GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON: GRAND STRATEGIST OR MERE FABIAN?

by

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INTRODUCTION

The historiography of the American Revolutionary War may for convenience be divided into three discrete schools. The first, dominant in establishing the still-prevalent mythos of the American experience, was marked by an effusive idealism and self-congratulatory patriotism. In this view, America's soldiers and leaders—notably George Washington among them—waged war with a heroism and skill truly epic in scale. The tenor of this early historical perspective is recaptured annually in all the hoopla familiarly associated with American Fourth of July celebrations.

Inevitably, of course, the historical revisionists arose to supply a "needed corrective" to such extravagantly romantic "distortions." They painted the military scenes somberly in black and gray, with bleakness the predominant theme. Washington was clearly a stumblebum general—impressive in ways, to be sure—but a stumblebum nonetheless. His lieutenants were no better. Stubbornness was the greatest of the Patriots' military virtues; they had simply hung on, and somehow muddled through to win. British leaders were even worse dolts who repeatedly snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. The War of Independence was really a case of Englishmen blundering the war away more than of Americans winning it.

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Lately, as might be expected, historians have found a more proper middle ground, rejecting both of the two earlier extremes. The conduct of the fighting and the personalities of the participants have been depicted in a more objective and balanced perspective, all with commendable precision. Still, the strategic side of the war, particularly insofar as George Washington's role is concerned, has not received the critical and systematic treatment it deserves. If Washington's strategy is mentioned at all it is likely to be characterized as "Fabian." That is

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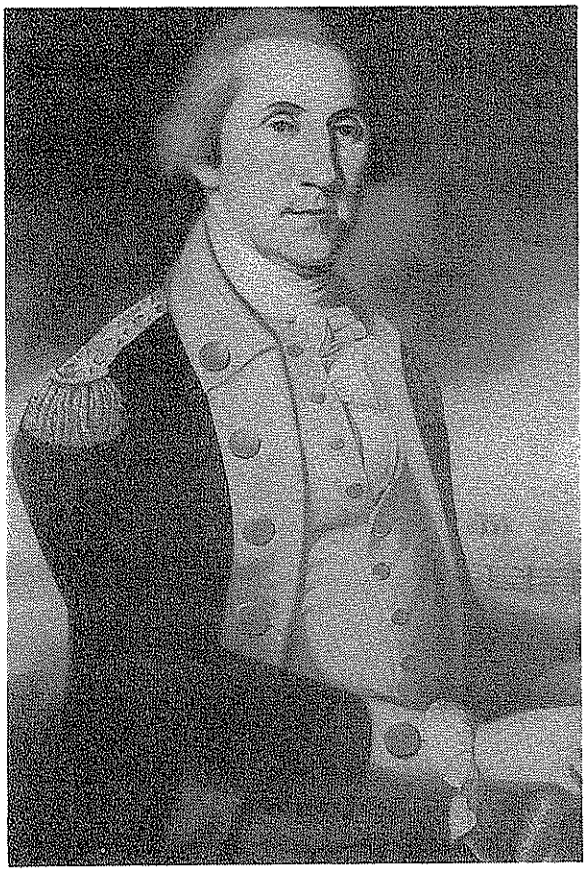

WEST POINT MUSEUM, US MILITARY ACADEMY

to say, in the manner of the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus, the Patriots are commended for their adroitness at avoiding decisive battle and for their ability to wear down and outlast the British. But they rarely receive even honorable mention for possessing or displaying any positive attributes of strategic skill. Washington is pictured as a one-sided general, almost entirely defensive-minded.[1]

But can we be so sure? His standing in the ranks of great coaches may not be in the select top ten, but it is probable that he deserves far better treatment from the sportswriters of history. After all, his game plan was solid. It appears to have been carefully thought out, taking into consideration the ground rules of his peculiar stadium, remaining always attentive to the demands of his alumni, and allowing a proper degree of flexibility. And he followed it through to win a resounding upset, despite the dual handicaps of a woefully green squad and a bench having almost no depth at all.

ENVIRONMENT

To appreciate the strategies pursued in the Revolutionary War it is necessary first to comprehend the conflict's setting. One must mentally cartwheel from the age of intercontinental ballistic missiles back to the era when one held his fire until seeing "the whites of their eyes." The forested wilderness which was Colonial America 200 years ago eludes the imagination of most 20th-century Americans. It was a wild, rough-and-tumble, primordial land pricked ever so slightly by civilization. Someone observed that a squirrel could have travelled to almost every square mile in the 13 colonies without once touching ground. Roads, the few there were, were mere trails snaking tortuously through the forests. Rivers were not bridged. Coachmen computed a trip by carriage from New York to Philadelphia in terms of days rather than hours. The frontier in most places was only miles from the ocean; all the large towns were seaports. The economy centered on agriculture and trade; manufactured goods, for the most part, came from Europe. There were few capable gunsmiths in America, and not all of those sided with the revolutionaries. But perhaps the single most significant geographical factor of George III's rebellious New World provinces was the sparseness of population. Cities were small. To be sure, Philadelphia was second in size only to London in the British Empire, but it was exceptional. Only three others (Boston, New York, Charleston) had populations of over 10,000. All the inhabitants of New York City, by way of comparison, would fit neatly into today's Madison Square Garden. Moreover, more people dwell today in Brooklyn than lived then in all the colonies combined. Totalling something over two and a half million, those early Americans were scattered in an eleven-hundred-mile arc, extending along the coast from Boston to Savannah.[2]

This, then, is the America which rose in rebellion in April 1775. Its few people, living near rivers and the ocean, subsisted mostly on

what they alone could grow and make. Its largely uncharted lands were inadequately served by rudimentary roads. Its ability to produce sufficient weaponry of war was virtually nonexistent. All in all, the country was poorly suited to warfare as practiced by professionals of that day.

