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The typical tranquility of the New Jersey night was shattered on January 1, 1781, the normal ambiance broken by the sounds of a commotion in the nearby camp at Morristown. Sometime later, fifteen hundred Continental soldiers marched along a road, a common sight during the height of the American Revolution. It was clear, however, that something was amiss; the officers trailed alongside or behind, pleading ineffectively with their men to return to camp. The infamous mutiny of the Pennsylvania Line had begun. It was arguably the most serious mutiny of the Revolution, surpassed perhaps only by the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783. Fortunately for the American cause, uprisings of this kind were extremely rare. The first major mutiny had occurred in May 1780 when the Connecticut Line formed up and demonstrated on the parade ground at Morristown, New Jersey. The Pennsylvania and New Jersey Lines revolted against their officers the early following year. A handful of minor incidents also occurred before the end of the war. Yet, mutinous activity never became popular with the soldiers of the Continental Army, indicated by the fact that just three major mutinies occurred during an eight year war. But why did the mutinies occur at all? Surely the soldiers must have had reason to commit one of the most heinous crimes in military law. As Charles Neimeyer writes, “soldiers deserted, cursed their officers and plundered civilians in practically all eighteenth-century armies. Yet mutiny was quite dramatically something else.”¹ How did the soldiers justify their actions, and how did their officers respond? Of equal consequence, why did so few mutinies occur? The answers to these questions form a key element in the enduring legacy of the American Revolution.

¹ Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: a Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 131.

In 1775, after the opening of the Revolution at Lexington and Concord, enthusiasm for armed resistance swept the countryside. Charles Royster calls this phenomenon *rage militaire*, a fervor that encouraged ten thousand colonial militia to gather outside Boston, besieging the British inside the city. Royster gives two main reasons Americans believed they could win the war with this non-professional army: first, militia only used the practical elements of drill without flamboyant displays, and second, Americans possessed innate courage.² This theory was part of Whig Ideology, which heavily influenced colonial American thinking in the 18th century. The belief was that professional, standing armies were both unnecessary and dangerous. The relevant example of the day was the British army, which from a Patriots' point of view enforced unfair legislation and held the colonies firmly under the heel of a tyrant. Americans took great pride in the differences between their army and its British counterpart. In 1775, the American army was more like a "commissioned mob"³ than a military force; but few Americans saw this as a problem. They expected their army of virtuous citizen-soldiers to overcome a disciplined, professional military power through superior freedom and spirit.⁴

Whig Ideology also reflected a basic class conflict in the 18th century world. The wealthy and ordinary propertied men, those who made up the militia, were seen as having virtue. They had a stake in the society, and could be relied upon to temporarily surrender their personal liberties in order to defend it. The property-less lower class, on the other hand, traditionally made up professional regular armies. They owed nothing to the society which held them in poverty and were thought to lack the virtue of militiamen. With this ideology in the background, it is no surprise that many Americans confidently predicted a quick and easy victory in their

² Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: the Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 25.

³ Maurer Maurer, "Military Justice under General Washington," *Military Affairs* 28.1 (Spring 1964): 8.

⁴ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1982), 36.

Revolution. Joseph Plumb Martin, a Continental soldier from Connecticut, wrote “I never spent a thought about numbers; the Americans were invincible in my opinion.”⁵ Few men discerned the reality of the situation before 1776, but one of those few was George Washington, the new commander in chief. His military experience had shown him that only a well-trained army made up of long-term regular soldiers could be expected to fight toe-to-toe with the British army. Still, there was only so much he could do to professionalize the army in 1775. He would never be able to form a professional army, a Continental Army, until the need for one was demonstrated. The disastrous Canada and New York campaigns of 1776 caused Americans to question their own innate courage and whether that alone could carry them to victory. In short, the army’s experience in 1776 “revealed the contrasts between the ideals of 1775 and the conduct of the war.”⁶ The American Revolution could not be won without a regular army, though at times the actions of such an army confirmed the public’s worst fears and reservations.

Nevertheless, it is fallacy to believe that the war could have been won without militia. Militiamen fought well when defending their homes, providing temporary and invaluable troop surges for the Continental Army, especially in the immensely successful Saratoga campaign of 1777. Following the decisive American defeats at Charleston and Camden, South Carolina, in 1780, the British could march through the Southern colonies unopposed by the Continental Army. Militia filled the void and continued to harass the British, even contributing to several victories in pitched battles, including Cowpens in early 1781. Militia functioned as a colonial police force of sorts, maintaining social control, keeping British loyalists and Indians in check, and patrolling between the lines of the two opposing armies. Most importantly, the militia restricted British supply and ensured that the British were always on hostile territory. This was

⁵ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle; being a narrative of some of the adventures, dangers, and sufferings of a Revolutionary soldier*, ed. George F. Scheer (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 16.

⁶ Royster, 58.

one major reason the American Revolution was successful; the British were never able to gain mass popular support, in part because of the influence of the colonial militia.⁷ Ultimately, it took a cooperative effort from professional, militia, and French forces to bring about final victory.

This modern understanding of the Revolutionary War was not prevalent in the 18th century. Landed citizens, the only ones who were in a position to alleviate the suffering of the Continental Army, usually supported the use of militia and were distrustful of Washington's regulars. The Continentals, for their part, felt an equally powerful resentment toward civilians and militia forces. They blamed many of their defeats, including Charleston, Camden, and Long Island, on the ineptitude of militia. During the retreat from Long Island, Joseph Plumb Martin wrote "our people were all militia, and the demons of fear and disorder seemed to take full possession of all and everything on that day."⁸ Martin's work is filled with sarcastic jabs at militia forces, for example "they seemed to be rather shy of displaying their knowledge of military tactics before regular troops."⁹ He also criticizes civilians for neglecting the Continental Army, often citing a kind of "Holy Providence"¹⁰ as the only reason the army survived its trials and sufferings. The soldiers knew the civilian populace could take much better care of them if they wanted to; "continentals knew that the public's negligence lay at the heart of the army's hardship."¹¹ The army's resentment of civilians would continue to grow throughout the war, unquestionably contributing to the mutinies of the early 1780s.

This friction was strongly reflected in the recruiting experience of army and civilian leaders. Charles Neimeyer goes into great detail about recruiting practices in his work, *America*

⁷ Don Higginbotham, *War and Society in Revolutionary America: The Wider Dimensions of Conflict* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 108-121.

⁸ Martin, 36.

⁹ Martin, 159.

¹⁰ Martin, 103.

¹¹ Royster, 295.

Goes to War: a Social History of the Continental Army. Like most, if not all historical works, *America Goes to War* should not be read at face value. Neimeyer's arguments reflect a general bias in favor of the army, and his assertions against civilians, militia, and political leaders are at times extremely cynical. Nevertheless, he does paint an interesting picture of Continental Army recruitment. It soon became clear that few propertied men were willing to submit to the harsh discipline of army life at all, never mind for three years or the duration of the war as Washington and his officers demanded. From the beginning, long-term enlistees were almost entirely made up of the transient poor. These young, landless men were the only ones consistently willing to surrender their personal freedoms and accept the harsh conditions of military service. Neimeyer also gives several more insidious reasons for recruitment of the poor: it allowed states to fulfill their recruiting obligations to Congress without removing men of means; it removed dangerous vagrants from the local area; and poor people were considered expendable.¹² Yet, it is quite possible that the poor were recruited simply because they were available. The extent to which Neimeyer's arguments actually held sway in the minds of recruiters is debatable though it appears that at least some of the landed colonial citizenry thought very little of sending poor people to fight and die for them.

In order to fight for their country, the poor required several types of compensation that might not concern a wealthier man: good and regular pay, annual clothing, and adequate food. When poor men signed their enlistment papers, they did so with the expectation that these things were more or less guaranteed. The Continental Army leadership always wanted many more soldiers than it had, and this shortage gave potential soldiers an excellent bargaining position. They held out for better pay, shorter enlistments, and promises of decent clothing and food. Describing his own enlistment experience, Joseph Plumb Martin wrote "as I must go, I might as

¹² Neimeyer, 12.

well endeavor to get as much for my skin as I could.”¹³ Martin’s choice of wording brings to mind a slave being sold at market. Yet one crucial difference separated soldiers from slaves; “as volunteers, soldiers considered themselves entitled to all contractual and implied rights of freemen who willingly offered their services to the state.”¹⁴ They negotiated the terms of their enlistments as freemen, and they expected to be treated as employees, not slaves, once they accepted those terms. Soldiers would not mutiny or desert over a few days shortage of food, but weeks, months, and years of deficient food, clothing, and pay slowly wore on the men. In the industrial era, factory workers who felt mistreated would go on strike. The mutinies of the Continental Army can be seen in this light, as responses by voluntary employees against a leadership which had not fulfilled its promises.

