Then he added somewhat bitterly: "In truth, if one was to hazard an opinion on this subject, it would be, that the army having contracted a habit of encountering distress and difficulties, and of living without money, it would be injurious to it, to introduce other customs." Tension mounted at Newburgh on the Hudson, where Washington's main forces had been stationed after Yorktown, and so alarmed was Washington at the restlessness of his men that he stayed at Newburgh that winter instead of going to Mount Vernon as he had planned.

On Monday, March 10, 1783, the crisis finally came to a head. On that day an anonymous circular appeared in the Newburgh camp summoning the officers to a meeting the following day to consider measures "to obtain that redress of grievances which they seem to have solicited in vain." At the same time, an unsigned address to the officers started circulating in the camp urging the army to take forceful action. It was an eloquent address; Washington later admitted that "in point of composition, in elegance and force of expression" it had "rarely been equalled in the English language," and Timothy Pickering called it "so truly unian a composition."

The writer began by describing himself as a "fellow-soldier" whose "past sufferings have been as great, and whose future fortunes may be as desperate" as those of the rest of the army. Until lately, he had "believed in the justice of his country."

But faith has its limits as well as temper; and there are points, beyond which neither can be stretched without sinking into cowardice or plunging into credulity. To be tame and unprovoked, when injuries press hard upon you, is more than weakness; but to look up for kinder usage, without one manly effort of your own, would fix your character, and show the world how richly you deserve those chains you broke.

Has not the army begged Congress "in the meek language of entreating memorials" long enough? If this is the way you are treated now, how will it be "when those very swords, the instruments and companions of your glory, shall be taken from your sides?" The hour has arrived to abandon the "milk-and-water" style and carry your appeal "from the justice to the fears of government." "Assume a bolder tone, and suspect the man" — Washington — "who would advise to more moderation and longer forbearance." It is time to draw up your "last remonstrance" and inform Congress that the army has its alternatives: "If peace, that nothing shall separate you from your arms but death. If war, that courting the auspices and inviting the direction of your illustrious leader, you will retire to some unsettled country, smile in your turn, 'and mock when their fear cometh on.'"

The appeal of the address was tremendous. Timothy Pickering observed that it was read throughout the camp "with admiration, and talked of with rapture!" But in a letter to his wife he added: "... should rashness govern the proceedings, the consequences may be such as are dread-
ful even in idea. God forbid the event should be so calamitous.”

It is difficult to say with certainty who were the leaders in the movement to stir up the army at Newburgh. By his own admission many years later, Major John Armstrong, aide-de-camp to General Horatio Gates, was the author of the call for a “last remonstrance.” It is obvious, however, that more important figures were lurking in the background. It is possible that General Gates was at the head of the movement. Washington himself was convinced that the “old leaven” — the “Conway Cabal” that had attempted to replace him with Gates early in the war — was at work again. But he also suspected that the conspiracy originated in Philadelphia. It was significant to him that the trouble began shortly after the arrival of a “certain gentleman” — Colonel Walter Stewart — from Philadelphia. It is “generally believed,” Washington wrote a friend, that “the Scheme was not only planned, but also digested and matured in Philadelphia,” and he referred to rumors that public creditors were looking to the army to use its influence “in order to compel the Public, particularly the delinquent States, to do justice to creditors” both within and outside of the army. In a letter to Hamilton, he repeated his suspicion that the plot had been hatched in Philadelphia, and he commented that there was “something very mysterious, in this business.”

There was nothing very “mysterious” in the desire of public creditors generally to have their accounts settled by Congress. How far they were willing to go in utilizing the army to frighten the states and Congress into taking action will perhaps never be known. It is clear that some members of Congress were aware of the possibilities. Shortly before the anonymous address was issued in Newburgh, Alexander Hamilton had written Washington to say that the situation was a “very interesting one.” “I need not observe how far the temper and situation of the army may make it so,” he added. Congress, he went on to say, was not governed by “reason or foresight” and was not likely to take “proper measures.” An “embarrassing scene” was bound to eventuate in which it would be difficult to keep the army “within the bounds of moderation.” What, then, to do? Washington should use his influence, not to check the army, “but rather, by the intervention of confidential and prudent persons, to take the direction of them.” But this should not be done openly. Like Congress some years before, Hamilton adverted to Washington’s “delicacy” in such matters; carried to extremes, it prevented his espousing the army’s interests “with sufficient warmth.” The great “desideratum,” he concluded, was the establishment of general funds for paying off public creditors, including the army, and “in this, the influence of the army, properly directed, may co-operate.”

How far Hamilton was prepared to go in uniting public creditors with the army in order to bring pressure on Congress it is impossible to say. It is worth noting, however, that even after the Newburgh crisis had passed, Hamilton told Washington: “I confess, could force avail, I should almost wish to see it employed. I have an indifferent opinion of the honesty of this country, and ill forebodings as to its future system.” If Washington suspected
that Hamilton was involved in the Newburgh scheme, he gave no sign of it. In replying to Hamilton’s earlier communication, he admitted that the “predicament, in which I stand as a citizen and soldier, is as critical and delicate as can well be conceived,” but he insisted that he was under “no great apprehension” that the army would exceed “the bounds of moderation.”