ENEMY STRATEGY

A thorough study of British strategic concepts and practices during the conflict which Englishmen called "The American War" is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, since the enemy's aims and attempts always have a marked impact on the development of friendly thinking, a brief sketch of London's strategy is necessary.

Reduced to its basic form, Great Britain's grand strategy was quite simple: to obtain some sort of negotiated settlement which would keep the rebellious colonies subservient members of the British Empire. London's aims were not to destroy the insurgents or their countryside, but to apply whatever degree of pressure was required to coerce them into returning to their colonial *status quo*. But how to apply that pressure was anything but simple.

Examining the North American Continent, royal planners came up with four distinct alternative strategies. First, they might occupy strongholds along the coast from which to conduct a naval blockade. In time, policymakers thought, the Americans would become so strapped economically that they would sue for peace. The primary weakness of this idea was that it would easily consume more time than the English themselves would accept, and there was no assurance that the rebels would find a blockade all that galling. Or, launch a campaign to detach the southern colonies from the others. That scheme was feasible, since the terrain south of the Potomac provided no impregnable barriers to shield American forces, while the proximity of the invading British to their bases in the Caribbean would permit relatively reliable logistical support. But such a strategy would hardly be decisive, for the heart of the rebellion beat in New England. Another concept—one which seems to sprout in every war—was to seize the enemy capital. Philadelphia, however, was not a seat of government in the European sense. It just happened to be a convenient place where the Continental Congress held meetings. Its capture would damage Patriot morale or weaken the American cause no more than the loss of any other major city. The fourth plan envisaged occupying a line from New York City up the Hudson River to Lake Champlain and on north to the St. Lawrence River. Once royal forces held that line, the reasoning went, the rebellion would be severed, for the Hudson cut the resources of both food and people roughly in half. Having first separated New England from the other colonies, English generals could then cut down the Yankees by invading from the west and driving to the sea. It was the only plan which held hope of a quick victory, but it required both a very large force and unity of command in the entire North American theater. Only twice did George III send an army big enough, and then he failed to establish an overall commander.[3]

During the course of the war the British tried all four strategies. None worked. True, the failures were partly attributable to British blunders. But success in war is a function of the opponent's actions as well, and Washington had an important hand in thwarting British designs.

AMERICAN STRATEGY

Strategy was not a word Washington used. It entered the language some years later, at about the time that Napoleon's startling successes extended theorists' comprehension

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of warfare. Nevertheless, it was a concept which the general from Virginia understood and implemented. He gained his knowledge not from books or military schooling, but from common sense and uncommon wisdom—and from the fount of experience.

At the level of grand strategy, the United States had two aims: the first, an obvious one—to achieve and protect its independence; the second, a rarely mentioned one—territorial aggrandizement. The former is self-explanatory, although the Patriots actually fought for over a year before they articulated their claim to independence in a unanimous declaration. The latter goal, however, is neither so well known nor so generally accepted. Nonetheless, a quick perusal of the writings of Revolutionary War leaders is enough to convince one that territorial expansion was from first to last a war aim of the Americans. A North American Continent entirely free of European control was their maximum goal. They looked upon Canada as the fourteenth colony, and never ceased conniving to capture or annex it. The western lands stretching invitingly to the Mississippi River were powerful magnets even before the war, attracting settlers and speculators in mushrooming numbers. A view of the great territory that lay before them was a sustaining vision for the Revolution's leaders. Henry Knox, stopping in Albany in December 1775, noted that town's central location with respect to Canada and the western lands. He predicted that it "must one day be, if not the capital of America, yet nearly to it." An astute historian writing in the twentieth century put it succinctly: "Washington and the other leaders saw that independence with a mere fringe of land along the seacoast would scarcely be worth the struggle. . . . An inland empire was the stake for which Washington was playing. . . ."[4]

Throughout eight years of fighting, General Washington's operational decisions were steadfastly oriented on his overall missions of securing the independence of the United States and expanding the borders of the original 13 colonies. He accomplished both, failing only to annex Canada and the Floridas.

Accepting that brief description of the guiding national policy of the infant United States, we then ask what Washington's military strategy was? How did he employ his resources to accomplish the two goals set by the Continental Congress? The answers are that he clung to no single strategy throughout, that he was flexible, that he tailored his actions to fit the changing situations. The long war passed through four distinct phases, each presenting an entirely different military situation, each requiring an entirely different strategic application of military force.[5]

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APRIL 1775—JULY 1776

This phase, nearly 15 months long, was the "revolutionary" period of the Revolutionary War. It opened with a clash between redcoats and minutemen at Lexington and closed with a Congressional declaration that the United States would henceforth be a free nation independent of the English monarch. When it began, royal governors, judges, and generals ruled—or at least regulated—the colonies; when it ended, rebels were in control of every province except Canada, and not a single English soldier stood anywhere on the soil of the United States.