Neimeyer writes, “the length of enlistment, the selling of one’s labor for a military tour of duty, was the chief cause of tension between the army leadership and its laborers, the foot soldiers.”¹⁵ Though the length of enlistment was a key point of contention in at least one major mutiny, to broadly assert that it was the “chief cause of tension” is to underestimate the importance of the many other causes of friction between Continental soldiers and their officers. One such cause was the increasingly harsh level of discipline forced on the soldiers as the war progressed. The army was a mess when George Washington arrived at camp outside Boston in 1775; camp cleanliness and sanitation was almost non-existent and there was no standard of military drill. Random firing of muskets in camp was rampant, so much so that Washington remarked “seldom a day passes but some persons are not shot by their friends.”¹⁶ The challenge which confronted Washington in 1775 was how to impose discipline when the idea of personal

¹³ Martin, 61.

¹⁴ Neimeyer, 111.

¹⁵ Neimeyer, 113.

¹⁶ Royster, 59.

freedom was so central to Revolutionary values. Royster states that Washington and his contemporaries had three options: first, they could forcefully impose discipline and abandon the ideology that promised victory through innate courage alone; second, they could modify Revolutionary ideals and accept discipline as a necessary part of military service; or third, the soldiers could temporarily accept discipline “knowing that it held a very tenuous place, if any, in revolutionary ideals.”¹⁷ Revolutionaries predominantly employed the third option; the soldiers eventually acquiesced to what they deemed acceptable levels of discipline. Tension developed when officers tried to impose discipline beyond what soldiers thought necessary. If left unchecked, this tension could lead to disobedience, desertion, and even mutiny. Throughout the war, enforcing discipline was a delicate balancing act; “the army could neither fully indulge the soldiers’ love of freedom nor smash it for the purpose of discipline.”¹⁸

Even when army leadership achieved this balance, desertion and defiance of authority remained widespread in the ranks. This is a reflection of great suffering; Joseph Plumb Martin’s work is especially descriptive of countless episodes of misery he experienced during his time in the army. Furthermore, Martin portrays the suffering of all the soldiers as equal, revealing that conditions in the army as a whole were less than satisfactory. In two especially powerful passages from two separate periods of the war, Martin states “we were forced by our old master, Necessity, to lay down and sleep if we could, with three others of our constant companions, Fatigue, Hunger, and Cold,”¹⁹ and “I often found that those times not only tried men’s souls, but their bodies too; I know they did mine, and that effectually.”²⁰ It was not only hunger that stressed men’s bodies and souls to the breaking point, but hard labor and lack of clothing as well.

¹⁷ Royster, 63.

¹⁸ Royster, 225.

¹⁹ Martin, 98.

²⁰ Martin, 170.

For Martin, those unlucky enough to be selected for duty on an advance party could expect weeks of night marches through hostile territory, and unvarying cold and fatigue. Regular camp duties could also be exhausting to the man who was not properly clothed or fed. Describing conditions during the hard winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge, Martin wrote “we had hard duty to perform and little or no strength to perform it with.”²¹

Physical hardship had profound psychological effects on the soldiers, especially regarding their honor. Honor was far more than an abstract notion in 18th century America; it was something which every man had or did not have based his actions and how he lived his daily life. A soldier could gain honor by standing fast in battle and obeying orders from his superiors. Officers gained honor by leading their men to victory, winning promotion, and earning respect from their fellow revolutionaries. In her work *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service & Sacrifice in George Washington’s Army*, Caroline Cox attempts to explain how the complexities of officers’ and soldiers’ honor shaped the war effort. Young men were attracted to military service in part because it was a way to accumulate honor, “something that patriot and military leaders exploited to enjoin all men to serve the cause of the American Revolution.”²² Clearly, “all men” did not join the Continental Army, but militia service was a source of honor for those who owned enough property. Honor was also a compelling anti-desertion tool; Cox writes, “honor was something that all men possessed, and the need to hold onto one’s honor through military service always triumphed over the immediate needs of heart and home.”²³ This is another dangerous generalization for Cox to make. Honor did not stop men from deserting the ranks and returning to their families, and it certainly did not stop them from mutinying later in the war. Overall,

²¹ Martin, 101.

²² Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service & Sacrifice in George Washington’s Army* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 38.

²³ Cox, 38.

honor was probably not quite as important or as influential as Cox asserts. Still, her work does provide an informative avenue into the minds of Continental soldiers and officers.

That Revolutionary soldiers were willing to endure great hardship for their country testifies to their honor, but the fact that they demanded regular pay detracts from it. Or does it? Did the soldiers lose honor in their struggle for a steady wage? Many 18th century Americans thought so; they condemned the soldiers as greedy and unpatriotic. The fact is that all professional armies of the period were paid, yet the honor of British soldiers, for example, did not diminish because of it. Underlying this phenomenon was the old Whig idea that truly patriotic militiamen would fight solely for their country and not for personal gain. If militia could function without monetary compensation, many Americans questioned why a regular army needed to be paid. The answer is simple: the Continental Army was made up almost exclusively of poor men who relied on steady wages and provisions to survive. Cox believes the soldiers' honor was offended because many civilians vilified them for desiring these necessary rewards. Continental soldiers, who had been recruited because they were poor, were called to fight voluntarily for the society that had marginalized them.²⁴

Even though they called them vagrants and knew they were the transient poor, "Revolutionaries seemed to have no difficulty holding their soldiers in low regard and yet having great expectations of them."²⁵ Officers and citizens viewed the pay of the soldiers as more than adequate even though it was never as much as a laborer could hope to make at a civilian job. The soldiers accepted this, and there would have been few problems if they consistently received timely and full pay as promised. Unfortunately, this was not the case; regular pay became the exception to the rule as the war progressed. As a result, soldiers were unable to send much

²⁴ Cox, 1-6.

²⁵ Cox, 20.

money home to their wives and children, and heads of families soon realized that “service in the army meant starvation for those at home.”²⁶ Joseph Plumb Martin, on receiving French specie in 1781, wrote “this was the first that could be called money, which we had received as wages since the year ’76, or that we ever did receive till the close of the war, or indeed, ever after, as wages.”²⁷ Martin’s phrase “that could be called money” brings up another important point regarding soldiers’ pay. Congress, struggling to fund the war effort, began printing paper money in 1775. This money was not backed by any hard currency, and quickly began devaluing. By 1780, the year of the Connecticut Line mutiny, Continental paper money had become almost worthless as inflation gripped the American economy. By 1781, one quart of rum cost \$1200 in paper money.²⁸ Martin undoubtedly received some pay between 1776 and 1781, but it was in nearly worthless Continental currency. What difference is there between being paid in pennies and not being paid at all? Ironically, the soldiers *were* fighting on a practically volunteer basis; they certainly were not being properly compensated for their services.

A final affront to the soldiers’ honor occurred when they began to notice the similarity between themselves and slaves. The door to this comparison was open in the first place because poor whites often did not consider themselves greatly superior to blacks. Duration of the war enlistees served an open-ended term; much like slaves, they had no idea when they would be allowed to go free. Also, slaves customarily performed demanding physical labor, the intensity of which was rivaled in a typical Continental Army camp. Soldiers had to carry passes when leaving the camp, much as slaves had to carry passes when leaving their owner’s plantation. Finally, citizens received a bounty for turning in both deserters and runaway slaves. One key difference between slaves and soldiers was the latter’s insistence on unfree labor, but this

²⁶ Bolton 235.

²⁷ Martin, 222.

²⁸ Martin, 242.

distinction evaporated when regular wages vanished. It is doubtful that most soldiers saw themselves as slaves, but many probably saw the similarities and carried them around in the back of their minds. The bottom line is that honor cannot be won by slaves, and the aforementioned similarities greatly offended the honor of the soldiery.

