The War for American Independence was the second great influence on the development of George Washington's public philosophy. One measure of the degree to which Washington was consumed by prosecuting and winning that war is that from June 15, 1775, when Congress selected him to serve as the Continental Army's commander-in-chief, until December 23, 1783, when he formally returned that commission to Congress, Washington took not a single day off. That seemingly mundane observation tells us much about his dedication to the cause. It was common for his fellow officers to take extensive furloughs to look after private business, to recuperate from injuries and fatigue, or sometimes just to remove themselves for a while from the dreary shabbiness of the army's encampments. Washington was compelled to grant these furloughs, some of them coming even in the midst of critical military campaigns, in order to maintain the morale of the officer corps. But Washington never furloughed himself. For eight and a half years he stayed at the helm, dealing daily with the grinding frustrations of leading a Patriot army, mediating the never-ending disputes over rank, pleading to Congress and the states for food and clothing for the army while imploring those same troops to be patient as they starved, reviewing the verdicts of hundreds of general courts-martial, trying to settle squabbles between his troops and local civilians. Occasionally, he even fought the British. But for most of those eight and a half years Washington was far more the administrative captive of headquarters routine than the daring field general of American legend.

Yet despite the camp drudgery and political infighting that caused most of his subordinates eventually to resign, Washington stayed on. When victory finally came, he was rewarded with honors far beyond those of even his great hero-ideal, Cato. The merest rumor that Washington might be passing through town was sufficient to trigger sponta-
neous celebrations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey as enthusiastic and adulatory as any in Virginia. These sentiments toward Washington ran so deeply into every stratum of American life—rich and poor, farmer and shopkeeper, frontiersman and mechanic, Northerner and Southerner—that his critics (and there were still plenty who believed his military abilities were overrated and his politics suspect) felt it necessary to hold their tongues lest they be deemed unpatriotic.

This near-deification of Washington can be attributed in large part to his standing as the one national symbol of the struggle for independence. Other Americans were more central in leading the political movement toward independence. Indeed, while Washington was sympathetic to the movement's goals, he remained a peripheral player at best; his leadership of the army prevented any substantial involvement in revolutionary politics. Yet because he stood at the head of the one constant, visible symbol of the independence effort, the Continental Army, many Americans came to see Washington as the embodiment of all those complex aspirations that represented the Revolution.

Americans hailed Washington as the great soldier of liberty—a man whose exceptional patriotism and virtue assured final triumph over a corrupt king's mercenaries. Nor was his fame confined to unthinking Americans brainwashed by the propaganda of revolutionary pamphlets. Even many contemporary British accounts spoke favorably, if begrudgingly, of his character and military talents. In short, his standing as the "Father of the Country" (and that phrase was already being widely used in pamphlets and sermons) derived from his wartime leadership, not from the popularity of his political beliefs. Few Americans were even aware that Washington was developing a distinctive vision of an American republic. For most it was enough to know that he was a Patriot.

Yet he was developing an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the kind of constitutional government that he felt most comfortable with. The influence of Virginia was still evident in his thinking, but the war both expanded and sharpened his understanding of what worked and, as often as not, what did not work. There is a striking measure of the impact of the war on his thinking. Of the thirty-seven volumes in the Fitzpatrick edition of Washington's collected writings, his wartime output, about 8 1/2 years worth, begins with volume 3 and ends in volume 27. By contrast, the eight years of his presidency fill
less than six volumes. There is, to be sure, much in these wartime vol­
umes of little interest to the political detective: marching orders, as­
sessments of the military situation, recommendations regarding the
color and style of continental uniforms, the daily issuance of passwords
and countersigns. But the Washington who accepted command of the
army in 1775 was not the same Washington who in 1783 anticipated a
quiet retirement to the life of a Virginia gentleman. The war was a
stern teacher, and Washington learned much.

Deference and Democracy

George Washington was a thoroughgoing republican both before and af­
 ter the war. Unfortunately, that description does not tell us very much
about his political ideas. By 1776 nearly everyone who supported inde­
 pendence (and even some who did not) called himself a republican.4 In­
deed, the term was virtually synonymous with the equally generic "pa­
 triot."5 There were certain core values that all republicans shared: an
aversion to hereditary and arbitrary power, government by popular con­
 sent, the promotion and protection of liberty (especially liberty in
property), a commitment to constitutionalism and rule of law, a notion
that government existed to provide for the common interest of the
community, and the encouragement of public virtue. But endorsement
of these general sentiments was not enough to bridge the ocean of po­
litical differences that separated republicans. Thomas Paine was a re­
publican, but so was John Adams. Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamil­
ton, Gouverneur Morris, John Dickinson, George Mason, Richard
Henry Lee, Benjamin Rush: they all considered themselves republicans.
There is a long tradition in American politics whereby the distinc­
 tive qualities between and even within ideological camps are
blurred and intermingled. Republicanism in the late eighteenth cen­
tury was no exception. It was something of a muddle even to its adher­
ents.

The important question, then, focuses not on whether George Wash­
ington was a republican, but rather on what kind of republican he was.
For example, republicans of all shadings believed that constitutional
government could only be legitimated through the instrument of popu­
lar consent. But how much consent was required? By what means? And
what were the instruments through which popular consent was registered?

Revolutionary-era republicanism was a house of many rooms; Washington was firmly situated within its conservative wing. If we compare Washington's republicanism with Abraham Lincoln's later model of democratic government ("of the people, by the people, and for the people") we can say that Washington readily acknowledged Lincoln's first principle—consent clearly had to come from the people. Even in class-conscious Virginia, Washington accepted the notion that the people's representatives had to be chosen by a broadly based electorate. And he most certainly endorsed Lincoln's third principle—republicans of almost all ideological shadings believed that public virtue was to be obtained by pursuing the interests of the whole community. Government was not to exist for the benefit of a privileged few. But the second of Lincoln's principles was anathema to Washington. He could never bring himself to accept the notion that all men were equally endowed with virtue, experience, and disinterestedness. Political liberty was a natural right and therefore held equally by all men; but political virtue was neither inherent nor held in equal measure by all men. Some men were clearly more virtuous than others and could more safely be entrusted with the people's business. Government by the self-interested, uneducated, propertyless masses might be democratic, but it could not be republican.

One of the best illustrations of his conservative republicanism can be seen in his relationship with his troops. He regularly made distinctions between his officer corps and the ordinary soldiers that underlined his hopes for the former and his fears about the latter. Popular mythology often portrays the American soldier as a receptacle for all of those virtues we wish to see exalted in times of national crisis. The American soldier (the "GI") is motivated by duty, loyalty, and patriotism. He is willing to sacrifice everything, including his life, to defend the principles underlying the "cause," whether it be independence, union, making the world safe for democracy, or rolling back the tide of communism. Washington harbored no such ideals about the capacities of the ordinary soldier. On the one hand, his addresses to his troops included the usual encomiums to the virtues of a Patriot army: men fighting for their liberty were morally superior to men who fought only for the king's silver; each soldier had the opportunity to earn the approbation
of his fellow countrymen; the commander-in-chief was confident that every man would do his duty with great spirit. That was the official Washington.

Privately, and to Congress, he was far more skeptical of the virtues of the ordinary soldier. In a protracted war (and Washington was convinced early on that the conflict would be a long one) patriotism could go only so far in eliciting good behavior from soldiers. "When men are irritated, and the Passions inflamed, they fly hastily and cheerfully to Arms; but after the first emotions are over, to expect, among such People, as compose the bulk of an Army, that they are influenced by any other principles than those of Interest, is to look for what never did, and I fear never will happen." He believed that only a professional army under the firm discipline of competent officers could defeat the British in such a protracted war. Obtaining that discipline among liberty-loving American soldiers would be no mean feat: "Men accustomed to unbounded freedom, and no controul, cannot brook the Restraint which is indispensably necessary to the good order and Government of an Army; without which, licentiousness, and every kind of disorder triumphantly reign."

Upon his arrival in Boston in 1775 he was shocked at the behavior of the Massachusetts provincials. For an aristocrat reared in a culture of deference, these New Englanders seemed far too democratic and far too willing to erase the social barriers between gentlemen and the masses. He reported to some of his Virginia friends that the army was composed of "an exceeding dirty & nasty people." They exhibited an "unaccountable kind of stupidity" that one could only expect from the "lower class of these people." He was astounded at the degree of "familiarity between the Officers and Men" in the New England regiments, convinced as he was that such leveling was incompatible with discipline and good order. And he took special exception to the common practice among New England units of having the enlisted men elect their officers. Washington's conservatism would not permit him to envision an army in which republican virtue was equally distributed among all citizens, especially among the rabble of the common soldiery.