If Hamilton’s intentions at the time of the Newburgh crisis are unclear, there is no mistaking the sentiments of Gouverneur Morris, assistant superintendent of finance, at this time. In a letter to John Jay in January, 1783, he said frankly:

The army have swords in their hands. You know enough of the history of mankind to know much more than I have said, and possibly much more than they themselves yet think of. I will add, however, that I am glad to see things in their present train. Depend on it, good will arise from the situation to which we are hastening. And this you may rely on, that my efforts will not be wanting. I pledge myself to you on the present occasion, and although I think it probable that much of convulsion will ensue, yet it must terminate in giving to government that power, without which government is but a name.

To General Nathanael Greene, then stationed in the South, Morris was even more frank. There was no likelihood, he told Greene, that the states would make the requisite grants of funds to Congress for paying off its debts, “unless the army be united and determined in the pursuit of it; and unless they be firmly supported, and as firmly support the other public creditors.” To General Henry Knox he wrote in a similar vein. Fortunately, neither Knox nor Greene was willing to follow the dangerous course indicated by the assistant superintendent of finance. “As the present constitution is so defective,” responded Knox, “why do not you great men call the people together, and tell them so? That is, to have a convention of the States to form a better constitution? This appears to us, who have a superfi- cial view only, to be the most efficacious remedy.” And Greene pointed out what should have been obvious to Morris: “When soldiers advance without authority, who can halt them?” Whether Hamilton and Morris were directly involved in the crisis that developed at Newburgh it is impossible to say on the basis of existing records. Certainly they were aware of the ominous unrest in the army and they were at least willing to contemplate the possibility of exploiting it in the interest of strong government. What they failed to realize was that they were playing with fire. Washington, usually ranked several pegs below Hamilton in intellectual capacity, sized up the situation at once.

Thoroughly alarmed at the anonymous papers of March 10, he acted without delay. In his general orders for March 11, he characterized the call for an officers’ meeting as “irregular and disorderly”; he did not, however, cancel the meeting. Realizing, as he said afterward, that it was easier “to divert from a wrong to a right path, than it is to recall the hasty and fatal steps which have already been taken,” he simply postponed it until Saturday. At noon on that day, the officers were to hear the report of a committee which had returned from a conference with Congress and, “after mature delibera-

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should be taken. Reporting the situation to Congress with "inexpressible concern," Washington explained what he had done "to rescue the foot, that stood wavering on the precipice of despair, from taking those steps, which would have led to the abyss of misery...." Following Washington's general order of March 11, a second anonymous address to the officers appeared in which the writer noted that Washington's order sanctioned the meeting called for in the original address. Until now, the writer said with some bitterness, Washington has given the army "good wishes alone." Now, at long last, his general order gives "system to your proceedings, and stability to your resolves."

At noon on March 15, 1783, was enacted one of the most memorable scenes in American history. At the appointed hour the officers, their patience with Congress worn "threadbare," their minds still inflamed with the appeal of the Newburgh addresses, assembled in Newburgh "New Building" to hear their Commander in Chief. Washington began somewhat uncertainly — "his anxiety," he had told one of his staff, "prevented him from sleeping one moment the preceding night" — by apologizing for his presence at the meeting. It was necessary, however, for him to say something to the officers about the anonymous papers circulating in the camp. In order to do this "with greater perspicuity," he had committed his thoughts to writing and "with the indulgence of his brother officers" he would take the liberty of reading from a prepared text. Taking a manuscript out of his pocket, he began reading: "Gentlemen, by an anonymous summons, an attempt has been made to convene you together. How inconsistent with the rules of propriety, how unmilitary and how subversive to all order and discipline, let the good sense of the army decide."

At this point — although observers are not in complete agreement as to exactly when this happened — he paused for a moment, as though he were having difficulty with the manuscript, then reached into his pocket and drew out his spectacles. Apologizing for the interruption, he remarked quietly: "I have already grown gray in the service of my country. I am now going blind." The room became deathly still as he resumed. "My God!" he cried, "What can this writer have in view by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather is he not an insidious foe...plotting the ruin of both by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the civil and military powers of this continent?" After pointing out the "physical impossibility" of carrying out either alternative suggested by the anonymous writer — marching on Congress or withdrawing to the West — Washington turned angrily to the advice of the writer "to suspect the man, who shall recommend moderate measures and longer forbearance":

I spurn it, as every man who regards that liberty, and reveres that justice for which we contend, undoubtedly must. For, if men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter, which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences, that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us; the freedom of speech may be taken away, and, numb and silent, we may be led away like sheep to the slaughter.
Congress, Washington insisted, would eventually see that "complete justice" was done the army. Its efforts to raise funds "have been unwearied, and will not cease" until they are successful. Furthermore, Washington himself would do everything he could "so far as may be done consistently with the great duty I owe to my country, and those powers we are bound to respect" to see that the army received its just dues. In return, the army was requested to "rely on the plighted faith" of the country and "place a full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress."