So why did most soldiers stay in the army? Why did they fight when they were being supplied with barely enough money and food to survive? This is where the soldiers' sense of honor comes into play. Having honor meant putting up with suffering and making sacrifices for the cause, all the while performing duties faithfully and obeying officers. Only when the soldiers were pushed to the breaking point would their strong sense of honor allow them to enter open mutiny. Examples of the soldiers' honor are everywhere in Revolutionary scholarship. Charles Bolton cites an incident that occurred two months before the decisive Battle of Yorktown in 1781. He says the soldiers generally lacked appropriate clothing, but refused to wear the red coats which mistakenly came in with a shipment. Their sense of honor preferred being cold to looking like the enemy.²⁹ General Washington himself often spoke highly of his soldier's honor and patriotism, saying that the hardships they endured would have broken foreign soldiers.³⁰ Ultimately, soldiers' honor is at least a partial answer to the question of why so few mutinies occurred, as well as why the Continental Army hung together long enough to win the war with French assistance.

For Continental officers, honor lay partly in separation from the men under their command. To enforce this separation, "the army was quite clear that there was to be no fraternizing between soldiers and officers under any circumstances."³¹ One reason for this regulation was to keep soldiers subordinate to their officers; if the two groups intermingled it

²⁹ Charles Bolton, *The Private Soldier under Washington* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1902), 103.

³⁰ Bolton, 125.

³¹ Cox, 59.

could lead to a loss of respect and obedience. This rule, however, was a double-edged sword. While it encouraged discipline in the ranks, it also led to the soldiers' increasing sense of disillusionment with their officers. Also, officers generally enjoyed better food, wages, and living conditions than their men, further compounding this sentiment. Soldiers usually accepted this special treatment as military tradition, but they were resentful when their officers were unnecessarily disrespectful or failed to acknowledge their suffering. An unintended consequence of this division was the soldiers' belief that their officers did not care about them. Near the end of the war, Martin writes of his officers, "they did not feel the hardships which we had to undergo, and of course cared but little, if anything at all, about us."³² Neimeyer writes, "Many soldiers must have seen their officers as more immediate oppressors than the British ever were."³³ This is an exaggeration; if the officers were that abusive neither honor, patriotism, nor anything else could have kept the soldiers in camp. Regardless, many men resented their officers' preferential treatment because they believed their leaders were out of touch with the common soldier and his suffering.

In contrast to this view, many officers expressed sympathy concerning the sad state of the men and an inability to do much about it. Washington was locked in a persistent battle to wrangle more funds and supplies out of Congress and the states, while Lieutenant Benjamin Gilbert asserted that neither the soldiers nor the officers were receiving everything that was promised them. Writing about the lack of pay in the army, he quipped, "poverty universally reigns both among officers and soldiers."³⁴ When wages were delivered as promised, however, the pay of officers was many times higher than that of regular soldiers: in 1778 a soldier made

³² Martin, 193.

³³ Neimeyer, 133.

³⁴ Benjamin Gilbert, *Winding Down: the Revolutionary War Letters of Lieutenant Benjamin Gilbert of Massachusetts, 1780-1783*, ed. John Shy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 28.

\$6.67 per month, an ensign \$20, and a colonel \$75.³⁵ There was no way Gilbert was not making substantially more money than his men, but officers required higher pay for the same reason they required better living conditions. An officer's honor rested to some extent on his elevation above the common soldier. The military ideology of the time maintained that officers should not suffer the same hardships soldiers did. Most sympathized with the soldiers' suffering, but accepted preferential treatment as the privilege of an officer and a gentleman.

Gentility was the other major reason officers received exponentially higher pay than their men. Becoming a gentleman required enough wealth to learn to play the part. Officers in the British army were primarily second or third sons from wealthy families; they were raised to be gentleman and took this training with them into the army. On the other hand, most of the young men who made up the Continental Army officer corps were from families of modest means. Becoming a Continental officer was a way for them to enhance their social status rather than maintain it. In short, many American officers were not easily identifiable as gentleman at first; they needed to learn gentility while in the military. The officers quickly developed a 'Gentility Complex,' putting a great amount of time and effort into becoming recognizable gentlemen. They did so for a variety of reasons. British and French officers set the standard to be emulated, and American officers endeavored to gain recognition as their equals. They also became gentlemen to gain favorable attention from their superiors. Promotion and rank were indispensable to personal honor, and consequently many disputes between officers arose over these issues. Ideology also played a part in the race for gentility; gentlemen, it was thought, espoused a firm morality that common soldiers lacked. Furthermore, gentility among officers

³⁵ Cox, 47.

was viewed as essential to maintaining subordination and discipline, and supposedly caused soldiers to feel and behave deferentially to their superiors.³⁶

The most important goal of the ‘Gentility Complex’ was to be recognized as gentlemen by peers, soldiers, and superiors alike. Indeed, “to be both respectful and to receive respect from others was essential to all social interactions.”³⁷ Despite the benefits, the evolution of officers from commoners to gentlemen came with a price: “their isolation, often from their civilian fellow revolutionaries, sometimes from their fellow officers.”³⁸ Continental officers were in a tenuous position; if the British won the war they would surely be hanged. They were constantly one misstep away from losing the respect of their fellow officers. In their quest for fame, they recognized that while one great moment could win you immortality, one dreadful defeat could ruin a career. When seen in this light the officers’ isolation is not surprising. They spent their days receiving and giving orders, fighting battles, disciplining soldiers, and all the while trying to become gentleman; the pressure must have been enormous. The isolation of officers and soldiers’ perceptions of this trend played major roles in the developments of the Continental Army mutinies of 1780-81. More importantly, gentility, its demands and its consequences profoundly influenced the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783, during which a military coup was very nearly launched against the new democratic United States government.

The division between officers and soldiers was also reflected in punishment. Gentility privileged the officers to undergo only non-corporal punishments. When an officer committed a crime, he could expect to be punished with a fine or by shaming, either in public or private. At Valley Forge in June 1778, a Lieutenant Colonel was convicted of the “ungentlemanlike

³⁶ Cox, 21-28.

³⁷ Cox, 27.

³⁸ Royster, 211.

behavior”³⁹ of defrauding his soldiers of rations and money. His punishment was to be cashiered, or publicly humiliated and dishonorably discharged. In addition, his name, place of residency, and crime were to be published in the local newspapers of the area in which he lived. To a gentleman, public humiliation in front of not only the army but civilians as well would have been considered a truly severe punishment. Later that same month a Captain was found guilty of disobeying orders and sentenced to be privately reprimanded by the senior officer of his regiment.⁴⁰ When they engaged in “ungentlemanlike behavior,” officers were punished by reprimand or humiliation, two actions which would clearly offend any gentleman.

As was the case in every other facet of military life, the punishment of crimes was vastly different for soldiers and officers. Military law penalized soldiers and officers separately based on class and gentility distinctions; “while equality before the law existed in theory rather than in practice in civilian life, there was not even a pretense of it in the military one. There, inequality was codified.”⁴¹ Soldiers received almost exclusively corporal, or physical punishments, based on a revised and less severe version of the British Articles of War. Even so, punishments were cruel and often bordered on brutal. The piquet was one such practice, where a soldier was hung by one wrist from a tree and could only support his weight by standing on a sharp stone or blade sticking out of the ground. The piquet eventually fell out of favor as a result of too many disabling injuries. Soldiers could also be forced to run a gauntlet of their peers, who would beat the offender with sharp or hard objects. But by far the most common form of corporal punishment was whipping. The maximum number of lashes allowed was set at 100 in 1776, where it remained throughout the war. This limit was many times lower than that of the British

³⁹ George Washington, *Orderly Book of General George Washington, Commander in Chief of American Armies, kept at Valley Forge, 18 May-11 June, 1778* (Boston: Wolfe and co., 1898), 31.

⁴⁰ Washington, *Orderly Book*, 48.

⁴¹ Cox, 86.

Army, and Congress came under some pressure to increase it later in the war.⁴² Non-corporal punishments for soldiers included confinement, subsisting on bread and water, and even extending one's term of enlistment.⁴³ This represents a fundamental difference in the mindset of officers and soldiers: officers were shamed by being discharged while soldiers looked forward to freedom and possible reenlistment for a new bounty. Soldiers also experienced informal discipline at the hands of their officers. Hitting, punching, and verbal abuse by superiors were accepted aspects of day-to-day military life.