A good soldier, in Washington's view, was not necessarily one filled with the spirit of liberty. State militia units, objects of Washington's scorn for much of the war, often served as prime examples of this be-
lief. He observed that militiamen were too "accustomed to unbounded freedom" and thus resentful of the kind of control and discipline necessary for a successful long-term campaign. Bravery and spirit were surely desirable, but in a soldier these qualities were a double-edged sword. The spirited soldier could as easily be turned to mutiny (a problem that nagged the Continental Army from 1779 until the end of the war) as to the defense of his country. Washington believed that only training and discipline could create an army for the long haul. To this end he encouraged the "Activity & Zeal" of his officers while asking only for "Docility & Obedience" from the common soldiery. Militiamen who bore arms when enemy troops approached their homes and farms but returned to their civilian lives as soon as British battle flags disappeared over the horizon could never be docile and obedient. They could never be the foundation of a permanent Continental Army. Washington wanted to command soldiers deferential to his vision of the common good, not a band of freedom-loving individualists bent on protecting their own interests.

Washington's hierarchical vision of military society becomes even more apparent when we contrast his attitudes toward the ordinary soldiers with his expectations for and treatment of his officer corps. While in his view enlisted men were crude, ignorant, and motivated largely by their immediate self-interest (poor metal indeed for the making of military steel), officers ought to be "men of character" actuated by "principles of honour, and a spirit of enterprize." The key word here is ought. Washington did not presume that rank alone endowed men with these virtuous qualities. New England's elected officers were his principle case in point: "Their Officers generally speaking are the most indifferent kind of People I ever saw. I have already broke one Colo. and five Captain's for Cowardice . . . there is two more Colos. now under arrest, & to be tried for the same Offenses." In Washington's estimation there could be no democracy in the organization of a republican army, for democracy took no account of the social values he most cherished: order, discipline, virtue, and most of all, deference.

Washington's idealized officer corps was to be composed principally of gentlemen. As in Virginia, gentlemen had the sort of social and economic independence that permitted them to look beyond their immediate self-interest toward the public good and freed them to pursue a more noble aspiration than wealth—glory. This did not mean that all
gentlemen were inherently virtuous. Without appropriate inducements they could be just as susceptible to the allure of money and position as the privates under their command. The endless disputes over rank served to remind Washington of the capacity of some of his officers to act out of "interested" motives. He expressed profound disappointment over this unseemly behavior. Even when he pointedly questioned some of the complainants' commitment to the cause, words clearly intended to embarrass the aspirants, his appeals were usually futile.

Nevertheless, he remained committed throughout the war to building a cadre of elite officers—young men (mostly) who shared a common commitment to private honor and public virtue, young men who were committed equally to independence and to republican government and who were as loyal to Congress as they were to Washington himself. With such men, he hoped to shape this undisciplined "democratic" army into an instrument for winning the war and for protecting the liberties of all the people. He envisioned his officer corps as nothing less than an example to the world of the kind of leaders that a republican society could nurture.

By and large Washington's officers were a remarkable group, as astute politically as they were enterprising militarily. Many would provide the core of national political leadership for a generation after the war. But it would be a mistake to think that this outcome was in any way foreordained or natural. While the bulk of the officer corps were "Gentlemen and Men of Character," such men were still not immune to "low and dirty acts." They had families to feed, careers to pursue, and interests to promote. Washington was no idealist when it came to human nature. He understood that it was one thing to promote a regard for public virtue in his officers; it was quite something else to expect virtue to survive for long unrewarded. To ask officers to serve in the public interest without regard for their private fortunes was acceptable (fame, after all, would provide the real compensation for service); but it was unrealistic to expect them to accept diminution of their personal fortunes so that other, more "interested" citizens could better themselves at the officers' expense.

Washington came to realize that virtue alone was too shaky a foundation upon which to construct a republican army; the notion of interest was too deeply imbedded in American character to simply wish it away.
Experience taught Washington that virtue could only be promoted on a broad scale if it could be reinforced by interest. If there was one principle that Washington retained throughout the remainder of his political life it was this: In republican government, virtue must always be tied to interest.

To create this cadre of officers, then, Washington first had to recruit and retain the best sort of men—men whose military talents and political loyalty would bring honor upon them all. Rank (and its perquisites) was one means of announcing the public worth of his officers. The commander-in-chief regularly petitioned Congress to be frugal in giving out rank. Washington believed that for rank to be respected and pursued by men of character, it had to be scarce.19 Appointing too many generals not only confused an already chaotic command structure, it devalued those who already held the rank. He also protested against the proliferation of foreign officers. Washington conceded that many of them were capable, especially as engineers and artillerists, in military specialties in which American officers had limited experience. However, he argued that these commissions limited the opportunities for American officers and pointed out that, in the long run, the republic would be better served by promoting "home-grown" officers.20 In addition, he defended the practice of allowing officers to use soldiers as personal servants against criticisms that the practice was inconsistent with the egalitarian spirit of the Revolution.21 Finally, whenever the military judgment or the character of any of his officers was assailed Washington came to their defense, even when he confided privately that, in a few cases, the public criticism was probably deserved. Washington did all of these in order to establish a sense of common cause and elan among his American officers.

But to have a republican officer corps one more thing was necessary. Washington had to attach the individual and collective interests of the officers to the success of the republic and its principal agent, the Congress; he had to somehow make the national interest congruent with their own. The usual appeals to high principle (e.g., patriotism, honor, duty, liberty) could only go so far. Officers had to be convinced that there was something in the war for them—that its successful conclusion would serve them individually at least as well as it served the larger community. As Washington put the problem to Congress: "The large Fortunes acquired by numbers out of the Army, affords a contrast
that gives poignancy to every inconvenience from remaining in it. The Officers have begun again to realize their condition and I fear few of them can or will remain in the service on the present establishment."  

Washington recommended several measures during the course of the war intended to improve the morale of his officers: pay increases for each rank that corresponded to pay scales in the British Army, a provision for a bounty to be paid in western lands, a pension for their wives and families, payment of all officers' wages in specie rather than the deflated, virtually worthless Continental currency, a promise of half-pay for life (a proposal that was later modified to provide a lump sum equal to full pay for seven years payable upon demobilization of the army). Washington believed that the more "respectable" the standing of an officer, the more he could be relied upon to act properly. "I have not the least doubt, that until Officers consider their Commissions in an honorable, and interested point of view [my emphasis], and are afraid to endanger them by negligence and inattention, that no order, regularity, or care, either of the Men, or Public property, will prevail."  

The message-within-the-message lurking in most of these appeals was that the mass of ordinary soldiers was a cauldron of bubbling resentments whose vitriol was directed as often at Congress and the states as it was at the British. Washington was too thoroughly conservative (and probably too politically astute as well) to deliberately play the "army card," but he often hinted to his friends in Congress that the only thing that prevented soldiers from looting the countryside and endangering the liberty of the people was the firm, guiding hand of the officer corps. Trying to purchase competent, loyal officers on the cheap was a policy guaranteed to undermine all of the aspirations of the great republican experiment.  

By contrast, Washington opposed giving economic incentives to the soldiery as a whole. He believed the practice tended to break down the distinctions between officers and enlisted men, strained public credit beyond the breaking point, and, perhaps most dangerously, raised the expectations of the soldiers without any real prospect of making good on those promises. "[Raising soldiers' pay] is a doctrine full of dangerous consequences, and which ought not to be countenanced in any way whatever. . . . All that the common soldiery of any country can expect is food and cloathing. . . . The idea of maintaining the families at home, at public expense is peculiar to us; and is incompatible with the
finances of any government." Washington was right, of course. The depleted national treasury could only have met the soldiers' demands with promises as worthless as its paper currency. Nevertheless, the anecdote again highlights the elitist, deferential quality in Washington's notion of republicanism. A republic could not long survive by relying solely on the virtue of its citizenry at large. It was likely to prosper only when the better sort of men could be induced to defend public virtue against a jealous, self-interested, liberty-loving people. Republicanism could only be constructed from the top down, not from the bottom up.

Republicanism and a Professional Army

A capable officer corps was also important because it was the principal instrument through which Washington could demonstrate the trustworthiness of a republican army. His problem was as much practical as it was political. Many Americans believed that the war could be effectively prosecuted by militia and by provincial troops loyal to the state governments. They envisioned the sort of conflict that has characterized many twentieth-century wars of liberation. In this model a large colonial army of occupation could be defeated not by a decisive set-piece engagement fought in traditional European fashion, but rather through continual harassment by small bands of irregulars who would skirmish with the enemy, destroy their lines of supply and communication, and then melt away into the forests and farms of the hinterland. These bands would avoid direct combat with the enemy's main forces whose advantage in discipline and firepower would probably overwhelm them. It was supposed that this guerrilla-style warfare would frustrate the British, both in the field and at home, and eventually bring them to the view that the war was unwinnable.

