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February 1777

Written by Andrew Stough

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"America owes foreign nations only for their assistance – not a rescue."

We left General George Washington in January 1777 at his quarters at Morristown, tense in his anxiety as to the intentions of the British who were now snug and comfortable in their quarters in New York and the surrounding area.

British Generals Howe and Cornwallis were not the end of Washington's problems. Holding the force together to fight another day would have been difficult enough but he had problems with his Generals, Congress, and the individual colonies. Ambitious generals felt that they could do a better job as Commander-in-Chief. The quasi-revolt of the generals was foiled by bickering and machinations among themselves. Congress unrealistically did not want to be bothered by the army's constant need for supplies ranging from shoes, to ball and powder, to rations for a daily meal. The individual colonies felt much the same as Congress. They had sent the troops - what more could you expect? If they also sent any kind of logistical support for their troops they wanted it used only by their troops and no one else.

The American armies and their leaders were what we today would call "On the Job Trainees." At first Washington had been indecisive, and had given too much authority to his generals, not all of whom felt responsible to Washington as they had been forced upon him by Congress. Time and trials had matured Washington and he now was undeniably in charge of the entire military force. While he would continue as the leader of the central unit of the Army he would, from now on, undeniably be the Commander-in-Chief.

Congress had seen the British military evolve from a force to defeat the French and Indians into an occupation force imposed on the colonies. Thereafter they were always fearful of being dominated by a strong military.

When fleeing Philadelphia to Baltimore, Congress gave Washington Carte Blanche to act on his own, believing that he would live off the land and take retribution against Tories who aided or sided with the King. More importantly they wanted him to stop pestering them for support. Instead, he allowed residents with sympathies loyal to King George III to remain in their homes and businesses so long as they took no action, verbal or physical, against the American Cause. Those who would not do so were escorted to British outposts and turned over to live with their colonial masters; usually a difficult and humiliating experience. He also deplored the British requirement for residents to feed and house their troops and refused to require residents to feed, clothe and quarter troops as Congress wished. However, at a later date he would of necessity resort to a modification of local assistance. But, it was only out of desperation and the necessity to keep the body and soul of the army together to allow it to fight another day.

After the Declaration of Independence Washington irritated most of the colonies by inferring that he did not consider them sovereign but a part of a greater nation, to be called "The United States" and by integrating men from all the states into unified units of the Continental Army. He also used supplies intended for "Their Men" for all of the troops. Neither Congress nor the Colonies understood his view of melding the army and the people into a concept of nationhood as opposed to sovereign states operating within a confederation.

Oddly enough, while others berated him, his men, who suffered most from these policies, accepted his views even if Congress and the colonies had not. As the war spread and became more active, the citizens who had previously not understood his actions honored him for his consideration as opposed to the harshness of the British in their occupation of the same contested areas.

Never understood by the British but accepted by his own forces was his battle strategy. He knew that his Army was not large enough or strong enough to challenge the British Army head on. Hit and run tactics had been successful as they continued the war. Britain, to put down the rebellion must destroy any organized armies in the field – especially Washington and the Continental Army! His policy of tactical withdrawal never allowed the enemy to destroy his army in battle. This saved lives, something the troops could understand. It also saved vital resources. Although a force might be technically defeated, the army remained whole and was viable, able

to draw upon new enlistees and militias. Seemingly defeated, American forces just faded away, recouping their losses, then returned to fight another day. Seemingly unsuccessful, these battles were usually more costly in men and supplies to the Redcoats and Hessians than to the Americans. The soldiers and Generals began to realize that by well timed tactical retreats and the preservation of resources that victory could be won through wearing down, immobilizing, and containing the British Lion.

This policy of valor in defeat could not have gone on forever without intervention on the American side.

How did Washington's policy of honor and liberty save the American forces? Credit to Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Revolution was Washington's policy of honor and liberty. The American forces could not have been convinced Britain's European enemies to come forward, not to rescue, but to assist the embattled Americans. The eventual declaration of war by France and other nations diverted British attention and resources to other areas of the world but it was primarily the logistical support by France and other nations that allowed Americans to prosecute the war to it's end, by their own force of arms and under their own direction.

In this manner we owe foreigners only for their assistance and not for a rescue. Washington stated and enforced a policy that American troops would always be under American Command. This policy remained in effect for over 200 years. More recently, American forces have been commanded by foreign officers under United Nations control; a first in American history.

References: Encyclopedia Britannica "The Revolutionary Years"; Christopher Ward's "War of the Revolution"; Marcus Cunliffe's "George Washington, Man and Monument", James Thomas Flexner's "George Washington, The Indispensable Man".

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