

The Apotheosis of George Washington

America's Cincinnatus and the
Valley Forge Encampment

by William C. Kashatus III

In the early evening hours of December 19, 1777, the Continental Army, commanded by Gen.

George Washington, marched into Valley Forge to encamp for the winter while the British occupied Philadelphia. Within days, six inches of snow blanketed the ground and the nearby Schuylkill River was frozen solid. Undernourished and poorly clothed, and with no immediate prospects for provisioning, many of the nearly twelve thousand soldiers assembled succumbed to the ravages of disease. About two thousand men would lose their lives to typhus, dysentery, and pneumonia that winter.

Within a year's time Washington's military fortunes had changed dramatically. Lauded as a military genius for crossing the Delaware River to surprise—and soundly defeat—a contingent of British and Hessian soldiers at Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas Day 1776, Washington was now at his lowest point. His troops had recently been deceived at Brandywine and outmaneuvered at Germantown. British forces had seized control of Philadelphia, the capital city, forcing Congress to relocate to the west. Washington's military skill was being questioned by both military officers and members of Congress, some of whom even conspired to remove him from the army's command.

During the last days of December 1777, as famine reached epidemic proportions among the soldiers, a local Quaker resident wandering through the woods near the encampment allegedly happened upon "a tall and lonely man driven to his knees in the bitter snows of Valley Forge." As he approached the kneeling figure, the quiet observer "heard the voice of one speaking in earnest prayer." Much to his surprise it was Washington himself. Astonished by the sight, the Quaker stood still "until the

general having ended his devotions, arose and with a countenance of angelic serenity returned to his headquarters."

More than any other place associated with the American Revolution, Valley Forge represents the suffering and sacrifice required to achieve American independence (see "Valley Forge: Commemorating the Centennial of a National Symbol" by Lorette Treese in the spring 1993 edition). For Washington, it

Rembrandt Peale's *Reviewing His Ragged Army at Valley Forge* (1883) remain among the most famous paintings depicting these themes. Of greater impact, however, were the literary works of the nineteenth century that hallowed Washington's encampment experience.

Works such as Mason Weems' *Life of Washington* (1800), Henry Woodman's *History of Valley Forge* (1850), and Washington Irving's *Life of Washington* (1859) encouraged

country's cause. Modest in the midst of pride; in the midst of folly, wise; calm in the midst of passion; cheerful in the midst of gloom; hopeful among the despondents; bold among the timid; prudent among the rash; generous among the selfish; true among the faithless; greatest among good men and the best among the great—such was George Washington at Valley Forge."

Although the heroic symbolism surrounding Washington and the Valley Forge encampment is so deeply entrenched, and because it has become difficult to distinguish the myth from the reality of the events that took place, recent scholarship reaffirms the admiration due Washington, who did endure tremendous difficulties during those grueling six months. Contemporary historians measure Washington's greatness by the character he displayed when faced by seemingly insurmountable circumstances that would have destroyed less courageous men. One of the most commonly accepted images of George Washington among historians is that of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (519?-439? B. C.), the legendary citizen-soldier of the Roman republic.

Much like Cincinnatus, Washington preferred to lead the life of a gentleman-farmer and tend to his plantations. However, he also embodied the spirit of the dutiful public servant who, lacking personal ambition, abandoned (at least for some time) his plough out of a deep sense of moral obligation to lead his country in battle. Despite the severe hardships of war and the threat of mutiny, Washington, like his counterpart, the Roman general, persevered and eventually emerged an indispensable hero of republican virtue, honor-bound tradition, and selfless commitment to the needs of his countrymen. While this image of Washington is usually



Rembrandt Peale immortalized the "Father of His Country" with his 1824 oil on canvas, *George Washington, Patriae Pater* (facing page). Emanuel Leutze glorified him with *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (above).

represented his darkest hour as a military leader. Yet his ability to survive and even flourish under adverse circumstances won him the esteem and affection of his countrymen, who would later deify him in art and literature.