Washington thought this scenario was absolutely wrongheaded. Guerrilla tactics might be appropriate for a peasant people who would have little to lose from a long, drawn-out conflict and the social upheaval that would inevitably ensue. But Americans were neither a peasant society nor a society that lacked indigenous social and political institutions worth defending. Once again revealing his conservative sentiments, Washington believed that Americans had more to lose from a long, populist war than did the enemy. In his view British troops
could occupy the main commercial centers of America (New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Boston) almost at whim. Marauding by guerrilla bands might inconvenience the British, but it could never dislodge them. If this occupation went unchallenged by a concerted American effort, the effect on the American economy would be disastrous. As economic disruption deepened, American support for the war would falter. The treasuries of state and local governments, dependent on continued economic expansion, would be strained beyond their capacities. Patriot governments would be faced with a Hobson’s choice—impose confiscatory and decidedly “unrepublican” taxes on the people in order to pay for a long and expensive war, or issue increasingly worthless paper currency, permanently undermining public confidence in the great republican experiment.

Washington believed that irregular forces simply lacked the military capability to remove the British. Pester them? Make life difficult for them? Inflict significant casualties on them?—Yes. But remove them?—No. He believed Britain’s superior economic resources could outlast the states’ in any war of attrition. “In modern wars the longest purse must chiefly determine the event. I fear that of the enemy will be found to be so. . . . Their system of public credit is such that it is capable of greater exertions than that of any other nation.” A long war, even one fought by small irregular units, would eventually pit an increasingly constricted American economy against this British leviathan and so impoverish the states that either the war effort would collapse or the newly emerging republican governments would be transformed into something far less worthy of defending. Washington believed that only the defeat of British arms in the field could induce Parliament to consider peace; only an army built on a permanent establishment under centralized leadership could pose that credible threat to the British forces. For more than six years his entreaties to Congress, often delivered in the midst of mutiny and starvation, carried the same urgent message: Stop dissipating valuable resources for temporary expedients (e.g., bounties for state militia); raise funds sufficient to establish and maintain a professional national army large enough to drive the British Army from American soil once and for all. Not only would the war be won more quickly, it would be less expensive in the long run. Moreover, a quick victory would not jeopardize nascent political
institutions or existing American social structures—a matter of no little consequence to a conservative revolutionary like Washington.

Washington’s formula for victory seems orthodox enough today. Use a superior, well-trained army to destroy the enemy’s military capabilities and peace will quickly follow. Yet many Americans feared their own army nearly as much as they feared the British; opposition to Washington’s insistence on a professional national army was widespread. The very idea of such an army ran counter to widely accepted republican principles. Ironically, suspicion of the Continental Army was particularly deep-rooted among the same Country ideologues who had so influenced Washington’s early political views.27

After an early period of enthusiasm for the notion of a national army, these older suspicions reemerged.28 First, a standing army would have to be fed. Moreover, because it was a permanent establishment the army would have to be fed and clothed even when not fighting—a condition more common to the life of the Continental Army than even Washington would have liked. Some republicans feared that provisioning such a large body for an extended period inevitably would strain the public treasury. As the gap between the soldiers’ expectations and the public’s pockets widened, the army would be tempted to extort satisfaction from the government, e.g., “Tax yourselves to feed us adequately or we will take what we need from the property of the citizens.” Republican government thus would be lost to the predations of its nominal defenders.

A second republican concern about a professional army focused on the “loaded gun” scenario. Many Americans believed that armies were blunt instruments capable of directing their force against whatever objects were chosen for them by their officers. Well-trained, well-disciplined troops loyal to their military commanders might prove an irresistible temptation to a clique of officers bent on pursuing their own political agenda. Cromwell’s army was still near enough in the historical memory of most Americans to make them cautious about a permanent military establishment. In addition, many of these critics believed that there were always enough corruptible men in government, even in a republic, capable of enlisting the army as leverage for obtaining political advantage, thereby substituting force for the republic’s commitment to government by reason. State leaders were especially concerned that the Continental Army would look to Congress for sup-
port, thereby strengthening the hand of centralist elements within the Confederation.29

Finally, many republicans feared the rigid hierarchy of obedience within a military order. They understood the military necessity of a clear command structure, but they worried about its potential for mischief if the army remained large and permanent. The social logic of any military organization was to look to its head, particularly to its general officers. Republicans thus believed that armies were innately susceptible to monarchist tendencies. Soldiers offering up to their general the mantle of Caesar was a standard element in republican demonology.30

Washington was thus faced with a war on two fronts. He not only would have to defeat the British, he would also have to convince American skeptics that the army, and its commanding general, could be trusted to behave as good republicans. This was no simple task. Both publicly and privately he implored the army, and especially his officers, to be paragons of virtue, to prove their worth in the defense of liberty, and to show that a Patriot army could endure more hardships than mercenary troops.31 But Washington recognized that wishing for virtue was not enough.

The Deferential Dictator

Washington could not guarantee the conduct of every one of his soldiers. The army was too scattered and command too decentralized to expect strict adherence to his orders. Yet his own thirst for fame and glory ("The approbation of my Country is what I wish. . . . It is the highest reward to a feeling Mind; and happy are they, who so conduct themselves to merit it.")32) was inextricably tied to the army's behavior. Washington therefore tried to impress upon his fellow officers that deference to civil power would do as much to establish the army's reputation as any number of battlefield victories. If the army were found wanting politically, then no amount of military success could retrieve its honor, or Washington's.

Washington attempted to ensure that at least his own republican credentials were above reproach. If his conduct could serve as a model of republican rectitude and respect for civilian authority, then perhaps the army and its officers could be persuaded to govern their own behavior
accordingly. As a standard for his political conduct (his military conduct was something on which he took no instruction) Washington looked to his commission from Congress. The commission stipulated that his office was awarded to him by "The Delegates of the United Colonies" and that he should "observe such orders and directions, from time to time, as you shall receive from this, or a future Congress of these United Colonies, or committee of Congress." His authority was neither personal nor grounded in his military rank; it derived from Congress and the states—from the people's representatives.

The commander-in-chief went to great lengths to prove his republican reliability by deferring to civil authorities on many matters whose ambiguity might well have justified his own independent action. People submitted all manner of petitions to him, assuming that as commander-in-chief he had great political influence. Some asked for civil appointment to the army; some asked to pass through British lines; some sought to do business with the army. Even his own officers brought their personal and political grievances to him. In every instance in which even the remotest question of civil authority was raised, Washington passed the petitions on to Congress or to the appropriate state governor. The cumulative impact of Washington's perspicacity in these matters was tremendous. Jealousies and suspicions toward Washington gradually melted away.

Among the many incidents that illustrate Washington's deference to civil authority, three stand out. In July 1776, shortly after independence had been declared, the British Admiral Lord Howe sent emissaries to Washington with hints of a peace offer. But his first message to the American commander-in-chief triggered an almost comical dance of protocol. Howe addressed his letter to "George Washington, Esq." Washington had instructed his aide to accept no communication unless Washington's official title was acknowledged. After much diplomatic to-and-froing the British aide returned with a letter addressed to "George Washington, Esq., &ca, &ca." Again the letter was refused. Finally, Washington was asked whether "His Excellency, General Washington" would receive Lord Howe's adjutant. Washington consented. Some might be tempted to attribute this episode to Washington's self-conscious vanity, but there was much more at stake. Washington, in consultation with his staff and other officers, recognized that Howe might try to deal directly with Washington and bypass Con-
gress altogether. If the army could be induced to make a separate peace, Congress would be left without the military arm on which the Revolution depended. By refusing to accept any British overtures to him that did not formally recognize his congressional authority, Washington made it clear to his British counterparts that his leadership of the army was not personal, but constitutional—it was delegated to him by Congress. Moreover, the only constitutional body in America entitled to entertain peace offers was Congress, not a general in the field. When Washington emphasized that all such proposals had to be directed to Congress, the British commander dropped the whole idea. Throughout the episode Washington had insisted on defending Congress's prerogatives. His actions on their behalf went far in establishing Washington's credentials as a military man sensitive to republican values. Congress subsequently endorsed his conduct in the following resolution:

That General Washington, in refusing to receive a letter said to be sent from Lord Howe, and addressed to "George Washington, Esqr." acted with a dignity becoming his station; and therefore, this Congress do highly approve the same, and do direct, that no letter or message be received, on any occasion whatsoever from the enemy, by the commander in chief, or other, the commanders of the American army, but such as shall be directed to them in the characters they respectively sustain.35

The second set of incidents illustrates his equally respectful posture toward the civil powers of the states. A problem endemic to all military campaigns is that soldiers and civilians do not always behave like brethren in the same cause. Contact with the army often leads many civilians to perceive soldiers as violent beasts who trample their fields, butcher their cattle, and molest their persons. Soldiers often hold civilians in equally low regard, viewing them as ungrateful wretches who profit from the misfortunes of the army and seek to gyp the common soldier at every opportunity. The Continental Army was no exception. Soldiers often stood accused of "outrages" and "violences" against local citizens. In every instance, Washington ordered the accused soldiers to be turned over to the civil authorities of the state in question. In a few cases he went further, dispatching a personal letter to the Governor expressing his willingness to support state authority in such matters.36
Nor did Washington make any distinctions between officers and soldiers. When General Benedict Arnold was summoned by the state of Pennsylvania to answer certain charges about his official conduct as military administrator of Philadelphia, Washington told the mercurial Arnold, one of his favorite field commanders, that he would have to respond to those accusations in a civilian court. Moreover, when Joseph Reed, the president of Pennsylvania, complained that Congress would not subpoena any of the military witnesses in Arnold’s case, Washington assured him that Congress’s intercessions were unnecessary. “Where any person in the military line is summoned . . . it is my duty to order their attendance, which I shall of course do. With respect to these therefore the interposition of Congress would be unnecessary.”

Privately, Washington professed that many of these prosecutions were unfounded; but individual justice was less important than establishing a pattern of good republican conduct and respect for the rule of law by the army’s commander-in-chief.

What most cemented Washington’s reputation as a republican general, however, was his conduct during the periods of his “dictatorship.” Twice, in 1776 and again in 1777, Congress was compelled to flee Philadelphia to escape the advancing British troops. They feared that such an ignominious abandonment of the seat of national government might signal the collapse of the war effort, or at least the part of it directed by Congress. To prevent this, Congress, in each instance, delegated extraordinarily broad powers to General Washington. These powers were not merely administrative; they authorized Washington to “direct all things relative . . . to the operations of war.”

Washington, in essence, was expected to assume powers and responsibilities closely akin to those typically granted to Roman dictators. In republican Rome a dictator was appointed only in a time of military crisis and was empowered to do whatever was necessary to save the nation from military defeat. His political power was plenary and unlimited during the duration of the grant. After the military crisis was alleviated the dictator was expected to return his extraordinary powers to the republic, or so Roman practice anticipated. In Roman republican theory, dictatorship was never intended to be anything more than a temporary expedient to preserve the fabric of civil society. Yet looming behind even the most benign of dictators was the specter of tyranny and the abolition of republican principles. Many Americans, including most members of
Congress, shared those misgivings about dictatorship. Thus, the willingness of Congress to endorse such a dangerous course is a mark of just how desperate those times were.

Ironically, these periods of dictatorship only served to further cement Washington’s republican credentials. His political ideals had insisted all along that a proper respect for the rule of law was the cornerstone of any constitutional order truly worthy of the name. Granted these vast powers by a panicky Congress, Washington chose to exercise, or, in several noteworthy cases, not exercise, these powers in ways that stamped him as a man with more than a token commitment to republicanism.

For the most part Washington continued business as usual. He forwarded items for Congress’s consideration even though it was fully within his own authority to deal with them. For example, when the army’s chief surgeon suggested a plan providing for military hospitals Washington responded that “altho’ the Congress have vested me with full powers . . . and I dare say would ratify whatever appointments and Salaries I should fix; yet I do not think myself at liberty to establish Hospitals, upon such extensive plans and at so great an expense, without their concurrence.” On another matter, his dictatorial powers should surely have given him summary power to deal with desertion. After all, desertion was a problem uniquely military. Yet while Washington assumed power under martial law to deal with deserters in eastern Pennsylvania, where civil government was in chaos, he refused to extend that power into those areas in New Jersey that fell within his seventy-mile military zone of authority. He assured Governor William Livingston that New Jersey’s powers were quite sufficient to deal with deserters; he would gladly defer to civil authority wherever it was well established.

“Dictator” Washington did commit an excess or two that elicited controversy. At one point, he ordered all of the farmers within seventy miles of his headquarters to harvest, thresh, and deliver their grain to him according to a specific timetable. Farmers who refused would have their grain seized by the army. Instead of a fair price for their grain, these recalcitrants would be paid only the price for straw. Several months earlier he had proclaimed that all persons were to take an oath of loyalty to the United States within thirty days or be deemed “enemies of the American States.” Both of these actions raised criticism—criticism that focused primarily upon Washington’s supposed insensi-
tivity toward personal liberty. The controversy stung Washington sufficiently that while he never formally recanted the loyalty-oath order, he chose not to enforce it. Most American leaders understood the difficulties that inspired Washington to issue each proclamation. In the end, nothing came of the criticism.

Caution was more typical of Washington's dictatorial periods than enterprise. If anything, the experience made him warier than ever of exercising political power through the military arm. When one of his most enthusiastic allies in Congress, Gouverneur Morris, proposed that the army be empowered to levy direct assessments on the city of Philadelphia during a period when the city was under military protection, Washington was quick to disassociate himself from the plan: "A measure of this sort, in my judgment would not only be inconsistent with sound policy, but would be looked upon as an arbitrary stretch of military power, inflame the country as well as city, and lay the foundation of much evil." It may seem a paradox that the chief advocate of a centralized professional army should also be the nation's most visible example of republicanism in action. Yet that is precisely what Washington's "dictatorship" established.

Disorder in the Ranks and the Doctrine of Civilian Supremacy

Congress came to trust Washington's republicanism. But their fears about the threat of a professional army were well-founded. As the war lumbered on, many soldiers came to believe that Congress deliberately starved them, that it refused to clothe them, that it failed to pay them on time, that it allowed their wives and families to be impoverished and dispossessed. Congress, they believed, did not trust its army and therefore avoided doing justice to its soldiers.

Many officers shared those resentments. But they added to them the sort of grievances brought on when men of means and social standing are subjected to unaccustomed slights and inconveniences. When they were paid at all (which was infrequently) the amount was often deemed insulting. Promised bounties of money and land seemed little more than congressionally summoned phantoms. The appointment and promotion of officers generated continual internecine squabbling, made
worse in the eyes of some officers by the clumsy favoritism found in Congress and most of the states. Men and officers alike grew increasingly restive toward revolutionary political leadership, believing that it was unwilling or incapable of dealing with the army in good faith.  

By early in 1780 Washington was warning Congress that without redress of some of the army’s grievances he could not guarantee its conduct. Men had not been paid for five months. There were widespread food shortages. The spirit of mutiny was in the air, and Washington pleaded with Congress to offer some sort of palliative. Without relief the army might disintegrate or, worse, loot the countryside.  

His warning was prophetic. On January 1, 1781, men of the Pennsylvania Line killed an officer, armed themselves, and began marching in the general direction of Philadelphia. The soldiers had the usual complaints: no pay, poor food, and resentments against some of their officers. They also believed that their enlistments, originally for three years but later extended by Congress for the duration of the war, had expired. Without more pay or a new enlistment bonus they believed they were free to go home. Why they chose to march in military formation toward the capital and not merely desert individually to their homes (a fairly common practice) is not clear. The soldiers seemed not to have had any explicit political agenda or plan of action. Their precise motives remain unknown even to this day, but their imminent arrival struck fear into Congress and the state legislature of Pennsylvania. Washington urged Congress to do what it could to address the mutineers’ grievances (they were, after all, grievances common to most of the army). But he also assured the delegates that he and the other officers were firmly aligned with the constitutional government and would do what they could to suppress the fever of mutiny. He exercised restraint in dealing with the Pennsylvanians and through the mediation of some of their officers eventually convinced them to give up their enterprise.

But within two weeks another mutiny erupted, this time in the New Jersey Line. Washington now reversed his course entirely. Rather than patiently letting passions subside, rather than using the event to underscore his own continued effort to secure a commitment from Congress for a resolution of the army’s rightful complaints, rather than negotiating with the mutineers, Washington chose this time to suppress the uprising with decisive force. He authorized General Robert Howe, head of
the detachment sent to quell the disturbance, to demand outright surrender by the mutineers and encouraged the summary execution of its leaders as an example to the troops.48

We might attribute Washington's iron-fisted reaction to panic. Perhaps he feared that he was losing control of the army, that once again unseen forces were seeking to undermine him and replace him as commander-in-chief. Perhaps he felt that the second mutiny was a sign that many troops had lost confidence in his ability to serve as their representative to Congress and were now prepared to make their case directly. Whatever his private thoughts, the mutinies provided Washington an opportunity to once again demonstrate his commitment to conservative republican principles.

