



History lesson for white supremacists

By William C. Kashatus

The radical white supremacist group that is scheduled to rally Sept. 25 at Valley Forge National Historical Park to protest the “corrupt dictatorship” of President Bush needs to learn its American history.

Jeff Schoep, commander of the National Socialist Movement, insists that the Bush administration’s failure to close “America’s southern border to illegal non-white immigrants and potential terrorists” undermines the “separatist views of George Washington and the ordinary soldier” at the winter encampment of Dec. 19, 1777, to June 19, 1778. Schoep sees no difference between the white supremacist groups that plan to hold the rally and the Continental Army. “We are patriots,” he declares, “and we are honoring our founding fathers.”



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Whether the National Socialist Movement goes through with its rally, it should be condemned for its outrageous interpretation of American history in general and of the Valley Forge encampment in particular.

There is no denying that George Washington, like many of the founding fathers, was a slaveholder. But he was well aware of the moral contradiction between his slave-holding and the revo-

lutionary principles of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The War for American Independence forced Washington to become more progressive in his attitude toward African Americans.

Initially, he refused to allow blacks to serve in the Continental Army. But when Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, offered slaves their freedom in exchange for fighting in the British Army, Washington quickly rescinded his objection and allowed “free Negroes” to enlist in the patriot army. In fact, African Americans made up perhaps 2 percent of the 230,000 soldiers who fought with the Continental Army by the war’s end.

Soldiers who suffered the severe hardships of the Valley Forge winter were a varied lot. Although those of English, Scottish, Irish and German backgrounds predominated, one diarist of the period noted that most American regiments included “Negroes in abundance.” The largest concentration of black soldiers served in the First Rhode Island regiment under the leadership of Gen. James Varnum. In addition, a group of 47 Indians joined the Army as scouts.

Just as important was the personal impact Washington’s black soldiers had on him. His respect for their courage made him increasingly troubled by the degrading effects of slavery on his own character. By 1778, he began to express his earnest desire to “get clear” of those he held in bondage and stopped selling them. Upon his death in 1799, Washington provided for the freedom of his remaining 123 slaves in his last will and testament.



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How we interpret Washington’s legacy at any given time is at least as much a reflection of how our nation feels about itself as it is of a figure who some glorify as America’s greatest leader and others criticize as having feet of clay.

Regardless of the perspective, those who pass judgment on Washington have a responsibility to investigate the facts as well as the tacitly understood moral conventions of the time in which he lived before slapping him and the Continental Army with the label “white supremacists.”

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