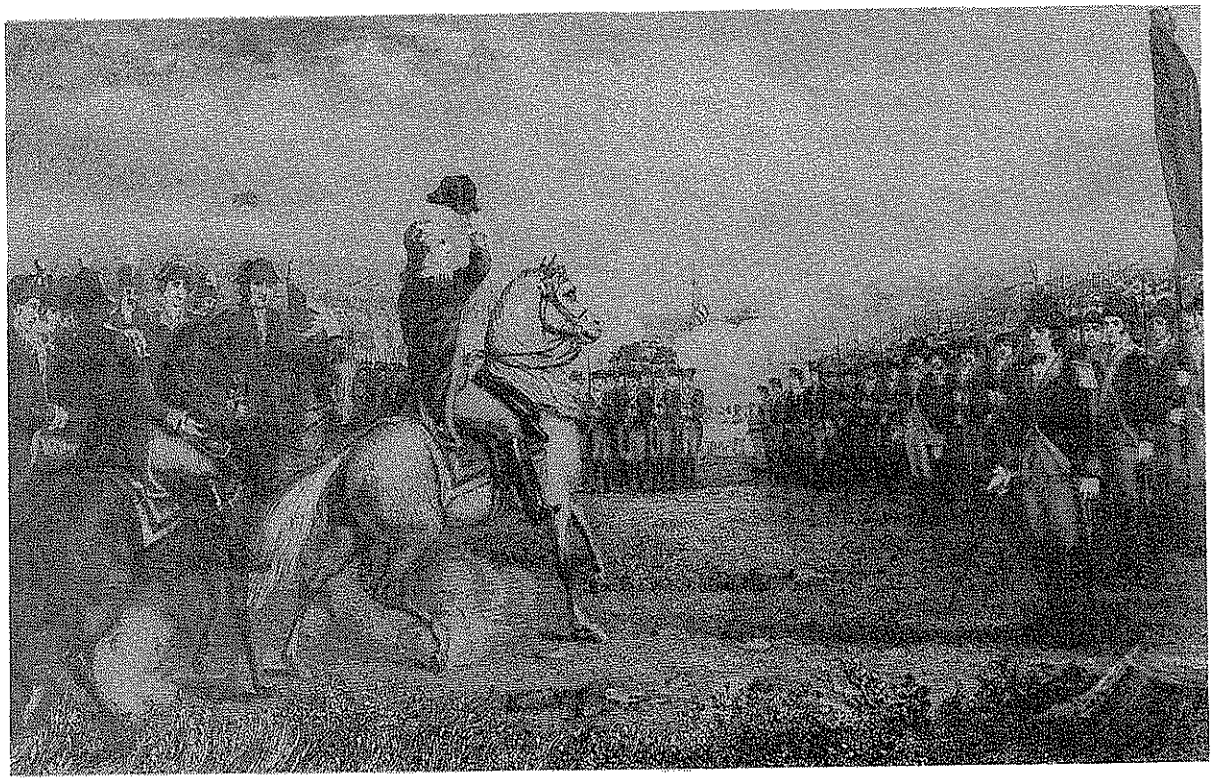
Virtually by definition, a revolutionary movement is required to assume the offensive. Its very purpose is to gain power by destroying or ejecting those authorities and institutions which happen at that moment to possess the power it wants. The revolutionaries must take the initiative, must attack the established order; they are the ones who must overcome. And that is what the Patriots did, at first by spontaneous reaction, later by calculated intent.

Word of the fatal English incursions into Lexington and Concord spread on the wind.

In a spontaneous uprising that astonished even the most ardent American agitators, infuriated New Englanders flocked to Boston by the thousands. That clamorous army of individuals, all seeking to shoot a "lobsterback," promptly penned the shaken royal forces in Boston. Unable to break into the city and uninterested in merely besieging the Britons, the rebels looked around for other objectives. Ticonderoga, the great fortress on Lake Champlain, was the nearest nest of enemy soldiers. The instinctive offensive bent of the rebellion's leaders is perhaps nowhere better displayed than in their rapid decision to seize Fort Ticonderoga. Within a fortnight of the initiation of hostilities at Lexington, Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen had captured the British redoubt complete with its extensive stores of military equipment.

Meeting in Philadelphia on 10 May the Continental Congress was taken aback by the military boldness of the Yankees, whose representatives forthwith applied to their sister states for assistance. Continental delegates had no authority to assume control of the mob in Massachusetts, nor did they have a mandate to wage war. Yet the exigencies—and the opportunities—of the situation demanded that some central control be exercised. So, by default more than by design, Congress seized the flapping reins of rebellion. The delegates created a Continental Army by adopting the throng outside Boston and raising a few additional units from other states. Then, in what must rank as its wisest decision of the war, Congress appointed one of its own members, a Virginia planter, to the position of Commander in Chief. Washington humbly accepted the commission and rode off to join his army.

Meanwhile, impatient insurgents in New England, continuing to probe for ways to get at the English garrison in Boston, had sparked the bloody battle of Bunker Hill. It was the third clash of arms in as many months between Old World professionals and New World amateurs. On the whole the aggressive



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Washington taking command of the American Army at Cambridge, 1775.

if impulsive revolutionaries had come out on top in the exchanges. Momentum was clearly going their way. Washington's immediate job was to maintain that initiative.