For especially heinous crimes, including desertion, spying for the enemy, and mutiny, capital punishment was an option. During the war, Washington approved hundreds of death sentences by either hanging or firing squad. His first was a soldier convicted of attempting to start a pro-British uprising in New York in 1776.⁴⁴ Capital punishment was not just the most severe punishment imposed by the army; it was also a secular event of sorts, one that demonstrated the strength and power of the military authority. The primary goal of any military punishment was to send a message to the rest of the army and prevent such an offence from happening in the future. To this end, punishments were usually meted out in front of the maximum number of soldiers. Washington and his officers were constantly weighing between harshness and leniency, trying to "find a level of punishment that could establish discipline and subordination yet avoid provoking mass desertions or rebellions against officers."⁴⁵ Punishment was a "tool for instilling subservience, blind obedience, and unqualified respect for rank,"⁴⁶ but it could perform none of those functions if the soldiers reacted negatively to treatment they saw as too severe.

⁴² Cox, 94-98.

⁴³ Maurer, 10.

⁴⁴ Maurer, 13.

⁴⁵ Cox, 75.

⁴⁶ Cox, 76.

One of the officers' most effective ways of maintaining both punishment and peace in the ranks was to adhere strictly to military law and protocol. This involved granting the accused the right to a court martial where justice could be handed down. When soldiers felt that justice had not been served, they were liable to show their discontent by mutinous activity. Joseph Plumb Martin described a scene in 1776 where a Connecticut Sergeant, unjustly accused and convicted of mutiny, was sentenced to death. The prisoner received a pardon at the last possible moment, and Martin describes the reaction of the soldiers: "but the sergeant was reprieved, and I believe it was well that he was, for his blood would not have been the only blood that would have been spilt: the troops were greatly exasperated, and they showed what their feelings were by their lively and repeated cheerings after the reprieve, but more so by their secret and open threats before it."⁴⁷ Martin mentions another incident where soldiers hurled stones at an executioner who was not properly respecting the body of his victim.⁴⁸ These passages reveal how soldiers would have reacted when they believed one of their own was being cheated of justice or treated cruelly.

The other major part of the officers' strategy was to stay within officially sanctioned punishments. General Washington played a chief role in this by vigorously discouraging extra-legal punishments by officers. Reproaching or hitting a man during drill was one thing, but doling out whippings without proper legal procedure was unacceptable. It would have been nearly impossible to get soldiers to respect an officer who treated them in such a manner. Washington also took the 100 lash limit imposed by Congress seriously, even if he did not agree with it. Court martials sometimes tried to get around the limit by sentencing a prisoner lashes for each of several crimes, but Washington usually prevented this. For example, a 1776 court

⁴⁷ Martin, 46.

⁴⁸ Martin, 165.

sentenced a soldier to receive 300 lashes, 100 each for desertion, reenlisting, and perjury. Washington, who had to approve every decision of the courts, reduced the sentence to 100 lashes.⁴⁹

General Washington had a definite idea of which punishments suited which offenses, and he did not hesitate to voice his displeasure when he felt a court's sentence was too lenient. Though he did not have the power to increase the punishment set by a court, he did in rare cases order a retrial. One of the main issues he had with the military legal system was there was no punishment between 100 lashes and death. Often, when courts felt a perpetrator deserved between 200 and 500 lashes, they were forced to hand down a death sentence instead. Washington adamantly argued for an increase to a 500 lash limit, especially after the Pennsylvania Line mutiny, but to no avail. The result was an inordinate amount of death sentences, most of which were never carried out. Caroline Cox gives the figure that only 17-30% of capital sentences actually resulted in executions.⁵⁰ Washington simply could not, nor did he want to carry out every potential execution. The prospect of mercy was as essential a part of the military justice system as the courts. It proved that the commander in chief was paying attention to the soldiers under his command and helped to mollify the negative reactions of soldiers seeing their brothers in arms punished. Washington periodically pardoned groups of prisoners, as on Independence Day 1779 when he released all prisoners under sentence of death. He hoped clemency would encourage the fortunate men to behave themselves better in the future.⁵¹

Some scholars take a hard line approach to Washington's approval of corporal punishment. Neimeyer, for one, is extremely critical of both the commander in chief and his

⁴⁹ Washington, *Orderly Book*, 49.

⁵⁰ Cox, 110.

⁵¹ Maurer, 13.

officers: “like sailors forced to serve a tyrannical captain, soldiers serving in the army were liable to be lashed, maimed, or beaten on the slightest pretext and had little protection against the capriciousness of the Continental Army’s military justice system.”⁵² While soldiers could be lashed or beaten, this rarely occurred on the “slightest pretext.” Washington and his senior officers actively discouraged extra-legal punishments and usually only meted out 100 lash sentences for severe crimes. The British military justice system was much harsher than its American counterpart, revealing that Americans showed restraint when punishing their fellow revolutionaries. Furthermore, the high rate of clemency shows that Washington was concerned with his soldiers’ reactions to punishment. He knew that military justice, under the right circumstances, could drive his soldiers to mutinous action. Given Washington’s concerns, it is probable that the mutinies of 1780-81 were at least partially driven by feelings of resentment caused by severe military punishment.

Illness also had a strong psychological effect on Continental soldiers. The availability of adequate medical care would have strongly influenced morale. During the Revolutionary War, medical technology and knowledge was not advanced, and even if it had been fewer than 200 of 3500 practicing colonial physicians had been educated in medical institutions.⁵³ Most doctors were lay practitioners who had learned their craft as apprentices to older physicians. There were also not enough physicians in the army to treat everyone. If a soldier fell sick a good distance from the nearest army hospital, he was sent back to the regimental baggage train and left to recover on his own.⁵⁴ Even when men were in the vicinity of a hospital or physician, it was not certain that they would be seen in a timely manner. Joseph Plumb Martin describes how he

⁵² Neimeyer, 140.

⁵³ James Gibson, *Dr. Bodo Otto and the Medical Background of the American Revolution* (Baltimore: Charles C. Thomas, 1937), 80-81.

⁵⁴ Martin, 54-55.

broke his ankle and hopped five miles into camp on one leg. When he finally arrived, he was forced to wait over an hour because the surgeon was “at a game of backgammon and could not attend to minor affairs.”⁵⁵ The surgeon’s indifference to Martin’s injury is revealing of Continental medical care on the whole. Compounding the situation, hospitals were breeding grounds for disease and infection. Men who entered hospitals for battle wounds fell ill and died from illnesses they caught in the hospital. James Gibson called typhus fever the “scourge of the army;”⁵⁶ it spread like wildfire in the crowded, unsanitary conditions of army camps and hospitals. Men, he claimed, had a 98% chance of surviving a battle but only a 75% chance of surviving a visit to a hospital. Smallpox also caused a great number of deaths, though the death rate due to the disease decreased dramatically after Washington pioneered systematic smallpox inoculations in 1777.⁵⁷

In many cases, diseases were prevalent enough to restrict military campaigning and affect outcomes on the battlefield. Ann Becker argued that smallpox was the single most important factor in the failure of the Canadian expedition during the winter of 1775-76. In general, the American rural population had little experience or immunity to smallpox, and it was these men who made up the majority on the campaign. When the disease invaded the army camp desertion increased dramatically. New reinforcements fell sick immediately and many soldiers turned to self-inoculation, a practice that may have saved their lives but further weakened the expeditionary army. The stresses of coping with a deadly disease, the winter cold, and determined defenders resulted in the defeat of the Canadian expedition. In 1775, both Washington’s army outside Boston and the British army inside the city had their options limited by men falling sick with the disease. Becker cites smallpox as a reason why the British did not

⁵⁵ Martin, 70.

⁵⁶ Gibson, 83.

⁵⁷ Gibson, 83.

mount another attempt to break out of Boston after the Battle of Bunker Hill. When the British abandoned the city, Washington inoculated men before he sent them inside. In 1777, he began immediately inoculating new recruits; this delayed their absorption into the army but greatly reduced their susceptibility to smallpox.⁵⁸ Smallpox, typhus, and other infectious diseases were part of the army experience for many soldiers, and the apparent helplessness of physicians against such diseases had a negative influence on morale.

Fighting illness among his soldiers was just one of the ways Washington tried to improve the state of his men. His actions show that he was deeply in touch with the suffering of the soldiers. He constantly pleaded with Congress and the states to provide more and better food and clothing, saying in one instance “the soldiers eat every kind of horse fodder but hay.”⁵⁹ Both during and after the war he urged the public to think of the soldiers and reward them for their tremendous sacrifices. Even Martin, whose disdain for colonial officers is matched only by his resentment of ungrateful civilians, grudgingly admitted “the General well knew what he was about; he was not deficient in either courage or conduct, and that was well known to all the Revolutionary army.”⁶⁰ Royster calls Washington the “high priest”⁶¹ of the Revolution, a spiritual guide who embodied Revolutionary ideology yet could be counted on to see the reality of the situation at the same time. He sympathized with his men, but not to the point of mutiny. Nevertheless, “when mutiny and desertion alarmed the colonies he sought the only permanent remedy—a greater degree of comfort for his men.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Ann Becker, “Smallpox in Washington’s Army: Strategic Implications of the Disease During the American Revolutionary War,” *The Journal of Military History* 68.2 (Apr. 2004): 394-422.

