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Cincinnatus and the Disbanding of Washington's Army

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Cincinnatus and the Disbanding of Washington’s Army

Who was Cincinnatus? It bespeaks a great loss of our own traditions that there is a great number of Americans who do not know. Cincinnatus was the favorite model of Roman virtue, frugality, integrity, and above all, of republican citizenship, even for the Romans themselves. He was the farmer who plowed his own land, the man elected consul in 460 B.C., the man called in 468 to the dictatorship—the supreme but temporary military command—to deliver the Roman consular army from the besieging Aequian forces. Summoned from the plow, he saved the Roman army, defeated the Aequians, and went straight back to his farm after holding his office only sixteen days.

Such is the Cincinnatus of tradition. Scholars have scoffed at the historical accuracy of the tradition, but this is beside the point. At issue here is not what the absolute truth was, but what the tradition was, for it is the tradition, and not what modern scholars have reconstructed, that had effect upon later readers and thus upon later events. This paper will deal with a few effects of this tradition upon American history at the close of the Revolutionary War.

At that time, George Washington was Cincinnatus. His contemporaries thought of him that way, especially after the event, and His Excellency General Washington, consciously or not, acted to encourage the comparison. Finally, he or the generals of his immediate staff put the tradition to good use. I will suggest, and attempt to support the suggestion, that one purpose for the establishment of the Society of the Cincinnati was to encourage a mutinous officer corps to disband, to obey the disbanding order in good order, cheerfully, proudly, and without embarrassing everyone by standing under arms insisting on being paid.

Washington lived simply, and was forever insisting that one must be a citizen first and an officer afterwards; he lost no opportunity to present himself as what his first name declared him to be, a farmer (georges). No matter what the intent, the effect was to put Cincinnatus in the mind of those who met him. Louis-Philippe, Comte de Segur, recounted in his memoirs: “He did not flaunt the magnificence displayed by generals under our monarchies; he was the embodiment of the republican hero.” Similarly, Pierre Etienne Duponceau was distinctly unimpressed by the General’s residence. Describing a visit there in 1780, when the war was still far from over, he wrote: “the most that can be said for it is that it is a modest habitation, quite in keeping with the idea we have of Cincinnatus and of those other great commanders of the Roman Republic. Such is the idea that I formed of it at the time.” Washington’s predilections in this direction were sincere and constant. He was an absolutist about his real persona as citizen farmer and about the temporary nature of his military office. A story Colonel Hamilton liked to tell about him illustrates this precisely. Sir Henry Clinton had sent him a message under white flag. It was addressed “To Mr. Washington.” An unusual address from one commander-in-chief to another. Though it is possible that Sir Henry wished to insult General Washington, it seems more likely that he merely wished to accommodate Washington’s known republican style. But General Washington took this further than Sir Henry could have imagined. Hamilton’s story goes on: the General took the missive, looked at it, and said: “This letter is directed to a planter of the State of Virginia. I shall have it delivered to him at the end of the war. Until that time it will not be opened.” A second was delivered a short time later, addressed “To his Excellency, General Washington.”
The image was constantly enough maintained that we can believe it was the man's actual nature. Eight years after the white flag incident, Jean-Pierre Brissot wrote home: "You have often heard him compared to Cincinnatus. The comparison is doubtless just. This celebrated general is nothing more at present than a good farmer, constantly occupied in the care of his farm and the improvement of cultivation. He has lately built a barn...."

The winter of 1782/83 found his Excellency "in a disagreeable state of suspense respecting Peace or War" as he himself put it to Major General John Armstrong Jan. 10. Nothing could advance until word was received from King and Parliament. The General's army had not been paid for years, four, five or six years, in fact, depending on length of service. The General actually wanted to go on holiday, and his expressed reason for not doing it was that the forces would mutiny in his absence. He was acutely aware of the plight of the officers: "As officers, they have been obliged to dress, and appear in character, to effect which, they have been obliged to anticipate their pay or participate their estates." He went on to explain to his correspondent (Joseph Jones, in a letter dated March 18, 1783) that disbanding men without certifying the amount owed them would be "to open the Gaols to them," and that even if their accounts were certified by the paymaster, they would have to sell their certificates for whatever speculators would give for them.

Washington sympathized with his forces and was constantly attempting to make their situation more tolerable. Much of his effort in this direction was a matter of constantly pleading with civil authorities to secure pay. Some of the officers themselves were doing what they could. By the end of February, rumors had reached Congress in Philadelphia "that there are dangerous combinations in the army and... that they are about to declare that they will not disband until their demands are met" (Joseph Jones to G.W. Feb. 27, 1783). This idea was, in fact, being "industriously circulated," as the General put it, throughout the army. On March 10 the widespread rumors were confirmed with the distribution, through every state line of the army, of two anonymous circulars. One proposed that the general and field officers meet at 11:00 A.M. March 11 "to obtain that redress of grievances which they seem to have solicited in vain." The other, similarly addressed to the officer corps, advised:

That in any political event, the Army has its Alternative: If Peace, that nothing shall separate you from your arms but Death. If War, that courting the auspices and inviting the Direction of your Illustrious Leader, you will retire to some yet unsettled country, Smile in your turn, and mock when their fear cometh on. Never sheath your swords until you have received full and ample Justice.

