

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - An Analysis Of Argument In George Washington's Newburgh Address: "Address To The Officers Of The Army," March 15, 1783



George Washington's "Newburgh Address" ranks among the most consequential speeches given during the Revolutionary War and it is certainly one of the most famous addresses delivered by America's first president. The speech often receives passing mention in rhetorical histories of the early nation, but scant attention has been paid to it by scholars of communication. My interest in the address is based both on its rhetorical-historical import and on the location in which it was given. Newburgh, New York is the city in which I live, so I hope to explicate the argumentative dimensions of this famous speech that was conceived and delivered in my own back yard.

Newburgh is the location of Washington's Winter Headquarters, of the Last Encampment of the Continental Army, and of the New Windsor Cantonment. It is located on the Hudson River, about 15 miles north of West Point and 55 miles north of New York City. Because of its unique geographic properties, it was a heavily fortified area during the Revolutionary War. Washington spent the last years of the war in Newburgh, composed this address at his headquarters there, and delivered it just a few miles down the road at the Army cantonment.

The address effectively forestalled a mutiny that might have ended all hope for American independence just as the peace treaty with Great Britain was being negotiated and signed.

Examination of the conspiracy and Washington's address allows for a better understanding of just how fragile the notion of effective American self-governance really was and how tenuous were principles of nationalism that we take almost for granted today.

1. *Background to the Speech*

In the fall of 1782, peace talks were underway in Paris and, with the Revolutionary war nearly ended, there was a fair amount of apprehension that Congress would disband the Continental Army without adequately compensating either officers or common soldiers. (Some had not been paid for years.) The soldiers had been disaffected for some time, and, by the time the Army cantoned near Newburgh for the winter, there were widespread desertions, hangings in effigy, and other symptoms of discontent. Regular soldiers had heretofore been the trouble-makers, but now Army officers, upon whom Washington counted to keep order among the troops, had also become restive. On at least seven occasions the Commander in Chief warned civilian authorities that his officers were disgruntled, writing that the patience of these men was "soured by penury and... the ingratitude of the Public" (in Ferling, p. 309). Just after Christmas, the officers acted. They sent a memorial to Congress, written by General John Knox, which detailed their grievances over pay and suggested that they wished to renegotiate the terms of their future compensation. "We have borne all that men can bear - our property is expended - our private resources are at an end, and our friends are wearied out and disgusted with our incessant applications," they pleaded (in Worthington, pp. 291-293). The officers had in 1780 been promised pensions - half-pay for life - but now, realizing that they stood little chance of ever collecting, they pressed Congress for a commutation that would afford them an equivalent lump-sum payment at the conclusion of the war (Kohn, 1970, p. 189).

The nationalists in Congress led chiefly by Alexander Hamilton and the Morris - Robert and Gouverneur - realized that they might use the threat of unrest within the Army to augment the powers of the national government. Congress debated and rejected payment plans for the Army in the first two months of 1783 and, by late February, the nationalists had devised a plan to further pressure the government. The Newburgh conspiracy was hatched. They would encourage, if not incite, further discontent and even disorder among Army officers, use evidence of that unrest to manipulate Congress, and forewarn Washington of at least a part of their scheme, counting on his ability to control his men.

Hamilton wrote to Washington in late February, telling him that the country would be bankrupt by June. There would be no more money to fight the British or to pay officers' pensions, if peace had been achieved by then. Hamilton decried

the lack of “wisdom and decision” in Congress and suggested that if the Army again petitioned about payment, such an action might sway “those weak minds which are influenced by their apprehensions more than their judgments.” Hamilton cautioned Washington that the danger in such a maneuver was “to keep a complaining and suffering army within the bounds of moderation.” Washington should see that “prudent persons” handled the petitioning and could, if things turned ugly, “bring order perhaps even good, out of confusion” (in Syrett, 3: pp. 253-255). Washington did not rise to the bait, but only affirmed the right of his officers to just compensation and continued to pressure Congress himself on their behalf. He warned those meeting in Philadelphia that he would remain in Newburgh and “Try like a careful physician to prevent if possible the disorders getting to an incurable height” (in Fitzpatrick, 25: p. 270).