Having nothing to lose (except their heads, of course) and everything to gain, the rebellious Americans found audacity a virtue. Washington saw the logic of accomplishing as much as possible before London could send reinforcements. His men were marginally trained and equipped, his officers inexperienced, his war chest empty, but the British were also weak—and the opportunities were inviting. Boldness would have to do for experience, élan for knowledge, spirit for money. The Commander in Chief dared not wait; time would surely work against him, for England could build up its strength in America much faster than he could train a truly professional army. He would have to overcome British regulars with a people's Army.

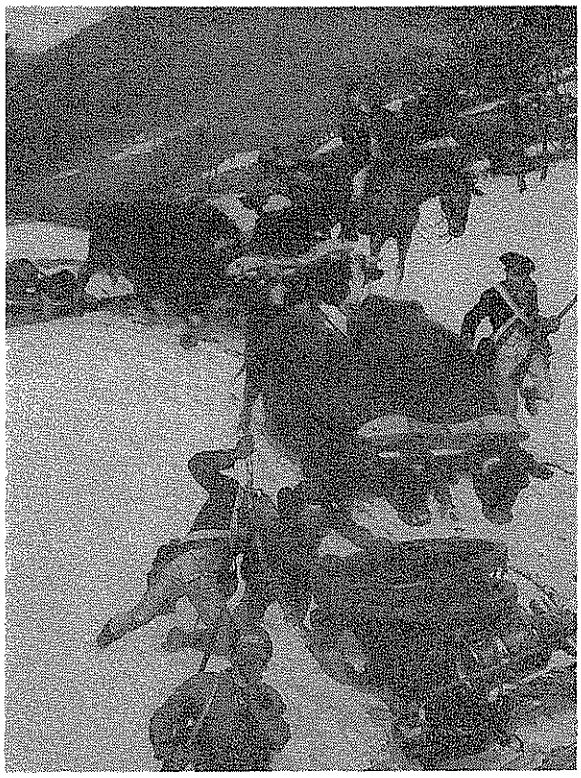
ONE SEEKS IN VAIN TO DISCOVER THE SHADE OF QUINTUS FABIUS MAXIMUS IN GEORGE WASHINGTON DURING THIS PHASE OF THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE.

Besides Boston, English soldiers still occupied the vast region of Quebec, a few bases in Florida, a handful of forts scattered throughout the western lands, the province of Nova Scotia, and several islands in the West Indies. Washington searched his meager bag of strategems for ways to get at his foe in every one of those locations. He had not even seen all his army when he ordered preparations for an invasion of Canada, an expedition he launched before the summer was out, sending one column toward Montreal and another to Quebec. He made overtures to the Indians, hoping to secure their help against the western posts, and studied propositions for raids on Nova Scotia and Florida. He tried to persuade citizens of the West Indies to join the fight against the Mother Country, while encouraging rebel assemblies in the 13 coastal colonies to purge their provinces of individuals and officials loyal to the Crown.[6] Finding himself unable to strike at most of the King's possessions for lack of a fleet, the Commander in Chief promptly took steps to build himself a navy.[7]

While his lieutenants were fighting for territory along the St. Lawrence, Washington wrestled with the perplexing problem of ousting the British from Boston. "The state of inactivity in which this army has lain for some time past," Washington wrote Congress in September 1775, "by no means corresponds with my wishes, by some decisive stroke, [to defeat the enemy garrison]." But an outright assault of the formidable breastworks was out of the question. So, too, was an amphibious maneuver while royal warships held sway in the harbor. Nonetheless, so strong was his desire to attack, he pondered every imaginable course of action, no matter how slight the chances of success. He even considered a risky plan for rushing the town over the ice should the bay freeze. Finally, when heavy snows permitted the use of sleds, he had the artillery pieces captured at Fort Ticonderoga dragged to Boston. Emplacing them on high ground overlooking both the city and the harbor, he forced the British to evacuate in March 1776.[8]

At that moment 13 provinces in North America were in fact independent. Every one of them was headed by a provincial government professing adherence to the Continental Congress and supporting a Continental Army. Americans and Englishmen still contested for Canada, but the 13 colonies themselves were free for the first time ever of royal military forces. Temporarily, at least, the revolution had succeeded—the insurgents had seized control of the government and created a new nation. When Congressmen declared the independence of the United States, they were simply confirming on paper what men in arms had already established on the battlefields.

Washington's strategy had been simple in the extreme: take the offensive whenever and wherever possible. His aim had been to



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Ticonderoga's guns being hauled to Boston.

grapple with and defeat the British any place they could be found. His forces had been weak, but, at that point in time, the enemy had been weaker. The Commander in Chief had taken serious risks, but the potential rewards had been great—and the obvious alternative was eventual defeat. One seeks in vain to discover the shade of Quintus Fabius Maximus in George Washington during this phase of the War of Independence.

Now, however, having seized their freedom, the Patriots would be required to defend it. On 2 July 1776, the same day Congress declared America's independence, the anticipated British invasion force arrived in New York Harbor and began landing troops on Staten Island.

JULY 1776–DECEMBER 1777

Only twice during the course of the war did London assemble and send to America major expeditionary forces—one in 1776, the other in 1777. English generals viewed their mission as one of entering royal colonies to throw out a renegade regime in order to restore lawful government. Not surprisingly, Patriot generals defined their own task in rather different terms—they saw it as the defense of national shores against a foreign invader.