⁵⁹ Martin, 287.

⁶⁰ Martin, 122.

⁶¹ Royster, 256.

⁶² Bolton, 73.

If Washington was the leader of the army, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, or “The Baron” for short, was the drill sergeant. Originally an officer in the Prussian army, Baron von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge in 1778 and began training the soldiers in military drill and discipline. He was largely responsible for the professionalization of the Continental Army, transforming it into a well-disciplined force in the same league as British regulars. He also fundamentally altered the way many officers interacted with their men. When training regiments, he had colonels instruct their men personally, something usually done by sergeants. He required officers to visit the sick and wounded and spend time with their men daily. He expected officers to know their men by name and report on their condition, food supply, and general disposition. He urged regimental officers to forego horses while on the march and share the fatigue of their men, as this would strengthen loyalty. Furthermore, he ordered these same officers to always remain calm and in control when correcting disobedience; soldiers did not respond well to a gentleman’s rage. General Steuben strongly prohibited soldiers from straggling so as to prevent looting, a practice which never endeared the army to civilians. His reforms helped transform the Continental Army into “one of America’s great spectacles,”⁶³ something people went out of their way to see. So many sightseers gathered at the siege of Yorktown that they interfered with military operations. It is clear that Steuben viewed the common soldier differently than many American officers and civilians did. According to Royster, “Steuben’s blend of sympathetic insight and aloof rigor enabled him to see the strength of public spirit that kept soldiers in service and helped him to deflect or overcome some of their resistance to working together under orders.”⁶⁴ Once again, Martin admits his respect for

⁶³ Royster, 242.

⁶⁴ Royster, 214.

Steuben and implies that he understood the hardships and sacrifices undertaken by the soldiers.⁶⁵ Washington and Steuben each fought for the soldiers in their own way, Washington by tirelessly trying to improve resources for their welfare and Steuben by teaching officers to care for their men paternalistically. Without a doubt, the presence of these two generals helps explain why only a handful of major Continental Army mutinies occurred during the American Revolution.

Washington was not, however, always successful at supplying his soldiers with adequate food and clothing. As a result, soldiers commonly employed impressment, defined as the “seizure of civilian property by soldiers.”⁶⁶ Martin’s description of the practice depicts it as “*plundering* them of their property, for I could not, while in the very act of taking their cattle, hay, corn and grain from them against their wills, consider it a whit better than plundering – sheer privateering.”⁶⁷ He writes that soldiers usually seized civilian property out of necessity, and neither Martin nor any other author cited in this work give any example of soldiers taking more than they needed or intentionally harming civilians. Martin’s work suggests that most soldiers were conscious of the wrongdoing they were committing but saw no other way to ensure their own survival. Throughout the war, Washington tried to control impressment, consenting to it only in emergencies. He worried that the practice would cause civilians to fear the army and possibly even shift loyalties back toward Britain. Also, impressment elevated the army over the civilian populace, something contrary to Washington’s ideals. States imposed regulations that officially sanctioned the procedure, but the approval process was tedious and unlikely to meet the soldiers’ needs.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Martin, 193.

⁶⁶ E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 77.

⁶⁷ Martin, 114.

⁶⁸ Carp, 79-84.

Lack of supply was the reason soldiers adopted impressment, but why did the army lack sufficient supplies in the first place? The answer is long and complex, consisting of many related failures in the army administrative system. In 1775, most Americans expected a short war, so Congress did not put forth the massive effort needed to establish an efficient supply process. Instead, the Continental Army was supplied by an “unsystematic, ill-managed administrative system that divided responsibility for maintaining the army among congressional committees, state authorities, military commissions, staff officers, and civilians.”⁶⁹ Early on, supplies were brought in reaction to needs of the moment; there was no prospective planning and no unified method of acquiring resources. Even as the size of the army decreased during the 1776 campaign, the quantity and diversity of items required by the army overloaded the fragile administrative system. One issue was terrain; overland transportation was slow, expensive, and dangerous. The biggest problem by far, however, was the human element. There was little army/state cooperation at the upper echelons of the system. Staff officers and state supply officials seldom saw eye-to-eye, and states would often supply their own troops with supplies meant for the Continental Army. Even when supplies made it past state officials, Continental officers would stop wagons and commandeer supplies for their own men. By the time the wagons reached their intended destination, only a fraction of the original supply would remain.⁷⁰

Often, wagons would not reach their intended destinations at all. E. Wayne Carp describes the Wagonmaster Department as the “weakest link”⁷¹ in the army administrative system. The department operated under a perennial shortage of wagons, horses, and drivers. All three were valuable commodities in the civilian market, and if the army could not afford to pay its soldiers it certainly could not afford to compete with civilian wages for drivers. After the

⁶⁹ Carp, 19.

⁷⁰ Carp, 56-59.

⁷¹ Carp, 60.

Battle of Camden, the British destroyed all of the Southern army's wagons, making supplying the troops even more difficult. Those drivers that did work for the army at reduced pay were prone to laziness and irresponsibility. They often drained the brine from barrels of pork, lightening the load but causing the meat to spoil en route. If the terrain was too difficult, drivers would simply dump their loads on the road side and go back the way they came. Even if caught in the act the drivers could not be severely disciplined because they were in such short supply.⁷²

Another issue concerned the suppliers themselves. Some farmers became disillusioned with the Revolutionary cause because of American military defeats and impressment, among other reasons. These men, along with those who simply saw opportunity in the hungry soldiers for huge profit, charged the army exorbitant prices. Many also chose to ferment their wheat into whiskey, lowering the food supply and forcing the army to pay the unfair prices. When France became involved in supplying the war effort, merchants would argue over the right to deliver goods as they sat in France awaiting transport. Unwittingly, the army itself also contributed to the supply shortage. Many Continental and militia defeats resulted in substantial losses of weapons and provisions, as a heavy gun was the first thing a retreating soldier would drop.⁷³ The army administrative system was forced to focus on this, since a weapon was the one thing a soldier needed most to fight. Joseph Plumb Martin exasperatedly commented, "here we drew our arms and equipment. Uncle Sam was always careful to supply us with these articles, even if he would not give us anything to eat, drink, or wear."⁷⁴ Unfortunately, none of these legitimate reasons for supply deficiencies were any comfort to the soldier in the field.

So why mutiny? An analysis of the Continental Army's situation presents a complex picture of underlying physical and psychological causes. Class conflict, honor, gentility issues,

⁷² Carp, 60-63.

⁷³ Carp, 64-67.

⁷⁴ Martin, 63.

punishment, and supply problems all contributed to soldiers' and officers' willingness to perpetrate mutinies to improve their situation. All four major mutinies, the Connecticut Line, the Pennsylvania Line, the New Jersey Line, and the Newburgh Conspiracy, must be examined separately; each had its own set of specific causes and responses that governed its unfolding. By 1780-81, the soldiers' patience with their condition had been stretched to the breaking point. Martin described the feelings of his regiment before the Connecticut Line mutiny: "our condition, at length, became insupportable. We concluded that we *could* not or *would* not bear it any longer."⁷⁵ And yet, even in the face of this "insupportable" condition, only a small percentage of Continental soldiers actually mutinied. For all the complaints and threats, all four major mutinies ended without major loss of life. Even more surprising, all four ended without permanently addressing the major grievances. Why did soldiers, with so many reasons to mutiny, stay in the army and fight until the end of the war? In a particularly emotional passage, Martin endeavors to explain: "the men were exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer. They saw no other alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home. This was a hard matter for the soldiers to think upon. They were truly patriotic, they loved their country, and they had already suffered everything short of death in its cause."⁷⁶ Royster echoes this sentiment, writing "the mutineers were at a disadvantage because they believed in the cause and wanted to remain soldiers."⁷⁷ In the end, each man was given a choice of leaving the army and abandoning the cause or continuing to fight with their demands unmet. Most chose to fight; otherwise, victory in the Revolutionary War could not have been won.

⁷⁵ Martin, 150.

⁷⁶ Martin, 182.