As a conservative, he could not allow the army to violate every good order of discipline. The Revolution could not be permitted to descend into anarchy. Washington's decisive action, especially regarding the New Jersey mutiny, assured the political leadership in Congress and the states that Washington and his still-loyal officer corps could be trusted to keep the everworrisome soldiery on a short leash. As a republican, he could not allow the military to subvert civilian government. No republic could exercise genuine self-government while casting anxious glances over its shoulder at its military leaders. As sympathetic as Washington was to the genuine sufferings of the army he could never condone using it to undermine republican government and the rule of law. This would be a betrayal of his oath to Congress and also of his own reasons for supporting the Revolution in 1775.

Many of his officers shared similar sentiments. But not all. In 1782 Washington received a private letter from Colonel Lewis Nicola. In bemoaning the plight of the army Nicola wrote in terms much like those used by Washington in his own petitions and memorials to Congress and the states; Washington's headquarters received similar letters almost daily. But Nicola went further. He offered a proposal that so alarmed Washington he immediately struck off a reply. Nicola had argued that the government was in such disarray that Washington should, with the support of the army, seize control of the reins of power.

This war must have shewn to all, but to military men in particular the weakness of republicks. . . . [I]t will, I believe, be uncon-
troverted that the same abilities which have led us, through difficulties apparently unsurmountable by human power, to victory and glory, those qualities that have merited and obtained the universal esteem and veneration of an army, would be most likely to conduct and direct us in the smoother paths of peace.\textsuperscript{49}

Nicola was not the only American with monarchist leanings, nor would he be the only American ever to suggest a Caesarian role for Washington.\textsuperscript{50} But such views ran counter to the republican hegemony that dominated revolutionary discourse. Nicola seemed to grasp this truth and conceded that "republican bigots will certainly consider my opinions as heterodox, and the maintainer thereof as meriting fire and fagots." He pleaded with Washington not to disclose his plans to anyone else.\textsuperscript{51}

It was a quixotic gesture on Nicola's part. Washington had not the slightest intention, even in those moments when he most despaired over the weakness of America's governments, of being an instrument of republicanism's failure. He was unsure of the noble experiment's future (indeed, he was to be haunted at times throughout his public life with private fears that republicanism was an unattainable aspiration), but if it was to fail it would not be because of treason by himself or the army. But Washington feared that Nicola's offer cloaked a more widespread erosion of support for constitutional government among other officers. (Nicola, later seeking to salvage his reputation, admitted as much.) He enclosed his reply to Nicola the same day—an urgency intended to impress Nicola and whatever supporters he might have among other junior officers with Washington's unequivocal feelings. Washington invoked classical images of military virtue and honor sure to have an effect. Acknowledging their justifiable grievances he insisted 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 [my emphasis] extend, they shall be employed to the utmost of my abilities to effect it, should there be any occasion." But he then implored that "if you have any regard for your Country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish' any further discussion of such "painful," abhorrent, mischievous ideas.\textsuperscript{52}

Washington's reply elicited a series of nervous, face-saving missives from Nicola, but we simply do not know whether Nicola shared the
commander-in-chief's views with like-minded officers. We do know that dissatisfaction among the officer corps continued to ferment. Late in 1782 feelings were running so high that the officers, with Washington's tacit permission, were sending emissaries to Congress. (It is likely that Washington wanted to impress upon the delegates that he was not crying wolf, that the officers' discontents were, if anything, more profound than he had represented.) These discontents became so acute that by the following spring a conspiracy emerged against the republic so convoluted that, to this day, we cannot be certain of the intentions of all of the players. But it culminated in a moment of high drama at Washington's Newburgh headquarters where the general made clear in one final gesture of republican heroism that no honorable army could permit itself to threaten, much less replace, the duly constituted authority of the people.

Washington had long lobbied Congress to recognize the special situation of the officer corps. Washington believed that most of these men had suffered severe economic hardship. Not only were they required to support themselves and their retinue from insufficient salaries that were rarely paid, they also resented the effects that service had on their private fortunes and their hopes for future prosperity. A provision of half-pay for life had been enacted by Congress in 1780, but by the winter of 1782-83 many officers doubted Congress's capacity to raise the revenues necessary to pay the pension. Peace was expected any day. What, the officers grumbled, would prevent Congress from dissolving the army and then, free of the looming presence of an armed soldiery, reneging on the half-pay promise? Perhaps, some officers thought, the army ought not to stand down unless concrete assurances were made. Many officers now insisted that a lump-sum payment be substituted for the less certain promise of half-pay for life. Washington thought the idea a good one, but he was reluctant to push Congress and the states too far. He had, after all, been a delegate to Congress himself and understood the political difficulties that the national legislature faced. He cautioned his officers to be firm, but patient.

In March came the spark that kindled the final crisis of the war. A cabal of younger officers, probably looking to Horatio Gates for leadership, circulated a letter written by John Armstrong, Gates's aide-de-camp. The letter asked for a meeting of all field officers to discuss their standing grievances. Officers were encouraged to reject "moderation"
and to consider "bolder" measures for dealing with Congress. Among the boldest of these measures was a suggestion that the army refuse to lay down its arms until its distresses were relieved: "What have you to expect from peace, when your voice shall sink, and your strength dissipate by division? When those very swords, the instruments and companions of your glory, shall be taken from your sides, and . . . [you,] retiring from the field, grow old in poverty, wretchedness and contempt?" Soldiers should not shrink from tyranny even if it cloaked itself in "the plain coat of republicanism." Make one last petition to Congress, but if it were rejected the army should pledge: "If peace, that nothing shall separate them from your arms but death: if war, that courting the auspices, and inviting the direction of your illustrious leader [the recalcitrants still hoped to attract Washington's support], you will retire to some unsettled country, smile in your turn, and 'mock when their fear cometh on.'"54

Washington immediately sensed that something "irregular" was afoot and called his own meeting of officers for March 15. This move would allow him to control the agenda and give him time to ferret out the motives of the conspirators, some of whom he suspected were political figures seeking to use the army for their own as yet unknown purposes. Washington insisted on speaking first at the meeting and, by doing so, completely disarmed the incipient conspiracy. After attacking the author of the Newburgh Address for appealing to the "feelings and passions" of the soldiers Washington proceeded to take the same tack. Responding to the veiled threat of armed resistance against Congress, Washington pleaded that

this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our Country in the extremest hour of her distress, or turning arms against it, (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea. My God! what can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to this Country? Rather is he not an insidious foe? Some emissary, perhaps, from New York [British headquarters], plotting the ruin of both, by sowing the seeds of discord and separation between the Civil and Military powers of the Continent?56
But the passion that Washington now appealed to was not the anger and frustration of a hungry, unappreciated army. Instead, he drew on the classical republican images that had so instructed his own life. He argued that threats such as those suggested by the address would “lessen the dignity” and “sully the glory” of the army. He implored the officers “as you value your own sacred honor [my emphasis], 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, under any specious pretenses, to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood Gates of Civil discord.” The officers’ perseverance in these difficult times might, instead, “give one more proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue.”

At the end of this brief speech Washington attempted to read a letter from a member of Congress describing that body’s most recent good-faith efforts. Before doing so Washington fumbled a bit and then said: “Gentleman, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray, but almost blind, in the service of my country.”

The moment, by most accounts, left many of the officers in tears. The cabal disintegrated, and the meeting returned to the orderly business of planning the next petition to Congress.

The conspiracy had an air of unreality about it from the outset. The army probably would have dissolved rather than march as a unit into the wilderness. The state militias might have posed an effective rejoinder to any effort by the Continentals to extort money from the states. But Congress thought the threat real. Therefore, Washington’s firm stand against military interference in civilian government has enormous constitutional significance.

In modern history the tradition of the “man on horseback” has a lineage and staying power at least as long as the tradition of constitutionalism. Revolutions begun for republican ends have often been undermined by the authoritarian, military means necessary to achieve them. Perhaps the American constitutional tradition was already sufficiently rooted that these recalcitrant officers would have found themselves cast adrift in a sea of republicanism whether Washington had acted or not. But many of the nation’s leaders (including Washington) thought otherwise. They believed the very survival of republican self-government was a day-to-day proposition. Forced in its infancy to accommo-
date the coercive influence of its military arm, the American political system would have found it difficult to establish a workable constitution based on principles of republican self-government. For where there is a powerful, highly politicized military, there can be neither self-govern­ernment nor a constitutional tradition. In this sense, George Wash­ington’s greatest, most lasting contribution to our constitutional tradition occurred years before his presidency—indeed, years before the federal Constitution itself.