Whereas in the earlier period Americans had possessed but little to lose, now they had everything at stake. Before, a military defeat would have been bitter but hardly fatal; now it could signal the death of the infant republic. Previously, Washington's primary thrust had been to defeat enemy forces; now his foremost imperative was to prevent a decisive defeat of his own army. Still and all, his mission was to defend the United States; he could not coldbloodedly sacrifice any of the new Continental states for the sake of saving the Continental Army. He was clearly expected to stand and fight, but it would have to be in such a way that he could always disengage to fight another day. As broad underlying principles, audacity and boldness gave way to tenacity and shrewdness.[9]

Patriot leaders had fully anticipated an attempt by the Crown to suppress the rebellion, but they were not at all prepared for the massive scale of London's reaction. Sailing into New York Harbor that fateful July was the largest expeditionary force England had ever sent anywhere. General William Howe headed an army of about 35,000 English and German regulars, while his brother, Admiral Richard Howe, backed him up with a fleet of several hundred warships and transports. One observer told how "onlookers gazed with awe on a pageant such as America had never seen before—five hundred dark hulls, forests of masts, a network of spars and ropes, and a gay display of flying pennants." Not only had Americans never seen such a sight, they had never imagined themselves facing such an armada. Worse yet, English forces far to the north, rested and reinforced, stood poised to push south on Lake Champlain against the reeling survivors of the ill-fated Canadian invasion.[10]

The bulk of the "veterans" who had exchanged blows with the redcoats in 1775 had gone home when their short enlistments expired, obliging the Commander in Chief to raise and train an almost entirely new army

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Washington's first success at Boston.

for campaigning in 1776. Hence, for the defense of New York General Washington had fewer than 10,000 men, most of whom were relatively recent recruits. Frantic appeals to Congress and nearby states brought in enough reinforcements to double the number if not the quality of Patriot forces in New York by the time the British finally attacked in August. It was to be the most numerous army Washington would ever have under his direct command, but, significantly, it was largely untrained and woefully inexperienced.

Washington's one great strategic blunder of the war was his decision to defend the city of New York. Apparently, a combination of political pressure, his own inexperience in high command, and an overly optimistic assessment of the fighting qualities of his green troops led him to taking a stand there. New York City was a trap. Americans had no fleet at all, while the waters surrounding Manhattan Island were choked with hostile sail. Had Howe elected to land above the Patriot positions to cut them off from the mainland it is hard to see how Washington could have escaped annihilation. However, Howe was not a bold strategist, and furthermore he was operating under political constraints conceived to promote the possibility of eventual compromise with the colonists. He settled for a more prosaic operation on Long Island rather than a deep turning movement up the Hudson River.

WASHINGTON'S ONE GREAT STRATEGIC BLUNDER OF THE WAR WAS HIS DECISION TO DEFEND THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

There followed through a dismal summer and fall a series of sharp clashes, first on Long Island, then on Manhattan Island, and finally on the mainland above. Battered and

demoralized continentals then backed across the Hudson and retreated by stages through New Jersey to the Delaware River. In battle after battle Howe's force proved superior to Washington's amateur army, but "the old fox," as British officers were beginning to call him, emerged from each setback with the nucleus of his army still intact. Lady Luck, British bumbling, and an occasional brilliant Patriot stroke (such as Washington's superb evacuation from Long Island or Benedict Arnold's gutsy defense of Lake Champlain) combined to thwart London's hopes of quickly snuffing out the rebellion. As a matter of fact, English and Hessian columns could and should have pursued the rebels relentlessly into the very laps of the Continental Congress. But Howe was not that cut of soldier; mindful of his charge to promote an eventual political settlement, it was not in his indulgent mind to push the sword to the hilt when the blade was already weighted with ice. He followed Washington across New Jersey and prepared to bed his army down in winter quarters.

Although the bitter months from August to December could have spelled the finish of what up to that time had been an altogether undistinguished military career, they provided instead Washington's education in generalship. Never again after New York did he hand Howe or his successors such a golden opportunity to destroy the American army outright; never again did he need more than a fair share of luck to survive.

That winter, when Napoleon Bonaparte was a seven-year-old schoolboy and Frederick the Great basked in the twilight of his illustrious career, George Washington directed an astonishing campaign, ranking with the best of Frederick's past accomplishments and Napoleon's future exploits. Had he achieved nothing before or after, Washington's ten days from 25 December 1776 to 4 January 1777 would alone assure him high mention in the annals of military history.

After the Commander in Chief gathered his shattered and demoralized army in temporary security beyond the Delaware River, even he was surprised at its small size and sorry state. "Pitiful" was a term often used to describe the men—and properly. Many had no shoes, all were in rags, few had retained such equipment as they had been issued. They were gaunt scarecrows posing as soldiers. Despair prevailed, among officers as well as men. An army, however, is never beaten until it thinks it is. One man resolutely refused to acknowledge defeat: the commanding general, George Washington.