⁷⁷ Royster, 301.

The winter of 1779-80 was the coldest in nearly 40 years, and one of the harshest of the 18th century.⁷⁸ By spring, the troops of the Connecticut Line at Morristown, New Jersey had finally had enough. The food shortage, exacerbated by a state law prohibiting civilians from selling food to the army, produced a spirit of discontent in the ranks. Tempers flared, and it was one such temper that became the immediate cause of the mutiny. On May 25, 1780, one of the soldiers verbally sparred with an officer on the parade ground, and called the whole 8th regiment to parade with him. The 4th regiment formed up and joined the mutiny soon after. Joseph Plumb Martin, who was a member of the 8th regiment at the time and took part in the mutiny, says the men had made no plans in advance, but quickly decided to march toward the 3rd and 6th Connecticut regiments to convince them to take part as well. The officers of these two regiments were unable to prevent the men from claiming their weapons and joining the uprising, and a colonel suffered a bayonet wound in the scuffle. The officers tried every strategy to regain the obedience of their men, from pleading to promising better conditions to threatening, but to no avail.⁷⁹ Sources differ on what happened next. Martin and Neimeyer agree that the Pennsylvania Line was mustered under arms and then ordered back to camp because they wanted to join the mutiny.⁸⁰ Royster, on the other hand, disputes the alleged intentions of the Pennsylvania Line. He asserts that the Pennsylvanians and even rest of the Connecticut troops refused to join the mutiny and checked the impetus of the mutineers.⁸¹ The truth probably lies somewhere in between these views: if the Pennsylvania troops had truly wanted to join the mutiny, their officers' orders to return to camp could have been easily disregarded. At the same time, it is hard to believe that some troops in the army were willing to mutiny while others were

⁷⁸ Royster, 299.

⁷⁹ Martin, 183-185.

⁸⁰ Neimeyer, 148.

⁸¹ Royster, 300.

steadfastly against it. The soldiers of the Pennsylvania Line surely had mixed feelings about the mutiny; they were, after all, suffering the same hardships as their brethren from Connecticut. The fact that they returned to camp when ordered shows that they had not yet reached the same point of discontent as the Connecticut troops. It would be another six months before the Pennsylvania Line would reach the point of mutiny.

The sources do reach an agreement on the manner in which the mutiny came to a close. Martin and Royster similarly describe a speech delivered to the mutinous soldiers by Colonel Walter Stewart of the Pennsylvania Line. The soldiers repeated their grievances regarding food and pay and Stewart, who was popular among privates, expressed his sympathy. He could not, however, condone their conduct. He told the men that their officers were suffering the same as they were, that their complaints were being heard but the officers were powerless to remedy the situation. He also appealed to the soldiers' pride, praising their noble sacrifices, bravery, and perseverance. Finally, Stewart invoked the soldiers' honor, claiming their mutinous activity was staining their character and threatening to undo all the good they had previously done.⁸² Humbled, the soldiers returned to their tents peacefully, and no one was prosecuted for the mutiny. Martin says the soldiers received better provisions afterward, and "had no great cause for complaint for some time."⁸³ Even so, this improved condition lasted only a few weeks at most, though Connecticut troops did not attempt to mutiny again until nearly two years later. As Royster observes, "the most notable element of the mutiny was the ease with which it was overcome."⁸⁴ The soldiers' readiness to give up their crusade and return to order speaks of their loyalty to the cause and their unwillingness to abandon the Revolution. Nevertheless, the mutiny

⁸² Royster, 300-301.

⁸³ Martin, 187.

⁸⁴ Royster, 301.

alarmed civilians and Continental officers right up to General Washington, who told Congress the episode had “given me infinitely more concern than any thing that has ever happened.”⁸⁵

The Pennsylvania Line mutiny began as suddenly as the Connecticut Line mutiny, with little if any planning. On January 1, 1781, New Year’s celebrations were interrupted by a violent uprising. The entire Pennsylvania Line, comprised of two brigades and 1500 men, formed up on the parade ground between 9-10 pm. The men, at least partially inebriated by liquor and “stirred to rebellion by the picture of their sufferings artfully drawn by demagogues,”⁸⁶ seized several nearby cannons and set off on a march to Philadelphia to lay their grievances before Congress. The soldiers reacted violently to their officers’ attempts to stop them, killing one and wounding several others. Still, once the soldiers were on the move the officers were allowed to accompany them, and many, including General “Mad” Anthony Wayne, pleaded unsuccessfully with the soldiers to return to Morristown. The soldiers had many reasons for the mutiny, including the usual suspects of lack of food and pay. They were also disgusted with the lack of sufficient clothing during the cold winter months. The central issue, however, was a conflict over the length of enlistments. Earlier in the war, ambiguous wording on enlistment papers led many soldiers to believe they were enlisting for three years while the army maintained that these enlistments were for the duration of the war. Feeling cheated and taken advantage of, these now veteran soldiers decided to force the army to discharge them. The mutiny ended on January 11th after ten hellish days of uncertainty for Washington and other civilian and army leaders. The soldiers accepted discharge and were not punished; Washington thought it best to let the past be “buried into oblivion.”⁸⁷ Even after their ordeal, most of the soldiers reenlisted for a new bounty

⁸⁵ Martin, 187n.

⁸⁶ Bolton, 138.

⁸⁷ Bolton, 140.

and continued to fight until the end of the war. Once again, the goal of the mutineers was simply to gain redress of grievances.

Unfortunately, the true intentions of the soldiers of the Pennsylvania Line were known only to themselves. Washington's correspondence with General Wayne and Pennsylvania Governor George Clinton, among others, reveals a strong sense of uncertainty concerning the mutineers' objectives. His first response to this "unhappy and alarming defection"⁸⁸, addressed to General Wayne on January 3rd, ordered Wayne to ascertain the soldiers' main grievances and offer to relay them to Congress. He also advised Wayne against an attempt to put down the mutiny by force to avoid further alienating the men. One of Washington and his officers' main fears throughout this episode was that the Pennsylvania soldiers would defect to the British. Many were completely convinced that the men wanted to "turn Arnold."⁸⁹ Lieutenant Benjamin Gilbert of Massachusetts wrote that "they treated with the Enemy and now refuse any reconciliation but all to be discharged from service, and all arerages paid immediately otherways they will march to Amboy and Join the British Army."⁹⁰ In fact, British General Henry Clinton did send an emissary to the mutinous soldiers offering full pardon and royal protection. This offer, though extremely generous by the standards of the time, was immediately and vehemently rejected. This more than anything else indicates that most of the Pennsylvania soldiers never intended to abandon the Revolutionary cause.

Washington's writings make it clear that the mutiny came as no surprise to him. In a circular to the New England States on January 5th, he wrote "it is with extreme anxiety, and pain of mind, I find myself constrained to inform Your Excellency that the event I have long

⁸⁸ George Washington, *The Writings of Washington*, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: American Stationers' Company, 1834-1837), 21: 55.

⁸⁹ Bolton, 139.

⁹⁰ Gilbert, 34.

apprehended would be the consequence of this complicated distresses of the Army, has at length taken place.”⁹¹ He tried to make the best of the situation, using the mutiny to pressure Congress and the states into better providing for the army. In the same circular letter he wrote, “the aggravated calamities and distresses that have resulted, from the total want of pay for nearly twelve Months, for want of cloathing, at a severe season, and not unfrequently the want of provisions; are beyond description.”⁹² He proposed a compromise for the soldiers on January 7th in a letter to Henry Knox: namely, three months pay and a full set of clothing. He went on to state that the rest of the army was in dire need of new clothing as well. This passage is an excellent example of how Washington used the mutiny and the threat of future mutinies to improve the condition of his men.⁹³ He continued to employ this strategy well after the mutiny was over. The end of the Pennsylvania Line mutiny was in a sense anti-climactic; it ended peacefully after a violent start and ten days of drama and intrigue. The final compromise was reached after the soldiers handed over the British emissaries, who were then tried and hanged as spies. Once he was sure the troops were not going to betray their country, Washington hurried to put a positive spin on the mutiny. He wrote to John Sullivan on January 16th:

The decided and unequivocal step the Pennsylvanians have taken, by delivering up the Emissaries from Sir Henry Clinton, is a strong mark of their attachment to the cause of their Country, and detestation of the insidious conduct of the Enemy. In addition to this, their respectful and Orderly behaviour in the whole course of the affair (except in the first instance) gives us reason to expect that they will return to their duty like faithful and good Soldiers.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 61.