The conspirators contacted several high-ranking officers who were headquartered in Newburgh with Washington, among them General Knox (to whom they anticipated that the Commander would turn for counsel), and General Gates, second in command after Washington and one of his few antagonists. Gates was highly popular with young, middle-grade officers and it was within the ranks of these men that the conspiracy gained a life of its own. Major John Armstrong, a former aide to Gates, wrote the words that nearly caused the officers to mutiny (Wright, p. 178).

On the morning of March 10, 1783, Armstrong’s anonymous “address” circulated throughout the cantonment. The document, from a “fellow soldier,” urged all general and field officers to attend a meeting the next day to formally demand a redress of their grievances. The leaflet angrily addressed the officer corps’ predicament over pay: “If this, then, be your treatment while the swords you wear are necessary for the defense of America, what have you to expect from peace, when your voice shall sink and your strength dissipate by division?” (in Brookhiser, p. 42). Even more alarming, the call drew a blueprint for rebellion that would blackmail Congress into action. The Address suggested that the officers resolve to resign the Army *en masse* if the war continued (leaving the country – especially the coast unprotected), or, if peace were achieved, that they refuse to lay down their weapons and move against Congress. In either case, mutiny would bring about the fall of the government, something that the British had not been able to accomplish in eight years of fighting. If the officers at Newburgh rebelled, then the entire Army encamped here, numbering over 8,000 strong, could not be controlled.

News of the document was leaked to Washington and he forbade the meeting, issuing General Orders on March 11th that urged the officers to “pay very little attention to [the] irregular invitation” and to denounce such “disorderly proceedings.” Instead, he called a meeting of all officers for four days later, on March 15th, where representatives of all regiments would decide what steps should be taken “to attain the just and important object in view” (in Harwell, p. 500). A second anonymous letter, dated March 12, also circulated throughout the cantonment, implying in emotional language that Washington secretly sided with the disgruntled officers and might countenance mutiny. The signs of upheaval, were in the Commander-in-Chief’s word, “ominous.”

The day Washington had set for the meeting arrived. The officers crowded into their new wooden meeting hall, called alternately the Temple of Virtue or the New Building, and saw General Gates presiding at the front of the room, surrounded by some of Washington’s most trusted men. Washington himself was nowhere in sight. Just as the meeting began, Washington strode into the hall and requested from Gates that he be allowed to speak. The General began to read his “Address to the Officers,” haltingly at first, according to eyewitness accounts, and then more fluently.

2. Organization of the Text

Washington’s text was organized around the contrast in ethos between himself and the anonymous author of the summons. He began his address by directly referencing the first letter that had been circulated throughout the cantonment, stating flatly that the attempt to convene the officers was “inconsistent with the rules of propriety,” that it was “unmilitary,” and “subversive of all good order and discipline” (in Padover, p. 253). The General briefly mentioned the second treasonous missive that had circulated throughout the camp, as well. This “anonymous production,” he claimed, was “addressed more to the feelings and passions, than to the reason and judgment of the army” (p. 253). He buttressed his confrontational opening by suggesting that “his fellow soldier” should “have had more charity” than to cast doubt on Washington’s character; than “to mark for suspicion the man, who should recommend moderation and longer forbearance” in the name of “justice” and “love of country” (p. 253).