As Americans strove to meet the high standards they set for themselves as a nation during the nineteenth century, they cast George Washington and the winter at Valley Forge in simple and symbolic terms to inspire greater patriotism. Washington's experience at the winter encampment became a popular device for describing the American values of sacrifice and dedication to a national cause. Lambert Sach's *George Washington in Prayer at Valley Forge* (1854) and William Trego's *Washington*

antebellum Americans to view the Virginian's greatness as a consequence of his religious piety. These accounts portrayed a dispirited soldier kneeling in prayer in the bitter, blinding snows of Valley Forge, reinforcing the belief that religious piety was fundamental to the character of Washington, the private man. By the turn of the nineteenth century, American writers had so completely deified the Continental Army's leader that he ceased to have any faults. His popular image had risen to an apotheosis. Henry Brown, in his 1878 oration at Valley Forge, described Washington as "a patriot, forgetful of nothing but himself; this is he whose extraordinary virtues only have kept the army from

traced to the year 1775, when he accepted the command of the Continental Army, it reached its fullest expression during the winter encampment at Valley Forge.

Washington's apotheosis from a vulnerable military leader to the deified status of Cincinnatus began in the autumn of 1777 when British Gen. John Burgoyne invaded the United States from Canada. Burgoyne had badly miscalculated his troops' ability to endure the hardships of the vast American wilderness, as well as the guerrilla tactics of the patriot army. Once he moved deep into the woods of northern New York, General Burgoyne's supply lines were shattered and his advance halted by the Americans' envelopment strategy, or pincers operation. He could neither retreat to Canada nor move onward to Albany; he certainly could not even hope to survive a winter in the wilderness with his available provisioning. Horatio Gates, the American general in command of this northern theater of war, realized his advantage: he would only need to halt Burgoyne's advance until the British were forced to surrender. With the help of an insubordinate combat general, Benedict Arnold (who had pouted in his tent at a critical point but emerged in time to lead the victorious forces), Gates forced Burgoyne's surrender on October 17 at Saratoga, New York. This feat, along with the capture of five thousand British soldiers, was the greatest American victory to date and it elevated Gates' reputation within the military, as well as in Congress, both of which had begun to question Washington's military skills. Unwittingly, George Washington himself had made this turn of events possible.

Washington had allowed his northern command to be semi-autonomous, in part because he refused to interfere in a theater of war of which he had little or no detailed

knowledge. He was also engaged in a host of other matters, such as provisioning and diplomacy. Gates knew this and took advantage of Washington's goodwill; he became insubordinate. After the victory at Saratoga, Gates attempted to usurp full autonomy from the Commander in Chief by sending his official reports directly to Congress instead of to Washington, as military etiquette dictated. Despite the fact that

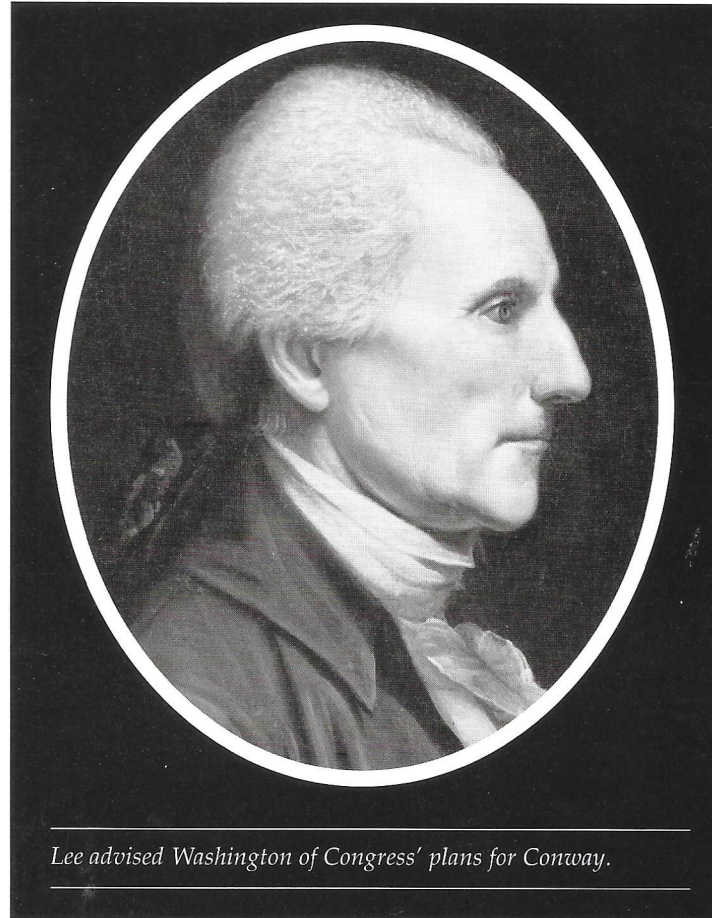
eager to return.