⁹² Washington, *Writings*, 21: 62.

⁹³ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 66-67.

⁹⁴ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 113.

Public perception of the mutiny was not always so positive or optimistic. A newspaper article in the *Pennsylvania Packet* criticized the soldiers' grievances as exaggerated. The soldiers marched in a "most tumultuous and disorderly manner,"⁹⁵ all the while complaining of "real and imaginary injuries."⁹⁶ The article reported on General Wayne's uncertainty about the soldiers' intentions, and hinted that the entire line was in danger of defecting to the British. The soldiers' only saving grace was that they handed over the British spies. However, a completely different picture could be painted if one read a different paper, like the *New Jersey Gazette*, for example. The *Gazette* characterized the soldiers' grievances as real and just, and the men having marched with "great regularity and good conduct...less damage than is common on the passing of troops."⁹⁷ Not only did the men hand over the British spies, they "rejected with so much honor and indignation"⁹⁸ the entreaties from the enemy. The closing paragraph contains the statement, "upon the whole, this affair...has only served to give a new proof of the inflexible honor of the soldiery."⁹⁹ Citizens could form vastly different opinions of a mutiny depending on where they lived and what newspaper they read.

Washington's other major concern was that mutiny would spread to other elements of the Continental Army. He intended to confront the mutineers himself but remained at his headquarters in New Windsor for fear that his own garrison would mutiny in his absence. After the mutiny ended, he warned Congress to expect similar incidents if they did not address the soldiers' grievances: "I cannot but flatter myself the United efforts of Congress and the States will be exerted to prevent by redressing the real grievances, a repetition of similar or even more

⁹⁵ "An Account of the Late Disturbances in the Pennsylvania Line," *Pennsylvania Packet*, January 27, 1781.

⁹⁶ "An Account of the Late Disturbances in the Pennsylvania Line," *Pennsylvania Packet*, January 27, 1781.

⁹⁷ "Trenton, January 17," *New Jersey Gazette*, January 17, 1781.

⁹⁸ "Trenton, January 17," *New Jersey Gazette*, January 17, 1781.

⁹⁹ "Trenton, January 17," *New Jersey Gazette*, January 17, 1781.

dangerous disturbances than those which have happened in the Pennsylvania Line.”¹⁰⁰ General Nathanael Greene expressed his concern that mutiny would “run through the whole line like wildfire.”¹⁰¹ These concerns were not unfounded. Barely a week after the Pennsylvanians returned to camp, 200 New Jersey Continentals stationed at Pompton, New Jersey mutinied and began marching to Morristown, intending to incite the rest of the army to join them. The troops expected to be dealt with in the same manner as the Pennsylvania Line, and Washington knew it. The commander in chief realized he could no longer show leniency toward mutineers and expect to maintain the Continental Army. On January 21st he wrote, “this dangerous spirit will subvert the whole army, if not quelled by a decisive effort of authority. I have ordered a large detachment to march from West Point to compel the mutineers to submission.”¹⁰² By the 27th this detachment had caught up with and surrounded the mutineers, forming up in “as regular a manner as if to attack the Enemy.”¹⁰³ Faced with a superior force willing to use arms against them, the New Jersey troops surrendered unconditionally. Most of the soldiers were pardoned, but two of the ringleaders were executed by firing squads drawn from the mutinous regiments they had been leading.¹⁰⁴

In short, Washington made an example of the New Jersey mutineers. From then on, it was clear that mutiny was not acceptable and would be actively repressed by use of force. Washington’s general orders on January 30th delivered a strong reproach to the mutinous soldiers and a discouragement to any considering the act in the future. In perpetrating this crime, the soldiers were not only dishonoring themselves and the army, but their country as well. Six years

¹⁰⁰ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 113.

¹⁰¹ Nathanael Greene, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard K. Showman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 5: 582-583.

¹⁰² Washington, *Writings*, 21: 125.

¹⁰³ Gilbert, 35.

¹⁰⁴ Gilbert, 35.

earlier the colonies had begun a “contest for Liberty and Independence ill provided with the means for war, relying on our own Patriotism to supply the deficiency.”¹⁰⁵ In embracing mutinous conduct, the men were abandoning the patriotic principles of the Revolution and sullyng the reputation of the United States. Suffering, Washington said, was to be expected in this kind of conflict. He once again expressed his sympathy for the plight of the army, but assured them his officers, Congress, and the states were doing their best to provide for them.¹⁰⁶ For the most part, Washington’s hard-line stance toward the New Jersey mutineers had the desired effect; no major soldiers’ mutinies occurred after January, 1781. There were minor uprisings, but they were dealt with quickly and severely. For instance, months later at the siege of Yorktown twelve men attempted to incite the Pennsylvania Line to mutiny, complaining that promises made to them earlier in the year had not been fulfilled. General Wayne intervened and ordered all twelve either shot or hanged.¹⁰⁷ In May, 1782, the entire Connecticut Line planned to seize artillery and march on the Hartford General Assembly to demand redress of their grievances. This would have been a major uprising, but a soldier betrayed the plot to the officers before the mutiny could get under way. One suspected leader was executed, and the soldiers were thoroughly admonished in a sermon by Chaplain Abraham Baldwin.¹⁰⁸ These cases are few and far between. After early 1781 it appears most soldiers resolved to serve out their enlistments in spite of less than satisfactory conditions.

Continental officers, on the other hand, did not mutiny until 1783 when news of a peace treaty with Britain became imminent, and with it the dissolution of the Continental Army.

Where soldiers’ mutinies revolved around their present condition, officers primarily conducted

¹⁰⁵ Washington, *Writings*, 21:159.

¹⁰⁶ Washington, *Writings*, 21:158-159.

¹⁰⁷ Bolton, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Furlong, “A Sermon for the Mutinous Troops of the Connecticut Line, 1782,” *The New England Quarterly* 43.4 (Dec. 1970): 621-623.

mutinous activity while considering their futures. Soldiers clamored for food, clothing, and other supplies necessary for their survival, but officers' demands were both more complicated and politically charged. A coalition of officers had the potential to become more dangerous than any wartime threat, save the enemy. The worst a soldiers' mutiny could do was deprive the army of a few thousand men, but an officers' mutiny could destroy it altogether. As Royster contends, "A disgusted soldier would go home, but disgusted officers found friends in the army and in political office who wanted to use their positions to increase the authority of government, especially Continental government."¹⁰⁹ This is exactly what happened in the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783, one of the American Revolution's most infamous events and one of its great stories.

By the final year of the war, Continental officers had many reasons to be disgruntled. Fighting had essentially ceased in late 1781 with the British surrender at Yorktown, but a formal peace treaty had yet to be signed. Boredom became one of the army's chief enemies, one that gave officers plenty of time to envision their futures. Many did not like what they saw; they were apprehensive about leaving the brotherhood of their fellow officers and venturing into civilian life once again. They feared that the genteel status and respect they had earned through military service would not follow them when they returned home. In addition, they had sacrificed some of the best years of their lives to win American independence. Many had missed out on the opportunity to learn a civilian trade and a means for making a living. Furthermore, they knew their last month's army pay would not carry them very far. In light of these concerns, the officers decided they deserved pensions and repeatedly petitioned Congress to provide them. As the inevitable disbanding of the army approached, these petitions became decidedly more urgent.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Royster, 311.

¹¹⁰ Richard Kohn, "The Coup d'Etat that Failed," *Society* 12.4 (1975): 30.

Richard Kohn terms the Newburgh Conspiracy the “Coup d’Etat that failed,” and this is no exaggeration. It began in November 1782, when two officers rode from the main army headquarters at Newburgh, New York, to Philadelphia with yet another petition for Congress regarding pensions. This petition was unlike those which had gone before it in that it contained thinly-veiled threats alluding to a possible officers’ mutiny. Congress was informed it could expect “a convulsion of the most dreadful nature and fatal consequences,”¹¹¹ if it did not concede to their demands. There were those in Congress who wished to satisfy the officers’ demands, but they were a minority. Congress was divided over many issues, reflecting a deep political conflict between those who supported a strong central government and those who wanted to concentrate power with the individual states. Nationalists were in the process of trying to pass a new centralized financial system that would give the central government control over the new nation’s finances. They saw the officers’ threats as a tool they could use to persuade the rest of Congress to accept their political agenda. After all, if the central government was going to be responsible for paying officers’ pensions, it needed power to raise the revenue. The officers became more and more useful as petitions continued to arrive in the coming months, and the Nationalists were able to win some victories. Opposition in Congress, however, remained steadfast on the issue of pensions.¹¹²

As January moved into February and March, correspondence between officers, Nationalists, and Congress itself intensified. The officers continued to plead their case, and the Nationalists continued to use “scare tactics”¹¹³ to convince Congress the threat of an officers’ mutiny was real. When these strategies had no effect, more ambitious plans were formed. Kohn states that several prominent Nationalists, including Robert Morris and Alexander Hamilton,

¹¹¹ Kohn, 31.