Washington persuasively assumed the support of his audience, suggesting that the assembled officers understood his known record of good will toward them and of his sound judgment in the conduct of the war. This record scarcely required

explanation, he asserted: "If my conduct heretofore has not evinced to you, that I have been a faithful friend to the army, my declaration of it at this time would be... unavailing and improper" (p. 254). Yet declare it he did. The Commander-in-Chief portrayed himself as open, candid, moderate, practical, and prudent. By contrast, the officer who penned the summons, who intended to take "advantage of the passions, while they were warmed by the recollection of past distresses, without giving time for cool, deliberative thinking" was lacking in candor, intemperate, imprudent, disrespectful of the army's honor, and, notably, anonymous (p. 253). Washington appealed to the officers' nearly filial sense of devotion to him by recalling his own actions on behalf of their mutual cause. He established common ground with his listeners, using a classic periodic sentence that linked his fate with theirs: "... as I was among the first who embarked in the cause of our common country (*he was the first soldier commissioned by the Congress*); as I have never left your side one moment, but when called from you on public duty (*he had not furloughed himself in eight years*); as I have been the constant companion and witness of your distresses, and not among the last to feel, and acknowledge your merits (*he had written Congress tirelessly on their behalf*); as I have ever considered my own military reputation as inseparably connected with that of the army (*he had served without pay and had rebuffed every suggestion of future reward*); as my heart has ever expanded with joy, when I have heard its praises, and my indignation has arisen, when the mouth of detraction has been opened against it; it can *scarcely* be supposed, at this late stage of the war, that I am indifferent to its interests" (as quoted in Brookhiser, p. 43). Washington forcefully reminded his audience that he had labored as long and as hard as any of them, and that he had served them well, frequently advancing their interests at the expense of his own. Mutiny would be an assault on his ethos, character, and integrity (Ellis, p. 142).

3. Analysis of the Text

While ethos was the main issue around which Washington's address coalesced, the question at hand was clearly deliberative: what should be done about a seemingly recalcitrant Congress and the demonstrable need of the army for pay. Correspondingly, Washington's speech dealt with the two main topics of deliberative rhetoric – the honorable and the advantageous (Kennedy, p. 49).

Washington argued that the actions urged in the summons were inexpedient (or disadvantageous) because they would not promote the object of securing payment

for the officers and because they would produce great harm to the revolutionary cause. He reviewed the recommendations of the "anonymous addresser," deriding the proposals as "in either alternative, impracticable in their nature" (pp. 254-255). Regarding the first suggestion, that if the war continued, the troops would move into the wilderness and leave "an ungrateful country" to defend itself, Washington queried, "But whom are they to defend? What would become of "Our wives, our children, our farms and other property, which we leave behind us," he asked. "Or, in the state of hostile separation, are we to take the two first (the latter cannot be removed) to perish in a wilderness with hunger, cold, and nakedness?" (p. 254). The second suggestion was far worse, Washington asserted. "If peace takes place," the army would contemplate "something so shocking" as the action of turning their swords against Congress until they had "obtained full and ample justice." This second choice amounted to "plotting the ruin of both [the Army and the Congress], by sowing the seeds of discord and separation" between military and civil authority (p. 255). These were two "dreadful alternative[s]," the Commander-in-Chief argued: there was no advantage in either "deserting our country in the extremest hour of distress, or turning our arms against it" (p. 254). Washington exclaimed, "My God! What can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather is he not an insidious foe?" (pp. 254-255).

Washington pressed the point even further, employing the Aristotelian concept of the possible (Kennedy, pp. 174-175): not only were the recommended measures "in either alternative impracticable," they were also impossible (p. 255). The Commander argued that "A moment's reflection will convince every dispassionate mind of the physical impossibility of carrying either proposal into execution (p. 255). Thus, going into the wilderness or turning their swords against Congress represented options that were simultaneously disadvantageous and impossible. Instead, Washington counseled patience. The expedient course of action involved embracing the principle of consistency and continuing to press Congress for adequate pay. The General urged his officers not to repudiate Congress, as it was his "decided opinion, that that honorable body entertain exalted sentiments of the services of the army, and, from a full conviction of its merits and sufferings, will do it complete justice" (p. 255). Washington's rhetorical strategy combined flattery with pretense: he had written privately that full compensation for the officers was unlikely, at best. The Commander argued publicly that the soldiers must realize that Congress faced a "variety of different interests to reconcile" and