Two days before Christmas, strained relations between Washington and the Congress led to an impossible stalemate. Annoyed by the general's seemingly endless requests for more provisions, and unwilling to accept his refusal to take by force what the army needed from local residents, Charles Carroll, a delegate from Maryland, despaired that Washington "is so humane and delicate that I fear the common

accepted hardship." "Such forcible procedures," he wrote to President of Congress Henry Laurens, "may give a momentary relief but, if repeated, will prove of the most pernicious consequence. Beside spreading disaffection, jealousy, and fear among the people, they never fail, even in the most veteran troops under the most rigid and exact discipline, to raise in the soldiery a disposition to licentiousness, to plunder and robbery, difficult to suppress afterwards." Consequently, Washington promised the severest discipline to those soldiers who conducted themselves poorly among the neighboring inhabitants and directed the local farmers to thresh their grain so it would not entice the wandering soldiers. He warned Congress that "unless some great and capital change suddenly takes place," by which they would procure provisions for his troops, the army "must inevitably starve, dissolve, or disperse in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can."

Congress also reprimanded Washington for taking up winter quarters at Valley Forge. Despite the fact that they were unable to meet the needs of the army because of delegates' poor attendance and their tendency to forever discuss and inevitably delay decisions, most representatives believed that the first obligation of the Continental Army was to protect them and the seat of government (which had been moved to Lancaster and, later, York). Appalled by their presumptuousness, General Washington registered his consternation with "those Gentleman in Congress" by reminding them that "it is a much easier and less distressing thing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fire side than to occupy a cold, bleak hill, and sleep under frost and snow without clothes or blankets."

Matters came to a head in January 1778 with the so-called



he no longer needed the large force that had been assembled to oppose Burgoyne, Gates refused to comply with Washington's repeated orders to return these regiments. Gates' refusal prevented Washington from making an effective strike against the British at Philadelphia and forced him instead to spend the winter eighteen miles northwest of the city at Valley Forge. Washington's inaction greatly displeased Congress which had been forced to flee Philadelphia and was now

cause will suffer." And many members of Congress shared Carroll's feelings.

Washington evidently respected civilian rights more than did many legislators. He was governed by the responsibility he had accepted for the welfare of his men and a conviction that the protection of the rights of citizens formed the basis for the revolutionary movement itself. He also knew that he could prevent American public opinion from siding with the Crown if the soldiers, rather than the civilians

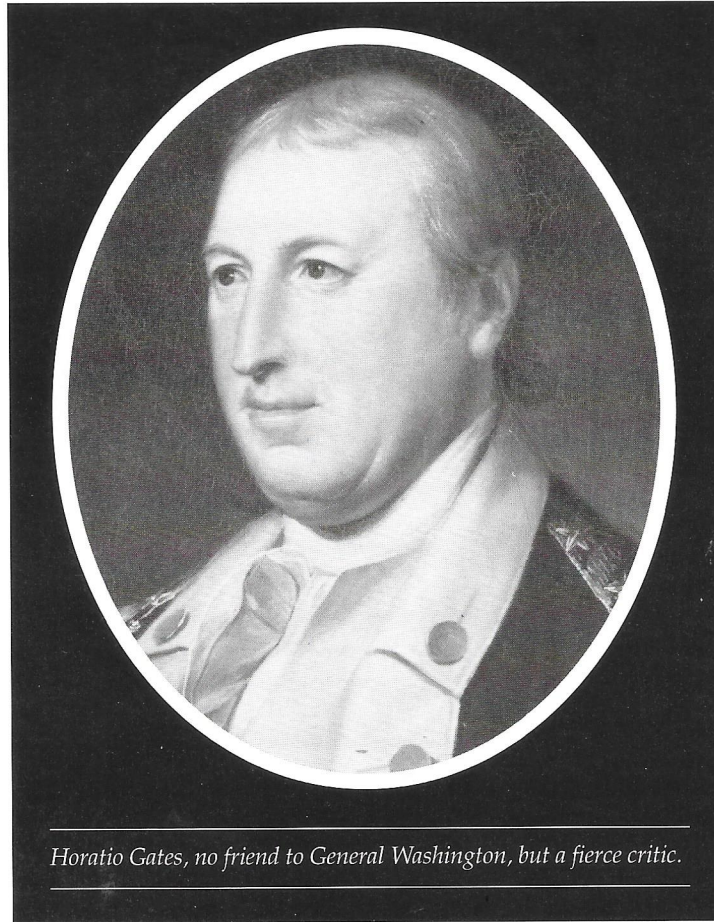
“Conway Cabal,” aimed at replacing Washington with Horatio Gates. Gates, who had won the praise of Congress for his victory at Saratoga, had served for twenty years as a regular officer in the British Army before joining the American forces. To check the contrary officer, Washington made him Quartermaster General at Valley Forge, responsible for supplies. Washington was foiled. Uninterested in the post, Gates resigned. Having won the support of Congress, he persuaded it to appoint him president of the Board of War. Beginning in January, Gates was comfortably situated in York, serving as president of the Board of War and campaigning for the position of Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. He collaborated in this effort with an Irish-born Frenchman, Brig. Gen. Thomas Conway, another fierce critic of Washington.

