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By Dean Mark C. Gordon

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and the Newburgh Addresses*

With the upcoming celebration of President's Day, it is an appropriate time to note that February 22 marks the 275th anniversary of George Washington's birth. Over the past two centuries, Washington's tremendous contributions as well as his mistakes and weaknesses have been the focus of numerous scholars and studies.

Rather than considering Washington's entire life, I think it is particularly appropriate at this point in our national history to remember the remarkable story of Washington's role in the incident of the Newburgh Addresses. Frankly, I don't recall learning about this episode in our history in any American History course while I was growing up.

Several years ago I had the pleasure of reading the magisterial 4-volume biography of Washington by James Thomas Flexner, and in the second volume (*George Washington: In the American Revolution (1775-1783)* (Little Brown and Company, 1967)), Flexner tells this remarkable story. (All the information that follows is either paraphrased or quoted from that volume.)

It should come as no surprise that during the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress had significant problems (to put it mildly) raising revenues. The relationship among the states was such that the Congress could not impose taxes or raise revenues without the unanimous approval of the states. The result was deadlock and severe lack of funds, which meant that the Continental Army went unpaid for long periods.

During the winter of 1782-83, the states were considering ratification of a change in the Articles of Confederation which would have given the Congress the power to collect customs duties. The members of the Continental Army were restless and they sent a petition to Congress with the officers' demands: "advance of part of the pay due, security for the rest, and commutation of the half pay for life which had been voted the officers into either a lump sum or full pay for a reasonable number of years." (p.486)

A committee of high-ranking officers took the petition to Congress. While the officers were in Philadelphia awaiting action, it became known that Rhode Island had failed to give its assent. Legitimate disappointment and anger gave rise to plans among some of the disaffected for a threat from the army that could lead to a reversal or perhaps a forcible change in government. Might they be able to get General Washington to lead their cause?

Encamped in Newburgh, New York, the army received on March 10, 1783 an "unsigned call to a mass meeting of officers on the next day." (p.503) The argument was set forth in a

paper, the "Newburgh Addresses," which laid-out the army's grievances, aggravated by the fear that they would be disbanded once the peace treaty was concluded at which point the army would no longer exist to push for redress and the soldiers would be at home and in poverty.

As Flexner relates, Washington read the Addresses with real concern. While he recognized the legitimacy of many of the soldier's grievances, Washington "saw that the most important matter of all was the direction of the deep historical flow on which momentary events are but ripples. He saw that if the army were allowed to terrorize civilians for political ends, the whole future of the United States would have been turned into a new course." (p.504)

Washington called his own meeting for March 15. Addressing the officers, Washington did not dispute the legitimacy of their grievances. His concern was with their means. Even legitimate grievances could not be imposed through force or the threat of force. The role of the army in a democracy was clear, and they were not to abuse it.

By rejecting the counsel to threaten force to gain even legitimate ends, Washington assured his officers:

"And you will, by the dignity of your conduct, afford occasion for posterity to say, when speaking of the glorious example you have exhibited to mankind, 'had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining.'" (p.507)

Flexner makes no secret of his estimation of the importance of what Washington had done:

The historian may well ask what would have happened had Washington been persuaded to lead the insurrection or proved unable to suppress it. The result would certainly have been what he foresaw: bloodshed....Even if England had not taken advantage of the resulting chaos, when the fire burnt out it would probably have left behind several nations....Americans can never be adequately grateful that George Washington possessed the power and the will to intervene effectively in what may well have been the most dangerous hour the United States has ever known. (p.508) In retrospect, the consequences of Washington's noble behavior in Newburgh can be clearly seen as immense. For those of us who teach about the importance of the rule of law, how humbling it is to contemplate those crucial moments when the future of over two centuries of the rule of law hinged on the wisdom of a single leader.

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