National Interest versus Local Interest

The War for Independence, however, did not merely serve to reaffirm the conservative republican views that Washington held in 1775. There was at least one profound, immensely significant change in his thinking that came about as a result of his wartime experience. Orthodox republican ideology presumed that only small republics could long retain their virtue and commitment to liberty. Republican governments had to guard against the centrifugal forces of corruption, power lust, and centralism. A carefully crafted constitution could serve republicanism as a partial bulwark against these disintegrationist forces. But most imp­ortantly, republicanism required a vigilant people prepared to defend their individual and corporate liberties against the slightest insult. By this criterion the notion of a large republic was an oxymoron. Only in a small republic where the customs and traditions of the people were relatively homogeneous could one hope to generate a consensus about the meaning of virtue and common interest strong enough to stand fast against corruption. The likelihood that a republic could maintain itself as a republic diminished as its territory enlarged, as its population became more diverse, and as the variety of interests its people pursued expanded. Small republics lived in constant peril, but large ones were doomed from birth.⁵⁹

There are a few signs that Washington was not wholly comfortable with this conventional republican wisdom before his appointment as commander-in-chief. During the war with France he had come to see that the military theater of operations should be continental, not prov­incial, in scope. He subsequently campaigned unsuccessfully to con­vince his superiors to give him military command over the entire west-
ern frontier—an appointment that would have expanded his authority beyond the boundaries of Virginia. In addition, his extensive landholdings in the West, as well as his frequent surveying expeditions to the frontier, had placed him within a circle of Virginia politicians with somewhat more enterprising, expansionist, westward-looking interests than their tidewater brethren. Finally, Washington's early enlistment in the revolutionary cause suggests that like many other Patriots he was able to conceive that some interests could be held in common by all American political communities. The Fairfax Resolves, after all, found Virginia making common cause with Massachusetts in defense of the great republican principle of liberty.

Still, in 1775 many republicans of Washington's generation looked to their states as their country. They conceded that some sort of voluntary, limited confederation of states might be necessary to coordinate the war effort. Republicans were practical men capable of realizing that thirteen separate wars for independence—wars on behalf of thirteen distinct political cultures—were doomed to fail against an integrated, administratively centralized enemy. Republican virtue alone was no match for the British Army. Nevertheless, many Patriots tolerated Congress only because it was an expedient instrument for defending the sovereignty of the newly independent republican state governments. They trusted Congress about as far as they trusted the Continental Army. So long as those bodies worked to protect the interests of the states, they elicited grudging support. But there was enough lingering distrust of corruption and centralism to make most "small republic" advocates suspicious of even the slightest misstep by either body.

By the late 1770s Washington had come to view the world quite differently from these localist republicans. Because these localists dominated government in most of the states, the breach widened to the point that Washington lost almost all confidence in the supposed advantages of small republics. The careful deference to the states that had characterized the early years of his command came more grudgingly as his army's sufferings increased. He placed more of the blame for his difficulties on the lassitude and self-interest of the state governments than on the military resources of the British.

A single-minded vision governed his actions during the war. Only military victory over the British could bring the war to a successful conclusion; only a well-disciplined national army could accomplish
that victory; and only constant support by all patriotic Americans could maintain that national army. No half-measures could carry the day. Whatever the merits of other republican principles, Washington believed they were secondary to the achievement of this greatest of all public goods—indipendence. Many Americans, especially many of his republican friends in the state governments, did not share his single-mindedness about the war and its purposes. As their doubts increasingly obstructed Washington’s goals, the general abandoned the mildly unionist sentiments of his early revolutionary days and became more and more an ultranationalist with a profound skepticism toward the virtues of state sovereignty. His grievances against the states read like a “long train of abuses.”

He was especially discouraged by the unwillingness of the state governments to support the Continental Congress. Each state was supposed to send and maintain a delegation to the Congress. In the first years of the war attendance had been regular and the membership had included men of great reputation and ability: John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson. As the war dragged on enthusiasm for congressional service waned. The great debates about liberty and independence were behind them. Now came the hard business of administering the day-to-day details of the war effort. Many of the country’s most distinguished men chose to forgo national service for state politics. More fame, not to mention greater rewards, was to be found in state government than in the distant, relatively ineffectual Congress. As a result, Congress often lacked a quorum precisely at those moments when Washington transmitted some of his most desperate requests. He complained to Benjamin Harrison, governor of Virginia:

the States separately are too much engaged in their local concerns, and have too many of their ablest men withdrawn from the general Council for the good of the common weal: in a word, I think our political system may, be compared to the mechanism of a Clock; and that our conduct should derive a lesson from it for it answers no good purpose to keep the smaller Wheels in order if the greater one which is the support and prime mover of the whole is neglected.
He urged Harrison "to exert yourself in endeavouring to rescue your Country by . . . sending your ablest and best Men to Congress." Men of virtue and talent "must not content themselves in the enjoyment of places of honor or profit" in the states, "while the common interests of America are mouldering and sinking into irretrievable ruin." But his pleadings went unheeded, and he was left to complain bitterly, "Where is Mason, Wythe, Jefferson, Nicholas, Pendleton, Nelson, and another I could name [Harrison himself]?"

But there was worse. In Washington's eyes the states stood accused not only of nonsupport of Congress, but also of active interference with the national war effort. A Congress reluctant or unable to act, often because of reservations from particular state delegations, was one thing; state defiance of Congress [and, thus, the national interest] was quite another. Washington was cautious in his early criticisms of the states. They were, after all, his nominal superiors through the agency of Congress. But desperation eroded that caution until, by the end of the war, he openly called for measures to compel the states either to do their duty or give up some of their powers.

The problem that most vexed Washington was supply. During the course of the war Congress tried various methods for supplying the army. At first Congress levied assessments on the states and supplemented those funds by the issuance of Continental paper money. But the assessments fell short, and the printing press currency became virtually worthless. Congress then adopted a system of specific supplies. On its face, the system promised to reintroduce sound republican principles to the army supply process. There had been much criticism of the previous money-based system because it had been rife with corruption and the profiteering of middlemen—two traditional bugbears in republican demonology. Under the system of specific supply each state was expected to provide a requisition of a commodity (e.g., shoes, beef, gunpowder) at a given time and place. Specific supply was good republican theory, but it was bad military policy. When the requisitions were fulfilled, which was infrequently, distribution was chaotic. The system broke down in the periods between campaigns. Troops encamped for the winter were never able to obtain even the marginal levels of support provided them when they were in the field. State politicians successfully justified these actions with the usual anti-standing army rhetoric; but Washington thought it utterly dishonorable and against the
common national interest for state legislators, many of them far from the smoke and grapeshot of battle, to starve the army at pleasure\textsuperscript{66}. "If the States will not, or cannot provide me with the means; it is in vain for them to look to me for the end, and accomplishment of their wishes. Bricks are not to be made without straw."\textsuperscript{67}

Incidents of delay or noncompliance by the states kept Washington’s army on the brink of disaster and dissolution for much of the war. But the states’ perfidious conduct did not end there. A few states even "appropriated" supplies for their militia that were intended for the Continental Army. In one instance, New York troops seized twenty-six bales of clothing intended for Washington’s army. The commander-in-chief was livid: "This I look upon as a most extraordinary piece of conduct, and what involves me just at this time in the greatest difficulties; for depending upon that clothing, I have not applied elsewhere and the troops in the field are now absolutely perishing for want of it."\textsuperscript{68} These were strong words for a Virginia gentleman; in that era challenges to a person’s honor less pointed than this often resulted in a duel.