The General had not prevented the invaders from carving out an enclave in the United States; parts of New York and most of New Jersey were now controlled by Howe's garrisons and patrols, and a body of 6,000 men had occupied Newport, Rhode Island in December. However, Washington had accomplished his primary mission of keeping the Continental Army in being—until this critical moment, at least. But now that accomplishment, too, seemed to be dissolving. Washington's strategic defensive had limited British conquests and had kept the flame of independence alight, but constant retreat and defeat had eroded spirit and will. To restore confidence it was now necessary to strike back, to inflict a defeat on the enemy. Washington resolved to go immediately on the offensive against the over-confident English and Hessians, no matter what. It was obvious to him that to save his army he had to risk it.

Moreover, he saw what he had not noted before—a way to wedge the British out of New Jersey by maneuver alone. By striking into New Jersey at the overextended and unsuspecting enemy garrisons he hoped to achieve morale-raising tactical victories. He would also be in position to grab sorely

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needed supplies, and could drive on to the mountains in the northern part of the state. Once ensconced there he would be able to supply himself, would be impervious to enemy attack, and, most importantly, would sit in a commanding position on the flank of Howe's lines of communication through the state. The English leader would then have little choice but to withdraw his posts to New York.

It was a bold plan, perhaps even desperate. But Washington, sensing that defeat would be no worse than failing to take any action, and realizing the benefit of riding with surprise and initiative, was grimly resolved to launch the make-or-break effort. True enough, the Continental Army numbered just a small fraction of its summer self, but those still in ranks were the ones who counted. They had been toughened in battle and had remained steadfastly loyal through all the defeats. They were the hard core, the winter Patriots, with not a sunshine soldier among them.

What they did is history. In the short space of ten days a demoralized army, which nearly everyone had expected shortly to disintegrate, won two modest but splendid victories, eluded a superior force, caused Howe to evacuate most of New Jersey, and renewed its own pride and sense of purpose. English historian George Trevelyan later wrote:

> From Trenton onward, Washington was recognized as a farsighted and able general all Europe over—by the great military nobles in the Empress Catherine's court, by the French marshals and ministers, in the King's cabinet at Potsdam, at Madrid, at Vienna, and in London. He had shown himself . . . both a Fabius and a Camillus.[11]

England's grandest expeditionary force had accomplished precious little to crow about. Despite its size, strength, and tactical successes, Great Britain's army found itself at

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The Battle of Trenton.

the end of the campaign of 1776 with just the toeholds around New York and Newport to show for its efforts.

The King's disgruntled ministers formed and shipped to America a second large expeditionary force in 1777. This one, under General John Burgoyne, went to Canada. Their grand scheme was for Burgoyne to march south along the Lake Champlain route while another officer led redskins down the Mohawk Valley, and Howe took his troops up the Hudson River. Meeting somewhere near Albany, the combined forces would have the strength and position to turn on and conquer New England. Properly executed, the plan could have worked.

Washington, who probably had a more effective intelligence system than any American army has enjoyed since, learned early of English plans. He was concerned, unsure of his ability to defeat his opponents' ambitious efforts. He strengthened those forces defending to the northward and concentrated elements under his own command to block Howe's movement up the Hudson River. Thus disposed, he had the benefit of an interior position between the hostile pincers. The ability to operate on interior lines was Washington's only counter to British sea-borne mobility. Ordinarily the English commander owned this advantage because he could move by water to any spot on the seaboard faster than his land-bound American opponent could march to that same point. But not in this case, not with British armies split between Canada and New York while Americans held the Hudson. No one explained it better than Washington himself:

> Should the enemy's design be to penetrate the country up the Hudson River, we are well posted to oppose them; should they attempt to penetrate into New England, we are well stationed to cover them; if they move westward we can easily [intercept them]; and besides, it will oblige the enemy to leave a much stronger garrison at New York.[12]

As it turned out, for reasons which to this day remain unclear, Howe decided against helping Burgoyne. Instead, he went by sea to attack Philadelphia. Howe, who always vividly remembered his bloody encounter at Bunker Hill, would not have found to his liking the prospect of attacking through rugged hills defended by a waspish Patriot force. But whatever his reason, he went to Chesapeake Bay, where Washington intercepted him as he had said he could.

Events that autumn turned the war around. Burgoyne, operating inland where the British fleet could not support him, lost his entire army at Saratoga. Meanwhile, Howe fought his way into Philadelphia, once again besting Washington in a series of tactical clashes. But the surprisingly resilient Continental Army emerged from each defeat undaunted and ready to fight again. At the Battle of Germantown, in fact, where the two sides had struggled to something of a draw, the Patriots even came to consider themselves the victors. So apparently did officials at the court of Louis XVI. The happy results at Saratoga and the encouraging performance of American arms around Philadelphia convinced Louis that England, France's old adversary, was just then especially vulnerable. The opportunity was too good to miss. France formed an alliance with the United States that winter, and the war abruptly entered a new and ultimately decisive phase.[13]

JANUARY 1778–DECEMBER 1781

As the second phase of the war had presented Washington a set of conditions entirely different from the first, so was the third—the coalition phase—wholly different from either of the previous two. France's entry into the fray added legitimacy to the revolutionary cause, assured a continuing source of supply, and held forth the promise of reinforcement from a French expeditionary army. But, important as these advantages were, none was the decisive factor. The key consideration was the fact that France had a navy—a fleet to oppose British supremacy in North American waters. No longer would English generals have the privilege of shifting units at will along the Atlantic seaboard; no longer, that is, would

