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May 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



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A treaty with the mainstream Cherokees at DeWitt's corner is spoiled by Dragging Canoe. Life in and beyond the mountains is never peaceful - not during, nor after the war years.

May was a month of calm with little or no activity by the British. However, the lack of any British activity is disconcerting to General George Washington who is unable to determine what the King's army will do next. American General Charles Lee, formerly a British officer, knows the concern that the British place upon protecting their supply van and their depots is not concerned by the lack of overt or known covert activity. He knows that General William Howe will not move until there is an overwhelming force that can both meet Washington on the field and ensure the safety of the supply train and the depots.

A greater part of Washington's success has been his lack of such an unmanageable supply train. Mobility has allowed his army to become the "Will o' the Wisp" who strikes hard and fast then disappears in what the British consider a most ungentlemanly, and unsoldierly manner and that does not allow Howe time to dispatch a sufficient force to engage him on the field of honor.

Despite the uncertainty about Howe, Washington stays busy, he is still haggling with Congress to get more men and to stop the practice of enlisting men for the calendar year. The result being that promptly on New Year's Day the encampment begins to empty and he is back to square one to enlist and train new men prior to taking the field in the spring.

To add to his woes the challenges to his authority continues. General Horatio Gates and his allies in Congress again raise the hue and cry that Washington should be replaced. The question arises, "Why can't Washington, the Commander in Chief, achieve a victory in a set-piece battle and end the war?". If Washington can't do it then find a new General who can! Namely pick Gates himself, or General Thomas Conway or perhaps General Charles Lee who says that since he has been an officer in the British army and knows how to fight them, he should be the choice.

Howe's inactivity is not entirely of his own choosing. He has no orders from London to act and is waiting on a determination by the King and his Ministers as to how they wish to prosecute the war. Britain got into this mess primarily by underestimating the colonists. For several hundred years Britain ignored the colonies, leaving them to govern and defend themselves. The king's expeditions against the French in Canada have been expensive in men and money. To fund his continuing actions he illogically claims that he has fought the French in America for the colonies' protection. Now, he says they must pay the price of that war and the cost of supporting British troops to continue the defense of the colonists. Of course, it was not through concern for or because of the colonists but through his continuing European wars which drained the treasury and depleted his army, requiring the employment of 29,000 Hessians to fight his errant subjects in America.

Another cause for the slow pace of the war was George III's belief that Americans were a simple lot who loved their King. That only a handful of radicals are causing the trouble. Give them time and the radicals would fall apart on their own and the people would come back into the fold. Another fallacy was that these simple people were unable to govern or protect themselves. Also, he liked to think that Americans really did not want independence and the burden of governance.

Above all other misconceptions was a contempt by the King and his Generals for the Americans as fighting men. If time and internal squabbling fail he will fall back on the armed forces. The British navy, the world's finest, would transport and supply the army and blockade the colonies. Then there is the Army that he thinks can crush the rebels in a wink. Add to this that recurring wars have drained Britain of both men and money. If the colonists could be brought back into the fold without expenditure of too many men or too much money it would save much argument with the Houses of Parliament.

The war is not popular in Britain. There are those in Parliament who side with the Colonies and are outspoken in their support. Many others are disaffected because their constituents are fed up with the constant loss of men

in wars and the ever-rising taxes to pay for the king's military adventures.

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Considering all of this, the King felt there was no rush to determine what to do. It was easier to delay a decision than to fight with Parliament. Then again, if ignored, the colonists might get tired of the fight and the war might just go away.



Howe, more qualified as an administrator than a fighting general, did not to have been too concerned about the delay. War Archives to Song of Liberty. CASARid. On the Under a Greater Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

necessary. Howe could wait; time and attrition were on his side. Washington knew that the Continental Army must act for two reasons. First and foremost is the cost in men and materiel; more men die in static camp than in battle or on the march. Secondly, marching and drilling incessantly lead to boredom. Boredom leads to insubordination and desertion, especially with Americans who are not accustomed to discipline even in battle. He must fight while the troops are fit and eager to the task.

To this end he studies Howe's position. There are several options Howe might take but the most probable appears to be a move south against America's largest city Philadelphia. Such a move would threaten Congress and he feels that it would bring Washington to battle and a disastrous defeat leading to an end of the rebellion.

Washington arrived at the conclusion that Philadelphia and Congress is Howe's next target. Washington sees this as an opportunity to harry and attrite the British. He arrays his other armies to counter any British move other than a march south. His own forces he plans to expose in such a manner as to draw Howe south too fast for a supply train and heavy equipment to keep up with marching troops. If Howe will strip his army to follow Washington's rapid retreat, then rear guard actions and destruction of bridges should weaken him to the point that Washington could turn and join battle at the most suitable times and places.

Hopefully, at some point he will find Howe's forces strung out enough to allow the Continentals to strike at the weakest point with an overwhelming force. On a smaller scale, such tactics have thrown units of Howe's forces into confusion followed by headlong retreat. If this is accomplished, Washington will destroy Howe's remaining force piecemeal or if necessary retreat into Pennsylvania to regroup and prepare a new attack. Washington's plans have always been based on offense and victory but he has always planned, if necessary, to leave a way out to preserve the army for future offensive actions.

The month of May passes. Washington and the Continental Army finally depart Morristown. June will be a renewal of hostilities with formal British forces in this war for independence.

Note: There is continuing activity by militia and other non-uniformed forces and of course, there is continuing Indian activity along the western frontier. Generally speaking, the Cherokee agree to a treaty at DeWitt's Corner in late May. However Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee break-away is still on the warpath. Life in and beyond the mountains is never peaceful – not during, nor after the war years.

References: Christopher Ward's "War of the Revolution"; Marcus Cunliffe's "George Washington, Man and Monument", Encyclopedia Britannica.