Whatever the reality of the situation (and there is considerable evidence that most of the states strained mightily to meet their military obligations), Washington was convinced that state cooperation varied with the proximity of British battle flags. When enemy troops threatened the state, few efforts were spared to help the army. But when the British moved their operations elsewhere, local enthusiasm waned. Washington found himself in a curious, double-edged political game in which the army’s status, and thus the national interest, was constantly jeopardized. State governors often failed to meet their supply obligations and recruitment quotas in large part because they feared the local political consequences of using their limited resources to benefit other states or a distant army.\textsuperscript{69} Yet when the enemy posed an immediate threat to the state its leaders employed every art of persuasion to have Washington bring the Continental Army to its immediate defense.\textsuperscript{70}

Even when the states sought to support the war effort Washington found their attempts inconsistent and meddlesome. Especially harmful to the cause, he believed, was the states’ insistence on fighting the war as much as possible with militia. Washington was convinced that these "short-termers," raised by increasingly expensive bounties, were a detriment to the national interest. They were undisciplined, unreliable, and subject to recall by the states at times that made strategic plan-
ning extremely difficult for Washington and his staff. The militia, moreover, was usually better paid and better fed than the Continental troops—a condition that worsened the discontents already rampant within his army. He also resented his lack of control over the militia. Although militiamen were nominally under his command, his options were constrained by state prerogatives and jealousies. He believed that militia could only be counted on to help in local campaigns; the merest inkling of a major campaign in a distant state sent many governors scurrying to recall their militia for the defense of “important local prizes.”

The states also disrupted his unity of command. Authority, Washington believed, should be commensurate with responsibility. He complained of having “powers without the means of execution when these ought to be co-equal at least.” Because Washington was commander-in-chief of all the armed forces arrayed against the British, he naturally presumed that his authority would be fully competent to meet that enormous undertaking. He was wrong. He did not even have the authority to appoint his own officers or to recognize extraordinary merit with promotions. Washington often found himself saddled with generals too old, too independent, or too incompetent to do him much good, yet too politically well connected in their states for Washington to remove. This system caused endless wranglings and jealousies among the often better-qualified junior officers. Indeed, the seed of Benedict Arnold’s treason is often attributed to his disappointment in not attaining a rank suitable to his military deeds in the war—a rank that Washington lacked the authority to give. Without political control over his most responsible lieutenants, how, Washington complained, could he be held responsible for the army’s failures?

The manner in which the Continental Army was raised added to Washington’s command problems. Each state was asked to muster an annual quota of men for the army. In return for raising these troops, however, each state insisted on keeping its units intact (e.g. the New Jersey “line”) rather than allowing their recruits to be dispersed throughout the Continental Army as needed. Moreover, the states insisted on the right to appoint all of the officers for their lines, just as they did for their own militia. Thus Washington was faced with achieving military success with an army that was three armies in one: Continental troops recruited directly by Congress or by Continental officers,
troops raised and organized by the state governments as separate units under Continental command, and state militia subject to perfunctory recall by their states. As Washington commented to one of his old colleagues, "If in all cases, ours was one Army, or thirteen Armies allied for the common defence, there would be no difficulty in solving your question [about the appointment of generals]; but we are occasionally both, and I should not be much out if I was to say that we are sometimes neither but a compound of both." 174

Republicanism on a Large Scale

Washington's unique vantage point during the War for Independence (he was, after all, the only commander-in-chief) provided him with an opportunity to assess, firsthand, confederation politics. No other American of his time—not Adams, not Jefferson, not Franklin—witnessed the birth of thirteen infant republics and a national Congress from a perspective remotely like Washington's. As commander-in-chief he was subject to the authority of a curious array of departments, committees, secretaries, and boards at the national level, while simultaneously having to assuage the local concerns of thirteen very independent, very different constitutional republics. As the eight years of his commission dragged on, much of this constitutional infancy must have seemed to Washington as painful and as troublesome as a breech birth.

Washington emerged in 1783 still very much the republican, but his republicanism had taken on deeper hues as a result of his wartime experiences. He was still the Virginia gentleman, but his willingness to consider a republic on a national scale forced him to jettison much of the oppositionist Country ideology that had characterized his early political career in Virginia. He was still a political and social conservative, but the war had convinced him that conservatism was best served by a national government sufficiently energetic to instill its special brand of public virtue on the widest scale possible. He still harbored a vision of a continental America stretching to the Mississippi, but he now believed that only a national government could safeguard the interests of the West from Europe and the predations of the Eastern states.
In short, the war had caused Washington to rethink his notions of what a constitutional republic should look like. Reluctantly at first, then with increasing vehemence, Washington began to see a national political system—a stronger union of some sort, though he still lacked a specific point of reference—as the only salvation for America's political, economic, and military troubles. Washington was certainly not the first American nationalist, but he became the first great national symbol of the nationalist cause.

To get to that point required him to radically rethink the nature of public virtue. Like most republicans, Washington believed that there could be only one true public interest. The common welfare had to be something more than just the result of an open competition between numerous interests within the community. Such a competition, he thought, would surely give sway to private interests rather than the genuine common interest. Moreover, harmony, not conflict, was essential to a virtuous community. This understanding explains why most republicans believed that good government could emerge only in a small republic—large, diverse populations would inevitably diverge over the question of what was in the public interest and would succumb, whatever the formal constitutional arrangements, to powerful partisan interests.

Such partisanship and division were anathema to a good republican. So it was with Washington early in the war. After his early, impolitic criticisms of New England soldiers, Washington tried to create a truly national army organized around the common goal of defeating the British and protecting the liberties of all Americans. But partisan bickering among the officers, especially disputes over the relative contributions of various states' regiments, interfered with that goal. To one brigadier he wrote, "How strange it is that Men, engaged in the same Important Service, should be eternally bickering, instead of giving mutual aid! Officers cannot act upon proper principles, who suffer trifles to interpose to create distrust and jealousy. All our actions should be regulated by one Uniform plan, and that Plan should have one object in view, to wit, the good of the Service." This same notion informed his analysis of national politics. For Washington there was a clear public interest held in common by all patriotic Americans—winning the war. There was no room for ambiguity or legitimate differences of opinion on this goal. All else that was of value to the community—constitutional govern-
ment, liberty, republicanism, prosperity—depended on winning the war. To Washington it was inconceivable that there could be any dissent to the idea that military victory was genuinely in the public interest.

To Washington, then, virtue was wedded to one's willingness to sacrifice private interest in service to the public interest. Once the public interest was determined, a desire for fame should lead honorable men only to unanimity and unity of purpose. "If we would pursue a right System of policy, in my Opinion, there should be none of these distinctions. We should all be considered, Congress, Army, &c. as one people, embarked in one Cause, in one interest; acting on the same principle and to the same End."176

It came as a rude shock when Washington found that many politicians in state and national government could not agree on what was genuinely in the public interest. He was particularly upset with the behavior of the state governments, many of which could not fully embrace any notion of the public interest that emanated from Congress or the army. Their particular view of republicanism taught them to be wary of centralism (a traditional enemy of true republicanism) masquerading as public virtue. Thus, it was more than narrow self-interest and petty partisanship that led many state governments to withhold wholehearted support from Congress and the army. For many Pennsylvanians and Marylanders and Rhode Islanders there was more to the public interest than winning the war. State citizens also shared a common interest in preserving their local republics against the centralizing impulses of Congress and the Continental Army. These "small scale" republicans feared an American "court" as much as a distant Parliament. Each was an instrument for undermining liberty and independence. Winning the war, though clearly in the common interest of all the states, should not come at the expense of devaluing state governments and state constitutions.

Washington tried to assuage these fears as much as possible. As noted above, he deferred to state authority even when it was inconvenient. He wrote nearly as frequently to state governors, taking them into his confidence and asking for their advice, as he did to Congress. Even when he most desperately importuned the states for support, he never conditioned those pleas with military threats. In the end, his efforts were to no avail. No matter how much Washington cajoled, no matter how
much he demonstrated the army's trustworthiness, an unbridgeable
gulf separated Washington's understanding of the common interest
from that of the "small scale" republicans.

When he realized that this local support would never materialize in
the way he envisioned, Washington began to take a more active role in
the promulgation of a new version of republicanism. Beginning in the
winter of 1779-1780 Washington used his political influence on behalf
of three goals inherently incompatible with the older, "small scale"
republicanism. First, he argued that the Congress should be granted
greater powers to act on matters of general interest to the confederacy.
Second, he maintained that in those matters of general interest the
power and authority of the national government should be supreme
over any state interests. Finally, in order to more effectively meet these
new responsibilities, Congress should establish a strong executive
branch, preferably with individual executives capable of accepting and
exercising political responsibility.