Having served under Frederick the Great of Prussia, Conway believed himself to be the most experienced officer at Valley Forge. He became almost dictatorial at Washington’s councils of war and suggested that he should be appointed Inspector General, in charge of drilling all the troops. Gates saw an opportunity for himself and convinced Congress to promote the aggressive Frenchman. When a fellow Virginian and member of Congress, Richard Henry Lee, informed Washington of the Congress’ intention, he responded succinctly but strongly. “To raise an officer without conspicuous merit over the heads of many senior brigadiers would give a fatal blow to the existence of the army. It will be impossible for me to be of any further service if this should happen.”

Not surprisingly, when he reported to Valley Forge to assume his duties as Inspector General, Conway was coolly received by Washington. General Washington was clearly aware of the conspiracy

organized for “exalting General Gates on the ruins of my reputation” and he readily confessed to an intimate that “I did not receive [Conway] in the language of a warm and cordial Friend since my true feelings will not permit me to make professions of friendship to the man I deem my enemy.” To the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington confided his disdain of Thomas Conway. “His ambition and great desire of being puffed off as one of

a letter of explanation, especially since Congress had now become more sympathetic about the problems Washington faced. While Gates’ letter expressed concern that his dispatches were being opened and copied, he denied neither his relationship with Conway nor his alleged criticisms of Washington. In his response, Washington explained that he had been informed of the conspiracy by loyal officers, denying any improprieties and



Horatio Gates, no friend to General Washington, but a fierce critic.

the first Officers of the Age could only be equalled by the means which he used to obtain them. But finding that I was determined not to go beyond the line of my duty to indulge him nor to exceed the strictest rules of propriety, to gratify him, he became my inveterate enemy; and has, I am persuaded, practiced every art to do me injury.”

By mid-January Conway had informed Gates that Washington had learned of their intrigue. Gates felt obliged to write the Virginian

any suspicions that Gates’ correspondence had been tampered with. He also enumerated the inconsistencies of Gates’ behavior as an officer, and sent a copy of his letter to Congress.

Because of the steadfast support Washington received from congressional officials such as Henry Laurens, General Gates was forced to write a letter of apology. Washington replied on February 24, agreeing to dismiss the issue entirely. Not only had the general survived

the conspiracy, but he had done so in such a tactful fashion that Congress praised him for his leadership. On April 22, Thomas Conway threatened to resign his commission—and Congress readily embraced the idea.

General Washington’s handling of the cabal was significant. His actions immediately quashed fears, doubts, and resentments that might have otherwise festered and, under more adverse circumstances, led to his replacement as the war dragged on. By remaining above the political infighting that surrounded the conspiracy and attending to the needs of his men, Washington earned the respect of Congress and of his loyal officers. He also forced them to visualize leadership without him. Had the controversial Gates replaced him as commander, the struggling army might have been torn into competing factions. Even worse, Gates’ tendency to act independently of his superiors might have resulted in his defying Congress, damaging the credibility of the entire revolutionary movement. Gen. George Washington’s masterful triumph over this internal conflict confirmed the image of a selfless, dutiful citizen-soldier. His leadership would never be seriously questioned—or challenged—again.

