

His Excellency, General Washington

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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During the heady days of July 1776, after the Declaration of Independence was approved, British commanders in New York sought out General George Washington hoping to resolve the conflict.

On July 14, they dispatched an emissary by boat with a message for Washington. The letter was addressed to "George Washington Esq." Washington's aides rejected the letter, stating that there was no such American leader. After all, General Washington was no lawyer. Washington refused to accept a public letter not properly addressed to his public office. Howe eventually relented, sending a note to "General Washington."

As a British officer in the French and Indian War, Washington had been burned by signing a communication in French whose meaning he did not fully understand. As the supreme commander of the Revolutionary Army, he would not make a similar mistake. Nor would he suffer patronizing British indignities to Americans. To Washington, words mattered.

Indeed, Washington understood that in the perilous revolutionary conditions of the newly independent country every detail mattered. To his brother, in May of 1776, Washington wrote: "To form a new Government requires infinite care and unbounded attention; for if the foundation is badly laid, the superstructure must be bad ... A matter of such moment cannot be the Work of a day."

On July 2, the commander of the Continental Army had issued general orders which anticipated the approval of the Declaration on July 4: "We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die: Our Country's own Honor, all call upon us for vigorous and manly exertion, and if we now shamefully fail, we shall become infamous to the whole world. Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the supreme Being, in whose hands Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble Actions."

On July 9, the text of the Declaration of Independence reached Washington in lower Manhattan. Washington issued orders for "several brigades ... to be drawn up this evening on their respective parades at six o'clock, when the Declaration of Congress, showing the grounds and reason of this measure, is to be read with an audible voice." Historian Pauline Maier noted: "Then, with the British `constantly in view, upon and at Staten-Island,' as one participant recalled, the brigades were `formed in hollow squares on their respective parades.'"

Washington's general orders read: "The Continental Congress, impelled by the dictates of duty, policy and necessity ... (has) been pleased to dissolve the Connection which

subsisted between this Country, and Great Britain, and to declare the United Colonies of North America, free and independent States."

Washington added in the third person: "The General hopes that this important event will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer and soldier to act with fidelity and courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his country depend, under God, solely on the success of our arms; and that he is now in the service of a state possessed of sufficient power to reward his merit, and to advance him to the highest honors of a free country."

Washington aide-de-camp Samuel Blachley noted: "The Declaration was read at head of each brigade," "and was received with three Huzzas by the Troops -- every one seemed highly pleased that we were separated from a King who was endeavoring to enslave his once loyal subjects. God grant us success in this our new Character."

"Reading of the document led to such uproarious enthusiasm that soldiers sprinted down Broadway afterward and committed an act of vandalism: they toppled the equestrian statue of George III at Bowling Green, decapitating it, then parading the head around town to the lilting beat of fifes and drums. The patriots made excellent use of the four thousand pounds of gilded lead in the statue, which were melted down to make 42,088 musket bullets."

In late August, Washington wrote again to the Continental Army: "The hour is fast approaching, on which the Honor and Success of this army, and the safety of our bleeding Country depend. Remember officers and Soldiers, that you are Freemen, fight for the blessings of Liberty -- that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men."

Always practical, Washington added: "Be cool, but determined; do not fire at a distance, but wait for orders from your officers -- It is the General's express orders that if any man attempt to skulk, lay down, or retreat without Orders he be instantly shot down as an example, he hopes no such Scoundrel will be found in this army; but on the contrary, every one for himself resolving to conquer, or die, and trusting to the smiles of heaven upon so just a cause, will behave with Bravery and Resolution."

Only after seven long years would heaven bestow by Treaty (1783) the smile of peace upon the United States of America, now recognized in law by the British Empire.

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