The author(s) of this propaganda very clearly had in mind nothing short of blackmailing the Congress and the delinquent and ungrateful states. The Commander-in-chief countered in two ways: to regain the initiative and to gain time, he called the meeting, but for the fifteenth instead of the eleventh; and wrote to two congressmen, Joseph Jones and Alexander Hamilton, entreating them to "push this matter [of certifying amounts due in back pay] to an issue," assuring each of them "it may... with propriety be suggested to them, if any disastrous consequences should follow, by reason of their delinquency, that they must be answerable to God and Country for the ineffable horrors which may be occasioned thereby." On the thirteenth, he released three resolutions of Congress answering a written complaint which Congress referred to as The Memorial from the Army—which I have so far found no copy. The resolutions covered present pay, arrears, and the raising of security for the amount of the arrears. For the first, the Superintendent was instructed to see to present pay "as soon as the state of the public finances shall permit;" for the second, the several states were abjured to pay their troops through 1780; for the third, assurance was given that "Congress will make every effort," not to pay the arrears, but to secure the certificates, i.e., to provide for meeting interest on them so that they would have some value.

Then, at the "Grand Convention of Officers," his Excellency General Washington gave a brief but effective address. Witnesses reported that it moved many of the officers present to tears.
His best weapon, a weapon which would in fact remain the only one his to wield, was appeal to pride. In a reprise of this theme, he implored them to trust Congress rather than let a distrust of that body lead them to "cast a shade over that glory which has been so justly acquired." By faith in Congress, detestation and horror of the anonymous proposals, "you ... will pursue the plain and direct road to the attainment of your wishes; you will defeat the insidious designs of our Enemies who are compelled to resort from open force to secret artifice. You will give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue, rising superior to the pressure of the most complicated sufferings" (Writings of Washington v. 26, p. 222).

Washington's earlier problem had been to prevent the dissolution of the unpaid army. This matter had reached the point of crisis in the fall of 1780. The crisis was eased not with pay, but with hope: October 21, 1780 Congress promised half-pay for life to the officer corps, in lieu of present pay. The problem was by this time, March of 1783, turned around. Now it was felt there would be peace, and the official word of it would bring the embarrassment of an unpaid army which might remain an army longer than anyone wished. Washington, in one of the private letters to Congressmen in which he urged settlement of accounts, summarized the situation this way:

It may be said by those who have no disposition to compensate the services of the Army, that the officers have too much penetration to place dependence (in any alternative) on the strength of their own arm; I will readily concede to these gentlemen that no good could result from such an attempt; but I hope they will be equally candid, and admit that much mischief may flow from it, and that nothing is too extravagant to expect from men, who conceive they are ungratefully and unjustly dealt by (to Joseph Jones, March 18, Writings of Washington, v. 26, p. 294).

One cannot but notice that with this letter, Washington acknowledges that there is a party of ingrates in Congress, and that the suspicions of the officers had foundation in fact. His letter of the next day, to Lund Washington, expresses the officers' suspicions—and his own—with great eloquence:

If the state will not furnish the supplies ... to feed, clothe, and pay the army, if they suppose the war can be carried on without money, or that money can be borrowed without permanent funds to pay the interest ... if they have no regard to justice, because it is attended with expense ... if it is presumed there is no bounds to the patience of the army; or that when peace takes place, their claims for pay due, rewards promised may die with the military non-existence of its members—if such, I say should be the sentiments of the states, and ... their conduct, or the conduct of some, does but too well warrant the conclusion, well may another anonymous addressee step forward, and with more effect than the last did, say with him "You have arms in your hands, do justice to yourselves, and never sheath the sword til you have obtained it."

But George Washington could never speak to his army in this manner, and had to worry about others who felt more free to do so. His correspondence from this period shows constant concern to have the army end its military existence in good order, without any final blot on its honor. But his area for action was starkly limited to things which could be done at no public cost. It will be seen that even under such an imposing limitation, the General was quite resourceful.