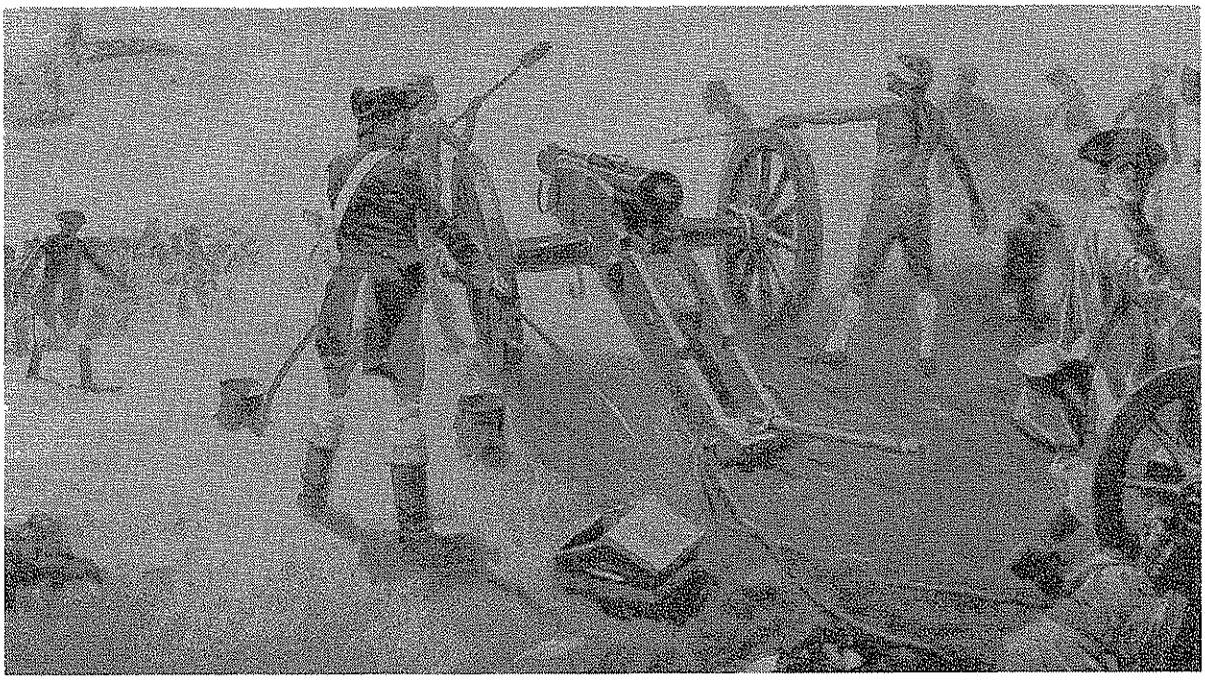
they enjoy the uncontested strategic advantage of interior lines. Their only mobility edge over the Americans was thus endangered if not lost.

This meant that the entire thrust of Washington's strategy could be reversed. Whereas he had been limited to the strategic defensive while Great Britain remained superior at sea, the arrival of a French fleet would make it feasible for him once again to pass over to the offensive. Military victory became possible. The invaders could be decisively beaten, could be driven off American soil. Moreover, risks could be more freely taken, for the loss now of a major portion of the Continental Army would not necessarily be fatal; the Revolution had taken too firm a hold in the country to be rooted out by an England at war also with France. Seizing the initiative was Washington's new imperative, defeating the British army his overriding goal. The predominant theme motivating American activities during the four years between Saratoga and Yorktown was the desire to lash out at the enemy.

One lesson Washington had learned was that his rag-tag army needed better training and organization if it were to have a chance of beating the British and Hessians. The amorphous mass of soldiery with which he had previously fended off English parries had been none too responsive or dependable; it was not a weapon with which he could confidently carry the war to the enemy. Most Americans tend to look upon the winter at Valley Forge as an epic of suffering and survival. And it was indeed a terrible time for the underfed, ill-clothed, poorly paid Continentals. But it was not the worst winter they would endure, nor was mere survival their greatest accomplishment. The Continental Army came of age that winter. When it marched forth in 1778 it bore the stamp of Steuben, the professional Prussian advisor who taught it to form line from column, to maneuver on the battlefield, to wield the bayonet. For the first time, Washington led an army not only rich in experience but one well-trained and full of confidence, one the equal or better of its foe in many respects. He intended to overcome British regulars with American regulars.[14]

He lost no time in testing his new force. General Henry Clinton, who had succeeded Howe, recognized the danger should a strong French fleet find his forces dispersed between Philadelphia and New York. He decided to consolidate in the latter city. As soon as the British started their march from Pennsylvania, Washington eagerly threw his own army in pursuit. Intercepting the English column near Monmouth in New Jersey, the Commander in Chief aggressively attacked. Missing a magnificent victory because of the malfeasance of his deputy, Washington nevertheless punished and humbled the British, proving the worth of Steuben's advice, and putting Clinton on notice that he faced a revitalized American Army.