Another characteristic that underscored the image of a selfless military was Washington’s treatment of the common soldier at Valley Forge. Although eighteenth century military discipline prevented much contact between the Commander in Chief and the enlisted men, Washington was not unmindful of their condition. Having promised the soldiers to “share in the hardships and partake of every inconvenience” that winter, Washington initially lived in a tent without heat except for a fire burning outside. He was eventually forced to find more suitable accommodations in

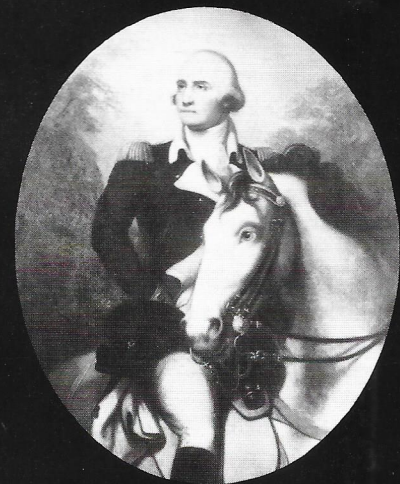
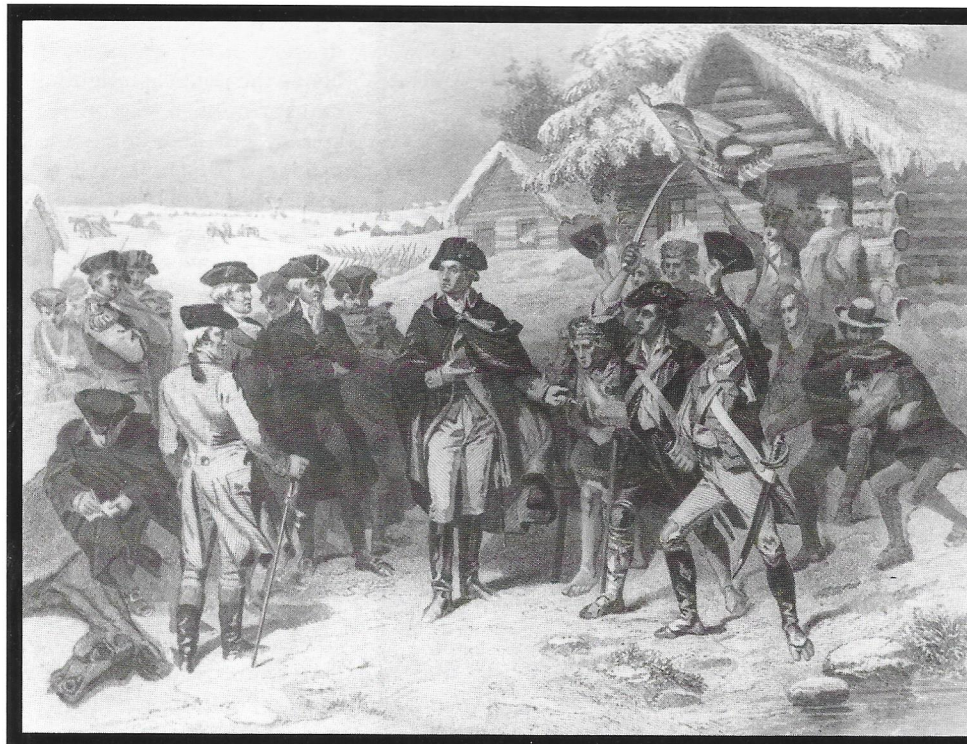
order to carry out his numerous administrative responsibilities. As many officers had already done, Washington sought housing in one of the local civilian residences, a house owned by miller Isaac Potts. Not as comfortable as some in which other officers were quartered, this small stone dwelling was located at the northwestern corner of the encampment along the Schuylkill River. The general's staff of twenty-five

Virginia soldiers constructed a scarecrow, labeled it "Paddy," and set it up beside the huts of the Eleventh Virginia Regiment. The prank was innocent enough until some of the Irish members of the unit discovered it and, greatly offended, made the mistake of blaming a neighboring Massachusetts regiment for the insult. The New Englanders disliked the Virginians and grew outraged at the accusation. There followed a considerable

exchange until Washington arrived, the Commander in Chief gave orders for a mug of spirits to be issued to each soldier, thus transforming a potentially nasty situation into a spontaneous celebration.