By thus determining and thus acting, you will pursue the plain and direct road to the attainment of your wishes; you will defeat the insidious designs of our enemies, who are compelled to resort from open force to secret artifice; you will give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings; and you will, by the dignity of your conduct, afford occasion for 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."

According to David Humphreys, it was a "proud day for the army." Washington appeared "unspeakably greater" in this occasion "than ever he did before." Never, through all the war, did his Excellency achieve a greater victory than on this occasion," said General Schuyler afterward. "The whole assembly were in tears at the conclusion of his address. I rode with General Knox to his quarters in absolute silence, because of the solemn impression on our minds." "It is needless for me to say anything of this production," commented Major Shaw; "it speaks for itself." Like Humphreys, Shaw thought Washington had never seemed more impressive than on this occasion.

On other occasions he has been supported by the exertions of an army and the countenance of his friends; but in this he stood single and alone. There was no saying where the passions of an army, which were not a little inflamed might lead.... Under these circumstances, he appeared, not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them; and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition! He spoke—every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course. Illustrious man! What he says of the army may with equal justice be applied to his own character, "Had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."

After Washington had withdrawn, the officers proceeded to adopt a series of resolutions expressing their "unshaken confidence" in Congress and rejecting with "abhorrence" and "disdain" the "infamous propositions" contained in the anonymous addresses. "I have ever considered," wrote David Cobb, one of Washington's aides, many years later, "that the United States are indebted for their republican form of government solely to the firm and determined republicanism of General Washington at this time."

A few weeks later, the end of the war was officially proclaimed, and the army began to disband. After delivering his farewell address to the principal officers still remaining at headquarters, Washington set out for Annapolis to surrender the
commission he had accepted from Congress eight years before. The ceremony, as worked out by a Congressional committee of three, was to be a formal demonstration of the supremacy of civil authority over the military in the newly independent nation. With this plan Washington was, of course, in full accord.

At noon on December 23, 1783, Washington entered the Hall of Congress, crowded with spectators, civilian and military, and took the place assigned him. After a brief pause, Thomas Mifflin, President of Congress, announced that Congress was ready to receive his communication. Washington thereupon rose and began reading his prepared address:

The great events on which my resignation depended, having at length taken place, I now have the honor of offering my sincere congratulations to Congress, and of presenting myself before them, to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the service of my country.

With increasing emotion, he continued for a few brief paragraphs, paused for a moment to regain his composure, then concluded simply:

Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre of action; and, bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body, under whose orders I have long acted, I here offer my commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life.

Delivering his commission to the President, he returned to his place and received, standing, the response of Congress, delivered by the President, who remained seated:

Sir: the United States in Congress assembled receive with emotions too affecting for utterance the solemn resignation of the authorities under which you have led their troops with success through a perilous and doubtful war. Called upon to defend its invaded rights, you accepted the sacred charge before it had formed alliances, and while it was without funds or a government to support you. You have conducted the great military contest with wisdom and fortitude, invariably regarding the rights of the civil power through all disaster and change...

The secretary of Congress then delivered a copy of the President’s address to Washington, who then took his leave. The next morning he left Annapolis and hastened down to Mount Vernon. “The scene is at last closed,” he wrote Governor Clinton of New York, “I feel myself eased of a load of public care. I hope to spend the remainder of my days in cultivating the affections of good men, and in the practice of the domestic virtues.”

As we know, the “load of public care” was to be placed on his shoulders again before long and he was to render further services to his country as head of the new government inaugurated in 1789. But without a doubt his most important work had been accomplished before he became President of the United States. By his unwavering loyalty to the Revolutionary cause, his judicious use of the powers granted him by Congress during the war, by his response to Nicola and his handling of the Newburgh crisis—in short, by his constant regard for the “rights of the civil power through all disaster and changes”—Washington had, with his immense prestige, helped establish consti-
tutional processes firmly in the American system and had advanced the cause of “government of, by, and for civilians” to which the Revolution was dedicated. People who like to generalize about revolutions in history often call attention to the fact that the Puritan Revolution in England had its Cromwell, the French Revolution its Napoleon, and the Russian Revolution its Lenin and Stalin. The American Revolution, fortunately, had its Washington.

Mount Ararat

CECIL GRAY

On what indifferent skyway flies the bird?
The time seemed right: the flaming tide
receded into scattered pools,
the scorched earth greened where sunlight
flaked away the blackout paint. God knows,
she left as if she were as anxious
to be free of the stifling ark as we.

Among the strangely chosen there were those
who said she was too frail a forager
to trust with so much hope. This time
the promises would fail: where would you seek
an olive in this withered land?
She will come back, they said, if she comes
back at all, dull-eyed from seeing nothing,
nothing in her beak.

Old Faith alone looks helpless now indeed.

O Noah, Noah! Rake through the smoldering wreckage
of the holocaust to see if watchful Chance
preserved an olive seed!
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