The half-pay for life for officers was unpopular by this time; with the officers for its aspect of the never-never, and with the people for its being open-ended. Congress resolved, March 22, at the request of the officers to commute this to five full years pay, or securities ("The same as shall be given to other creditors of the United States") on interest at six per cent. The General seems to have reserved this good news for timely use: The expected word from King and Parliament would make his problem more acute, and this would mollify it. The news of the five years full pay was, in any event, published simultaneously with the word of the "definitive treaty of peace" (General Orders, March 30, 1783. What the G. O. of this date speak of as the "definitive treaty" was actually a definite cease-fire. The peace was not settled until September 3).

There followed a series of acts for the improvement of morale, none of which involved any cost beyond what had already been expended. These were principally aimed at the officer corps. On April 1 he recommended an altering of the military establishment so that officers at the rank of colonel, lt. colonel, and major would be in command of regiments. "As I conceive no reasonable objection can now
be made... and as it would be a gratification to a number of very meritorious officers, I could sincerely wish Congress would take the matter up as early as might conveniently be done." His next step to shore up the morale and patriotic goodwill of the officers was to propose that "some general rule [be] devised (without inconvenience to the public, or detriment to the service) for giving brevet commissions of a superior rank to those they now hold to all such veteran officers as have served faithfully and bravely in the same grade since the 1st of January 1777? for example, what difficulties would there be in the way of promoting... all lts of that date now actually in service to the rank of majors; all majors... to be l't colonels etc. The adoption of the measure would... be considered as a just reward to merit, and, without encreasing the public expense one farthing, would add greatly to the satisfaction of many very worthy and deserving characters" (to the Secretary of War, Writings of Washington, v. 26, pp. 279-281). To broadcast a series of promotions when the war was already, in effect, over, could have no other end in view than to provide a potentially dangerous class of officers with something comforting to take home with them. But even this was beyond Washington's power. Congress did not put this into effect until Sept. 30. This was rather tardy: in the interim, a contingent of Pennsylvania troops mutinied and obliged the Congress to leave Philadelphia and reconvene in Princeton—the alternative was to remain in session in Philadelphia and face the demands of the troops. The last item of business conducted (except for adjournment) was to instruct the War Secretary to inform the Commander-in-Chief of "the state and disposition of said troops... that he may dispatch to this city such forces as he may judge expedient for suppressing any disturbances that may ensue." We are never informed of the number of the "said troops," but Washington called them "a handful of men contemptible in numbers, and equally in point of service," and sent "three compleat Regiments of infantry and a Detachment of artillery"—over 1,500 men—to deal with them (Writings of Washington, v. 27, p. 32).

Two other measures pertaining to morale were effected as an immediate consequence of the arrival in camp of the official dispatch proclaiming the cessation of hostilities. As no instructions from Congress accompanied the news, his Excellency, concerned over (1) lack of "vigorous preparations for departure" on the part of the British, (2) "new and unusual demands of compensation from the noncommissioned officers," and (3) the probability that those enlisted for the duration of the war would instantly demand discharge, called a staff meeting (April 18). The questions he put to his officers and aides were whether to publish the news or suppress it, what to do about the men "engaged for the war," and "what preparatory measures can or ought to be taken respecting the dissolution of the army?" (Writings of Washington v. 26, pp. 328, 329).

They determined to publish the peace in the day's Orders, and then ordained a measure to satisfy the soldiers and non-commissioned officers: at their discharge Congress should permit them "to take with them as their own property, and as a Gratuity, the Arms and Accoutrements they now hold." General Knox, chief of artillery and Washington's chief aide, submitted a plan for a society of officers, The Cincinnati (Winslow Warren, The Society of the Cincinnati, p. 5). As adopted at a subsequent meeting and presented to Washington for approval, and then to the officer corps, the preamble to the Institution concluded:

The officers of the American Army, having generally been taken from the citizens of America, possess high veneration for the character of that illustrious Roman LUCIUS QUINTUS CINCI-NATUS; and being resolved to follow his example, by returning to their citizenship, they think they may with propriety denominate themselves The Society of the Cincinnati.

The principles of institution proclaimed: preservation of the rights and liberties of human nature, determination to promote union and national honor between the states, perpetuation of friendships formed during the war, and beneficence "towards those officers and their families who unfortunately may be under the necessity of receiving it" (Warren, op. cit. 18-19). For the establishment of its fund membership required one month's pay.
The prospective members were instructed to write it off the amount of their arrears (“the regiments to do it regimentally, and the generals and other officers not belonging to regiments, each for himself”). The form for this instructed the Paymaster General to pay the treasurer of the Cincinnati “one month’s pay of our several grades, respectively, and deduct the same from the balance which shall be found due to us on the liquidation of our accounts” (Warren, op. cit. 28).