There is a spirited debate among historians as to whether the Revolu­
tion established national sovereignty or the sovereignty of the several
states. For the most part, Washington tried to distance himself from
that issue, which was debated by his contemporaries as well. But star­
vation and mutiny among his troops and the prospect of military disas­
ter forced him off the fence. When a nationalist faction arose within
Congress and many of the states in 1780, especially among veterans of
the war, Washington abandoned his carefully constructed policy of def­
erence to the states and indicated his unequivocal support for the na­
tionalists. He laid out his principle objections to "politics as usual"
in a long letter to a former member of Congress:

In a word, our measures are not under the influence and direction
of one council, but thirteen, each of which is actuated by local
views and politics, without considering the fatal consequences of
not complying with plans which the united wisdom of America in
its representative capacity have digested, or the unhappy tendency
of delay, mutilation, or alteration. I do not scruple to add, and I
give it decisively as my opinion, that unless the States will content
themselves with a full, and well chosen representation in Con­
gress, and vest that body with absolute powers in all matters rela­
tive to the great purposes of war, and of general concern . . . we are
attempting an impossibility, and very soon shall become (if it is not already the case) a many headed Monster, a heterogenous Mass, that never will or can, steer to the same point. The contest among the different States now, is not which shall do most for the common cause, but which shall do least.79

This letter is one of Washington's most bitter; other parts of it are even more strident and accusatory. But it lays out the parameters of his nationalist thinking. His criticisms of confederation politics were both structural and ideological. He was outraged at the timidity of Congress and by its practice of merely recommending measures to the states. Rather than a Congress with authority to match its responsibilities Washington saw a system in which "each State undertakes to determine, 1st. whether they will comply or not 2d. In what manner they will do it, &ca. 3dly. in what time."80 Blame for this political timidity was placed entirely at the doorstep of the states. Their local views, jealousy of the national government, unjustified fear of the army, and self-interest combined to make them the greatest obstacle to attaining the unity necessary for winning the war. Washington usually spoke in rather broad terms on the subject of expanded congressional powers, calling for Congress to act in matters of "general concern." Beyond a suggestion that Congress be granted the authority to lay taxes, borrow money, and provide for the army, he offered few specific recommendations as to what those powers ought to be. In truth, though, he was more interested in vesting Congress with greater enforcement (executive) powers than in expanding the scope of its legislative powers.

Structural reforms would fail, though, if they were not presented as part of a broader appeal for national unity. Washington still believed that republican governments, regardless of form, could survive only if they were virtuous. Congress was much to blame for the army's difficulties, but Washington became less inclined to criticize that body as the war lengthened. Many of its members had at least tried to supply the army and support the great national patriotic cause. But the states, in Washington's eyes, had lost their nerve. Increasingly protective of localist, parochial notions of the public good, they undermined the common interest of all Americans in winning the war. Part of Washington's despair was grounded in a creeping fear that virtue was fighting a losing battle against self-interest and that republican government was impos-
sible after all. Therefore, Washington spoke about arousing the talented, honorable men of America—men of acknowledged virtue—to save the republican spirit from the hydra of parochial factionalism. Congress needed more comprehensive powers, but without virtuous men at every level of government the great experiment was doomed to failure.

The second plank of Washington's constitutional reform program called for sharp constraints on the powers of the state governments. He did not propose to abolish the states (a position that only a few extreme nationalists were prepared to consider) and conceded their primacy in managing local affairs and maintaining public order. Moreover, part of his rationale for increasing the powers of the national government was that without more comprehensive central direction to the country's affairs each of the thirteen states, and the liberties they so jealously championed, would succumb separately to British military and economic pressure. Only a national government with supremacy over the states in all areas of general interest could hope to bring the war to a successful conclusion. Congress, "after hearing the interests and views of the several States fairly discussed and explained by their respective representatives, must dictate, not merely recommend, and leave it to the states afterwards to do as they please, which . . . is in many cases, to do nothing at all." Washington's federal model allowed for state interests to be represented only in Congress. Once Congress, composed as it was of delegations from each state, had determined the common national interest, further opposition or noncompliance by any state would be impermissible. The principle of democratic centralism would forbid any additional checks upon national authority from thence forward. State power would have to give way entirely in such matters.

Finally, Washington insisted that any expanded congressional powers could only be made effective by vigorous, responsible executive leadership. The antimonarchist, anticentralist, anticorruption sentiments held by many revolutionary legislators were slow to yield to Washington's claims. The history of Congress's efforts to manage the business of war demonstrates that the idea of a plural executive operating under the close supervision of a jealous legislature died especially hard. Congress initially supervised the army and its provisioning as a committee of the whole. When that proved unwieldy Congress established a committee of five of its members, the Board of War. Later still, the board was
recast to allow members from outside Congress—men presumably with administrative skills. None of these arrangements met with much success or the commander-in-chief’s approval. Even when Congress was able to raise the necessary supplies the distribution system was so disorganized that the provisions rarely reached the army expeditiously.

Washington campaigned for single executives—men vested with the kind of responsibility and authority to “act with dispatch and energy.” As early as 1775 Washington had lobbied for a clearer line of executive responsibility. Notes for a letter to Congress reveal that he had planned to “express gratitude for the readiness which the Congress and different committees have shown to make every thing as convenient and agreeable as possible, but point out the inconvenience of depending upon a number of men and different channels through which these supplies are to be furnished and the necessity of appointing a Commissary General for these purposes.” When his nationalist allies in Congress finally adopted a plan to allocate executive power to individual ministers Washington was ecstatic—an enthusiasm that was tempered somewhat by Congress’s subsequent wrangling over the selection of the ministers. In his own mind, the value of energy in the executive branch was proven by the military campaign of 1781 when British military confidence was mortally wounded at Yorktown. Washington attributed much of the success of that campaign to Robert Morris, Congress’s superintendent of finance. By raising the money necessary to supply the army and by taking personal responsibility for its effective distribution Morris confirmed Washington’s confidence in a strong executive.

The Political Experience of War

The war did not create the political character of George Washington. Much of Washington the Virginia rebel of 1774 was still recognizable in Washington the triumphant commander-in-chief of 1783. But the war did compel him to rethink many of his assumptions about the prospects of republican government. While his optimism about an American empire of virtue and justice had been unreserved in 1774, his experiences in the war made him increasingly skeptical that such an empire was natural or inevitable. Believing in republicanism was one thing,
raising it up in an increasingly chaotic, even revolutionary, America was quite another matter.

Several themes emerge from a close reading of Washington's wartime correspondence. First, he came to believe that no community could long rely solely on the virtue and public spiritedness of its ordinary citizens. Self-interest and factionalism would corrode public virtue if it was not invigorated by the leadership and public example of the better sort of men. In addition, a system of laws based on sound republican principles had to be vigorously enforced at all levels of government. Otherwise, citizens would come to see a real advantage in pursuing their own self-interest. Second, there were common interests (e.g., independence, economic prosperity, security against foreign intrigues) shared by all Americans that transcended the interests of smaller communities and states. Because these common interests benefitted the whole, they had a higher claim to authority than other, more local, public interests. Third, powers sufficient for attaining the general interests of all Americans had to be attached to a national government. Such a government (and Washington was still unsure of its precise form and structure) not only had to have plenary powers to deal with those common national interests, but its executive had to have enough authority to guarantee compliance with its measures. National supremacy thus had to be the rule in all areas affecting the common interest. Fourth, agencies of the national government had to be made permanent. The army surely would be one of those permanent institutions, but Washington anticipated that other national agencies would require the same continuity. Ministries for foreign affairs, finance, and war were essential, and he hinted at the possibility of a national bank, an agency for managing the western lands, and even a national university.

The war also reinforced a lesson learned in his Virginia years. Successful generals must immerse themselves in politics as much as in battlefield tactics. He had tried to remain aloof from American partisan politics early in the war, often seeking to project an image of the republican hero standing above the fray, motivated only by a sense of personal honor and public virtue. He feared, because of the ideological predisposition of most Americans against standing armies and place­men, that any political influence he might attempt to exercise could well backfire, undermining the war effort and destroying his own carefully constructed public persona. But to raise his army, keep it sup-
plied, and earn the cooperation of Congress and the states. Washington came to recognize that such a posture was untenable. Washington thus became an increasingly active and influential political player. He wrote candid, behind-the-scenes letters to Congressmen and state leaders (a practice he had avoided the first year or two of the war when he was playing the nonpartisan) whom he believed might influence political events. Political allies communicated with him regularly, keeping him informed of the political scene and soliciting his views on various plans and proposals. He surrounded himself with aides such as Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, and Joseph Reed who were chosen deliberately for their political skills rather than their military experience.

After 1781, with military victory imminent, Washington turned his attention more and more to the political problems of an independent United States. He was full of political ideas—ideas he deemed vital to the success of the constitutional order. But the overwhelming demands of commander-in-chief had prevented him from embarking on the sort of careful reflection that would enable him to place these ideas within the sort of "system" that he so much admired. Sentiments, no matter how deeply felt, did not make a coherent political theory. Ironically, his impending retirement, which he often envisioned as a return to the simple life of a farmer, would immerse him ever more deeply in American political life and provide him the time to more fully contemplate his vision for an American empire.