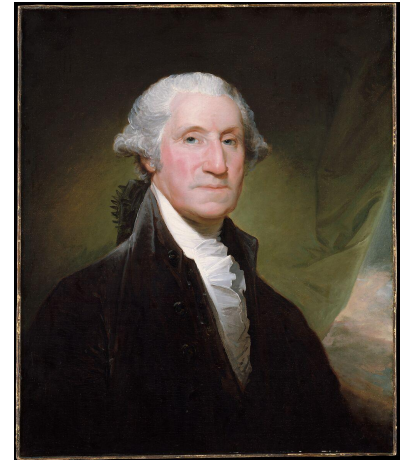


Document 1: George Washington and the Newburgh Conspiracy

The Newburgh Conspiracy was brought about by the Continental Army officers as a way to challenge the authority of the new Confederation Congress. Frustrated with Congress's inability to pay soldiers and otherwise fund the military, by early 1783, with victory over Britain achieved, there was widespread unrest among the army, making the atmosphere ripe for mutiny.



Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no power to tax, and it relied on requisitions (voluntary payments from the states) to raise revenue. However, the states only irregularly complied, and Congress struggled to support the army throughout the war. Officers and soldiers often were not paid regularly, and the army was often forced to get supplies from citizens. At points, George Washington himself funded the army from his personal wealth.

In 1780, Congress passed a resolution that would provide half-pay for retired soldiers, but as of 1783, the states had still not complied with Congress's request for the funds. The following year, an amendment to the Articles of Confederation was proposed that would allow Congress to support the army and pay its foreign loans through taxes. However, the state legislatures rejected the amendment.

The states became even more reluctant to fulfill requisitions for the army as the British threat continued to recede. By late 1782, many in the army, encamped at Newburgh, New York, feared Congress would never meet its financial obligations. Some officers and soldiers attempted to stoke the rest of the army's unrest. They hoped that intimidating Congress would help. Whether what occurred at Newburgh was actually an attempted overthrow of the government remains uncertain. Though some historians believe it may have been planned by a few extreme members of the army allegedly led by Washington's rival General Horatio Gates.

A meeting of officers was called for the following day on March 10, in the camp at Newburgh. A provoking address written by Major John Armstrong also circulated. The address pushed the men to abandon the moderate tone of Washington's requests to Congress in favor of a forceful ultimatum: if Congress wouldn't agree to their terms, then the army threatened two things. One, they would disband and leave the country unprotected. Or, two, refuse to disband after a peace treaty ending the war, which would lead to a military takeover. When Washington learned of this, he was horrified and issued orders declaring that such a meeting was improper. He then scheduled a meeting four days later that he would not be present for, hoping this would give the soldiers time to cool their inflamed "passions."

On March 15, officers gathered, and Gates presided over the meeting. However, Washington entered the room unexpectedly, saying he wished to address the meeting. He then

denounced the address's author and implored the officers to "give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue" by placing their "full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress."

Washington told the officers that he wanted to read them a letter from Joseph Jones, a Congressman from Virginia, for support. But, Washington's vision had recently begun to fail, and he stumbled through the first paragraph. He then reached in his pocket for a pair of spectacles and remarked casually, "Gentleman, you must pardon me, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in service to my country." This vulnerability from their stoic leader deeply affected the officers; some even wept openly. After Washington left, they agreed to present him with "the unanimous thanks of the officers."

Washington's careful words and personal plea defused the situation and convinced the officers to remain loyal to Congress and put trust in a sometimes painfully slow political process, in the process perhaps saving the fate of the American Revolution.

Adapted From:

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/newburgh-conspiracy/>

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