that “their deliberations are slow;” but that the members “would not cease, till they [had] succeeded” in providing just compensation for the officers (p. 255). To distrust Congress would itself be inexpedient, particularly if that distrust might precipitate actions that would, in Washington’s words, “cast a shade over that glory, which has been so justly acquired, and tarnish the reputation of an army, which is celebrated through all Europe for its fortitude and patriotism” (p. 255). To take such a tack would surely imperil a positive congressional response and, in all probability, prove counterproductive to the officers’ cause, “cast[ing] it at a greater distance” (p. 255).

Turning from a consideration of the expedient to a discussion of the honorable, Washington further appealed to his officers, arguing that to reject the anonymous summons would constitute “one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue” (p. 256). Quite obviously, in the Commander’s view, the anonymous appeal, as well as the actions it portended, were dishonorable in the extreme and should be denied vehemently. In essence, Washington shamed his officers into embracing patriotism and further patriotic action (Wills, p. 104). Again employing a classic periodic sentence, he pleaded: “... let me conjure you in the name of our common country, as you value your sacred honor, as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the military and national character of America, to express your utmost horror and destation of the man, who wishes... to overturn the liberties of our country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood gates of civil discord, and deluge our rising empire in blood.” The army officers had consistently displayed “faithful and meritorious services” to their nation and their sacrifices should not be dishonored by rash action (p. 256).

This argument from service or sacrifice played back to Washington’s opening remarks regarding his own sacrifices on behalf of his country and linked his fate once more with that of his officers. Even as he called for further honorable service from them, as their Commander, he inverted the concept of service, inviting his soldiers to command him. He said: “I feel for an army I have so long had the honor to command, oblige me to declare in this public and solemn manner, that, in the attainment of complete justice for all your toils and dangers... you may freely command my services to the utmost extent of my abilities” (p. 256).

These three extended references to service formed the foundation of the final paragraph of Washington’s formal remarks. They addressed what the Commander termed the officers’ “opinion of right,” that is, what their honor obliged them to do: namely, to embrace a calm, patriotic and political heroism that would mirror

their courage on the battlefield (Wills, p. 104; Rhodehamel, p. 83). These were virtues with which Washington had clearly associated himself throughout his address, thus linking his deliberative advice to the officers to the character he had constructed for himself.

4. *A Famous Post-Script*

Arguably the most compelling part of this speech are the words that were not written in Washington's text, but were delivered extemporaneously. Virtually all accounts of the address and its reception mention a post-script, although some historians debate whether these words were uttered before or after the main speech. To support his claim that the officers should be patient with Congress, Washington had brought with him a letter from Joseph Jones, a member of Congress from Virginia. The General apparently began to read the letter and stumbled over Jones's handwriting. He is reported to have paused and reached for his new spectacles (new just that January and never before worn in public), saying: "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself growing blind, as well" (in Harwell, p. 501). Officers who wrote about their impressions of the speech indicated that this remark completed the rally to Washington's side. Some of the men were said to have wept openly (Kohn, 1975, p. 32).

Washington left the Temple as soon as he had finished reading the letter. For his efforts, the officers voted a unanimous resolution of thanks to the Commander in Chief, noting that they "reciprocated his affectionate expressions with the greatest sincerity of which the human heart is capable" (in Schwartz, p. 45). They expressed confidence in the justice of Congress, asked Washington to act in their behalf, and sent a deputation to Congress to represent their case. They also repudiated the anonymous "fellow soldier" who had penned the proposals of mutiny. Washington's rhetorical genius had permanently averted the officers' uprising and the disastrous consequences it would likely have engendered. Three days later, word of the final peace with Great Britain reached Newburgh.

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