The incident reflected the ingenuity and understanding of a born leader. In fact, Washington gained more admiration from his men for his readiness to give up power, making them responsible for each other's actions, rather than pressing his own author-

regimental chaplains at the brigade level, overriding a tradition of local preference that had informally evolved among the men in the appointment of their own chaplain. "The Congressional plan," wrote Washington, "would introduce religious disputes into the Army, which above all things should be avoided, and in many instances compel men to a mode of Worship which they do not profess. The old establishment of appointing



Washington has been commemorated in portraiture (above), while his Valley Forge encampment (left) and his commanding officers (facing page) have been romanticized by artists.

spent most of its time at the headquarters to assist him with his multifarious duties. Detached from the house, a little kitchen, which served as a base of operations, was crowded, cold, and damp.

Often, General George Washington would ride through the encampment, occasionally speaking with enlisted men. According to one of these soldiers, "General Washington has a dignity which forbids familiarity, mixed with an easy affability which creates love and reverence." This was illustrated by an incident that allegedly occurred on St. Patrick's Day of 1778. During the early morning hours a band of mischievous Pennsyl-

exchange until Washington arrived on the scene.

A quick check convinced him that no one really knew who had set up the scarecrow. Showing a clear grasp of psychology, he put on a fine display of fury, outdoing even the angry Virginians. After zealously declaring his great admiration for St. Patrick, he announced that he would not tolerate such an outrage. Washington then demanded to know who, in fact, was responsible for the prank and vowed to make the mischief makers forever regretful. As he must have anticipated, the Virginians (who had been given much more support than they had bargained for) began to relent. To save face all

ity. In so doing, he accepted the ideal of Cincinnatus who limited the dangers of mutiny by leading with a unique balance of charisma and humility. He respected the men who served under him and was fully aware of the moral demands made on him as their leader. This was especially true in matters of religious conviction.

Although he was an intensely private man who, by inclination and principle, shied from public demonstrations of piety, Washington fiercely supported religious tolerance in the ranks. He exerted himself to prevent the imposition of an official religion on his men when he opposed a congressional plan to appoint

chaplains however, gives every regiment an opportunity of having a chaplain of their own religious sentiments and it is founded on a more generous toleration."

Washington's exceptional ability to check the unbridled ambitions of his subordinate officers and mediate the disputes of the common soldiers without resorting to blatant force, represented the ultimate strength of his character as a military leader. This does not minimize the significant roles played by either of those parties at the Valley Forge encampment. To be sure, without the expert tactical training of the army provided by drillmaster Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, the reorganization and

Gen. Nathanael Greene, or the diplomatic genius and unflinching loyalty of Col. Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette, it is doubtful that Washington would have survived the winter of 1777-1778. No less admirable were the brave men who marched into Valley Forge on December 19, 1777, as a ragtag band of amateur soldiers and militiamen and who departed—exactly six months

renewed feeling of confidence invigorated them. Mounted on his white stallion, Washington made a circuit around the regiments in a review of the army. As he made his inspection, a member of his personal staff, John Laurens, noted that “the General wore a countenance of uncommon delight and complacency and he received such proofs of the love and attachment of his officers as must have given

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later—on June 19, 1778, as a disciplined fighting force capable of defeating the British. Without their perseverance, loyalty to the patriot cause, and undying spirit, the War for Independence would not—could not—have been won. And George Washington's unique and invaluable contribution of holding the Continental Army together during the darkest hour of the American Revolution should rightfully be regarded among the greatest achievements of any general in the nation's military history.

On May 6, 1778, the Continental Army assembled for a grand parade on the encampment grounds to celebrate a treaty of alliance with France. Morale was

him the most exquisite feelings. If ever there was a man in the world whose moderation and patriotism fitted him for the command of a republican army, he is." When the ceremonies ended, the men—unable to contain their euphoria any longer—broke ranks and tossed their hats high above them, shouting, "Huzza for Washington! Long Live the great General Washington!" The tribute was well deserved. Gen. George Washington—destined to become president of the nation he so dearly loved—had, in one instant, become the American Cincinnatus.

Huzza for Washington! ❖

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