With membership would go a medal, suspended on a two inch wide ribbon, blue, edged with white, descriptive of the union of France and America, viz:

the principal figure
CINCI\-NATUS:
three senators presenting him with a sword and other military ensigns—on a field in the background, his wife standing at the door of their cottage—near it, A PLOUGH AND INSTRUMENTS OF HUSBANDRY round the whole, OMNIA RELINQUIT SERVARE REMPUBLICAM
on the reverse
sun rising—a city with open gates, and vessels entering the port—fame crowning Cincinnatus with a wreath, inscribed VIRTUTIS PRAEMIUM
below, hands joined, supporting a heart, with the motto
Esto Perpetua
round the whole
SOCIETAS CINCINNATORUM INSTITUTA
A. D. 1783
(from the Institution of the Society, available in full in Warren, 16-31)

It cannot be ascertained whether his Excellency instructed Knox to draw this plan or not. Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, states flatly that he did, but Rochambeau was en route to France at the time Knox presented the draft. He either knew of Washington’s instructing Knox to draw up the proposal, heard of it through intermediaries, or merely made the probable assumption and asserted it as fact. No evidence surfaces in the Washington Papers to indicate that Washington knew anything of it, but there would have been no need of any covering correspondence, for it all took place at headquarters. That Washington was not at the May 10 meeting in which the final draft of institution was determined upon is made matter of record by the institution itself. It concludes with a resolution that Generals Heath, Steuben, and Knox “be a committee to wait on his Excellency the Commander-in-Chief, with a copy of the Institution, and request him to honor the Society by placing his name at the head of it.”

The immediate effect of the Society would be a gathering of officers by regiments in a spirit of noble generosity about their pay. Writing off a month of it in such a spirit will have been—whether by design or not—a salubrious exercise for all. It permitted each to think of himself not as one ungratefully treated by his country, but (justly!) as one who had served it selflessly all along. It provided also a title, but one so fiercely republican that the king of Sweden would later refuse permission for his few eligible subjects to hold it—This is Washington’s own understanding of the reason for the Swedish king’s refusal (letter to Comte de Rochambeau, Aug. 20, 1784). Further, it was a glory and a title they could share with Washington. By acclamining him President General of the society, they acknowledged him as Cincinnatus, and they were all of them Cincinnati. Perhaps they could even participate in his example: Washington, as everyone knew, had forsworn all recompense from the start.

In this event it was well that the men should be taught to think the crown of fame the proper virtutis praeemia. On May 26, two weeks after the founding of the society, Congress furloughed those who had signed on for the duration; when the peace became official, their furloughs were their honorable discharge. They were sent home each with a slip of paper signed by the Paymaster General, asserting that the amount written on the line was the balance owed to the bearer.

The medals they had been told the Society would provide them spelled out that their real recompense was glory, and served to remind them to accept it in patriotic and noble spirit. Later they would be paid in lands, but in the interim their reward—the only one Washington’s headquarters could send them off with—was a share in the republican glory of Cincinnatus. In proper form “Cincinnatus” returned to his farm and became the simple farmer. But his time he spent busily lobbying for an alteration of the Articles of Confederation. Nobody knew better than he how ill-de-
signed for survival the Confederation was: it couldn’t even pay an army! His quiet activities, and those of others like-minded to him and inspired by him, came to fruition in the summer of 1787, with his presidency (chairmanship, one would say nowadays) over the convention to amend the Articles. That Convention produced our Constitution and our country. Washington was called upon again to lead, and again was the Cincinnatus, returning to his farm.

Our Revolution was over, but this same revolutionary fervor spread, and was nowhere else handled so happily: In France it was betrayed by the First Consul Napoleon, and was left to smoulder on under the emperors of the Napoleonic succession. Dampered, it was preserved to inspire Karl Marx, who can be looked upon as a retarded or a latter-day Tom Paine. Looking back upon the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the South American Revolution (about which more in a moment), and further, upon the ever-abiding, stifled revolutionary republican fervor in France, he made a universal generalization from the recent tide of history and postulated that revolution is inevitable. When the revolutionist zeitgeist came to czarist Russia (where the Czars looked upon Moscow as the Third Rome), it was betrayed, with the republicans over-run by absolutists who took Marx at face value, established his writings as testament, and, deeming themselves absolutely right, ruled absolutely.

In South America, Simon Bolivar, who had witnessed the French Revolution and had traveled in the Post-Constitution United States, did unto Spain as Washington had done unto England. But when tempted with power, Bolivar yielded: as he liberated the provinces he became President of Columbia, including Venezuela and New Granada in 1819; Dictator of Peru (1822), and Perpetual Protector of Bolivia (1825). Finally, his own constitution for Bolivia proposed that the executive be [the world’s first!] President-for-Life, with power to name his successor! (May, 1826).

Do I go too far to suggest that the difference in political happiness between the U.S., France, and the South American Republics is that their revolution fell to “another Julius Caesar,” and ours to “another Cincinnatus”? 

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