¹¹² Kohn, 31-33.

¹¹³ Kohn, 33.

began plotting to ferment a real mutiny at Newburgh. They established contact with a group of officers Kohn refers to as the “Young Turks,” whose *de facto* leader was General Horatio Gates, a former Revolutionary hero and an old enemy of Washington. The Nationalists’ plan was to deceive these officers, to help them start a mutiny and then immediately betray them. The plan was a “treacherous double game, fraught with uncertainty,”¹¹⁴ but for the Nationalists it was the best way to prove to Congress the validity of the officers’ threats. The first part of the plan was relatively easy; Gates and the “Young Turks” began planning a mutiny in February. Kohn argues that they planned a full-scale coup d’etat aimed at deposing the democratic government. It is unclear exactly how far the mutineers intended to carry their uprising; their only goal may have been to force Congress to award them pensions. Still, Kohn’s argument is well within the realm of possibility. The second part of the Nationalists’ plan involved informing General Washington of impending danger while leaving out any specifics. The politicians knew they were playing a dangerous game; only someone as well-respected and admired as Washington could stop an officers’ mutiny once it began.

Finally, in March 1783, after their financial plan had once again failed in Congress, the Nationalists gave the go-ahead. On the 10th, anonymous inflammatory letters began circulating around the Newburgh camp, calling for a meeting of all field officers on Tuesday the 11th at 11:00 am. The language of the letters can only be termed extreme; the author condemned Congress as uselessly indecisive and American citizens as ungrateful. Officers were urged to reject a future of bitterness and poverty and join in arms to take what they deserved. The letters even covertly criticized Washington’s patience and leniency with Congress.¹¹⁵ As was the case with the New Jersey Line mutiny, the commander in chief responded swiftly and aggressively.

¹¹⁴ Kohn, 33.

¹¹⁵ Kohn, 33-34.

He prevented the officers' from gathering by calling general orders on the morning of the 11th and rescheduled the meeting for Saturday, March 15th. Finally, he implied that he would be absent from the meeting by requesting a full report afterwards. Washington's plan had several merits. He hoped five days would give the men time to cool their tempers, and his supposed absence from the meeting would give the officers no reason to rendezvous in secret. He clearly suspected Congressional involvement, perhaps even deciphering the involvement of Alexander Hamilton. He wrote a letter to Hamilton on the 12th:

There is something very misterious, in this business. It appears, reports have propagated in Philadelphia, that dangerous combinations were forming in the Army...From this, and a variety of considerations, it is firmly believed by *some*, the scheme was not only planned, but also digested and matured in Philadelphia; but my opinion shall be suspended till I have better ground to found one on.¹¹⁶

If Hamilton was involved in the plot, he could scarcely have believed Washington was not suspicious of him. The General could do nothing about the intrigues of the politicians, but he resolved to quell the mutiny which threatened both his country and his ideals. On the prescribed day, when the meeting was just under way, Washington entered the meeting house and asked to be allowed to speak. Into the silence that followed he delivered a speech that crushed the mutineers' resolve and ended the mutiny once and for all. He began with a stinging rebuke of the anonymous author of the inflammatory letters, criticizing him as a deceitful demagogue, an expert at arousing the passions of others for insidious purposes. He accused the author of trying to overthrow liberty in favor of tyranny, and of attempting to persuade others to abandon their wives and children to the enemy. He openly wondered if the man was a spy, a betrayer of the cause, or a supporter of military dictatorship. In short, he forced his officers to "face the

¹¹⁶ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 216.

implications of rash action—civil war, treason and the undoing of eight years’ effort.”¹¹⁷

Washington went on to defend the noble Revolutionary ideals and the virtues of Congress.

Finally, he pledged himself to the officers, promising to continue to do whatever was within his power to reward their sacrifices. He ended the speech with inspiring praise, celebrating the achievements of the army and the great legacy it would leave behind if the officers remained loyal during its darkest hour.¹¹⁸

What came next is widely seen as one of the defining moments of the American Revolution. Washington began to read a letter from Joseph Jones in order to demonstrate the faithfulness and good intentions of Congress. Unable to decipher the wording, he took out his glasses, saying to the gathering, “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.”¹¹⁹ The effect of this soft-spoken statement on the stunned congregation can not be overestimated. Kohn describes the scene, the conflicting emotions, and the officers’ response:

This simple dramatic gesture, an act that blended Washington’s charismatic influence with the deepest symbolic patriotism, was overpowering. The tension, the imposing physical presence of the Commander-in-Chief, the speech and finally an act that emotionally embodied the army’s whole experience, combined all at once and shattered the officers’ equanimity. Spontaneously they recoiled. Some openly wept.¹²⁰

The end of the Newburgh Conspiracy marked a turning point in the history of the United States. It ensured the Continental Army would dissolve peacefully, leaving power in the hands

¹¹⁷ Kohn, 35.

¹¹⁸ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 222-227.

¹¹⁹ Washington, *Writings*, 21: 222n.

¹²⁰ Kohn, 35.

of a civilian government. It proved, once and for all, the admirable character and devotion to the cause espoused by most of the army's soldiers and officers. The public did not learn of the complex plotting behind the conspiracy, and Kohn states they did not fully appreciate how close to open mutiny the officers had strayed. Hence, the public reacted positively to the conspiracy; "instead of arousing suspicion and distrust by its flirtation with mutiny, the army emerged from the Newburgh affair with enhanced prestige and honor."¹²¹ When Congress passed a bill granting officers certificates worth five years worth of full pensions, the crisis truly was over.

If this compromise is taken at face value, it appears that the officers received their just rewards. The truth, however, is more unfortunate. The certificates handed out by Congress were not payable until 1790. By then, many officers had descended into poverty and been forced to sell their certificates to speculators for a fraction of the full value. Soldiers fared even worse once dismissed from the army. They expected land, clothing, and hospitality from civilians, and received none of these. Many were ragged, dirty, and poor for years or even their whole post-war lives.¹²² Indeed, "continental Army veterans felt the full sting of the nation's ingratitude."¹²³ Public perception once again shifted in favor of militia, as many forgot the essential contributions of the Continental Army. This did not change until the 19th century, when citizens increasingly began to view the army as a republican institution. People started to appreciate the Continental Army and its veterans, romanticizing the soldiers' patriotism and lamenting their unfair post-war treatment. The "Suffering Soldier" became a powerful image and the catalyst behind the Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818. The image was so influential, that only those veterans who could show proof of poverty received any monetary compensation under the

¹²¹ Kohn, 36.

¹²² Martin, 279-292.

¹²³ John Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, & Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 2.

new law.¹²⁴ By 1857, \$60 million in Revolutionary War pensions had been awarded to veterans by an appropriately grateful citizenry.¹²⁵

The mutinies of 1780-83 were a central part of the Continental Army's experience during the war. They represent some of the darkest periods of the Revolution, when the army and the Revolution itself were in jeopardy. Soldiers had so many reasons to mutiny, including lack of pay, food, clothing, and a civilian populace that refused to provide enough of these supplies. Freezing conditions, poor medical care, and harsh army discipline and punishment contributed to the lingering resentment that finally boiled over in 1780-81. Officers revolted when concern for the future encouraged them to demand pensions at the end of the war. Both officers and soldiers demanded things they felt they deserved or had been promised them. Yet during these bleak times, the army persevered and survived to fight another day. Whether it was because of a charismatic leader or a deep, personal desire to see the goals of the Revolution come to fruition, most soldiers and officers refused to abandon their country in its time of need. Honor and a deep devotion to the cause enjoined men to continue to fight until the end of the war. Most had never intended to break up the army or desert the Revolution; mutiny was a last resort employed to gain redress of grievances. Even though the endurance of Continental soldiers and officers was repeatedly stretched to the breaking point, the army kept fighting, and the Revolution was won.

¹²⁴ Resch, 1-9.

¹²⁵ Bolton, 246.

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