That was just the first strike of the year. With Philadelphia freed and Clinton entrenched in New York, Americans surveyed their situation. Not until the French fleet appeared could they attack the hostile bases at New York or Newport, but other, lesser objectives were within reach. That year, for example, saw United States soldiers invading Florida, marked the start of George Rogers Clark's decisive campaign in the western lands, and recorded the first of John Paul Jones's raids along the English coast. When the French fleet crossed the Atlantic it went initially to the Chesapeake hoping to trap Clinton in Philadelphia. Learning that the English were in New York, French Admiral D'Estaing took his fleet there. He and Washington planned at first to attack the British in their own lair, but D'Estaing feared that his deep-draft ships would be unable to maneuver over the shoals leading into the harbor. Therefore, the American general and the French admiral agreed on a plan to smite the other English stronghold at Newport. That attack was duly carried out, but failed because of poor allied coordination and a violent storm which scattered the fleet. That ended campaigning for the year. The results of joint operations between United States armies and French naval forces had sorely disappointed everyone involved, but the



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Battle of Monmouth.

significant facts were that the fleet had arrived and coordinated attacks had been attempted. Though less successful than might have been expected, Americans had taken and kept the offensive through 1778.

The next year opened with an English raid resulting in the capture of Savannah, their first offensive move since Howe took Philadelphia. Nevertheless, Washington continued to dream of combining his army with the French navy to eject Clinton from New York. Fearing that very event, the English commander prudently evacuated Newport to bolster his defensive strength at the mouth of the Hudson. However, D'Estaing remained reluctant to try the strange and constricted harbor, so the allied offensive effort was devoted to an attempt to retake Savannah. Once again faulty coordination between Frenchmen and Americans seriously hampered operations, and British defenders won a clear victory. A second time D'Estaing sailed away leaving fallen hopes and bitter recriminations in his wake. The coalition was experiencing growing pains.

Elsewhere, on the other hand, 1779 was a happy year for Americans. John Paul Jones raided England again, carrying the war to the enemy homeland a second time. Anthony Wayne stormed Stony Point in a daring bayonet assault to remind Clinton of the offensive spirit of the Continental Army. And Washington sent large forces westward to ravage the settlements of hostile tribes and to overpower various British outposts.

For a while in 1780 the pendulum of offensive action swung back to the British side. French General Rochambeau landed in Newport with an army of 5,500 men, but the Royal Navy penned the major French fleet up in Brest, on the wrong side of the ocean, dooming plans for a combined attack in America. Meanwhile English columns moved from their base in Savannah to overrun most of the territory in Georgia and the Carolinas. But the renewed British efforts to recapture the initiative did not mean Washington ever relinquished his own concept of attacking and defeating his foe. He sent Nathanael Greene, his best general, southward with orders to chase Cornwallis out of the southern states, while he himself stubbornly plotted to recapture New York using both American and

French soldiers. When word came that the French Navy would be unable to reach the United States that year, Washington tried to get Rochambeau to let a Spanish fleet escort an expedition of French and American forces to Florida. The French general demurred; instead, he and Washington decided to unite their two armies in the north for an all-out, decisive campaign in 1781.[15]

The plan worked out in the manner the two commanders had intended, except for the location. Washington calculated that a French fleet which refused to enter New York Harbor to help Americans would have no choice if the French army as well were involved. Accordingly, he talked Rochambeau into agreeing to assault the enemy bastion in New York City. The allied generals maneuvered their armies to a position above the city and awaited word from the fleet, led this time by Admiral DeGrasse. In the meantime, Greene, in a superb campaign which is itself a strategic classic, pushed the invaders out of the southern states. All English forces were then tightly penned up in coastal enclaves, the largest at Yorktown in Virginia where Lafayette held Cornwallis and some 10,000 men at bay. But DeGrasse, reasoning that Virginia was a safer plum than heavily defended New York, calmly informed Washington and Rochambeau that he would sail his fleet only to the Chesapeake. Washington, who had been waiting more than three years for the opportunity to launch a successful sea-land assault, bit his tongue and promptly headed southward. Continentals and Frenchmen marched together. The American commander sent a courier to DeGrasse telling him that, should they find the English still in Virginia when they arrived, the allies "ought, without loss of time, to attack the enemy with our united force."[16]

The resulting siege of Yorktown and surrender of Cornwallis became the final planks in the platform of American independence. Within weeks of the startling news, London agreed to begin negotiations with the United States.

JANUARY 1782–DECEMBER 1783

By the beginning of 1782 Washington was reasonably sure that his forces had won the struggle for American independence. England, now fighting Spain and Holland as well as France and the United States, was engaged in far-flung theaters ranging from the West Indies all the way to India. The island nation was overextended, and a negotiated peace became essential. Washington's job in these circumstances was to employ his military power in such a manner as to maintain and if possible strengthen the American bargaining position. The final two years of the long war may thus be captioned, "shaping the peace."

With independence virtually assured, the United States once again had more to lose in battle than it stood to gain. Preserving the Continental Army was now more important than defeating the enemy army. Washington informed his officers that offensive actions were to be undertaken only when the Patriots had a "moral certainty of succeeding." Nonetheless, it would be wrong to portray his attitude during this period as defensive. Recall the two national goals: independence and territorial expansion. Having for all intents and purposes gained the first he turned now to the second.[17]

Even in the midst of the crucial year of 1781, the Commander in Chief had continued his campaigns to reduce the threat posed by Indians on the frontiers. In the winter after Yorktown he closely monitored actions in that forested theater, where Americans were trying vainly to take Detroit. He wrote that he was concerned lest British garrisons in the West "establish and secure their claim to the extended limits of Canada." In March 1782 he ordered General Irvine to cut a road from Fort Pitt to Niagara in preparation for a campaign to clear the Great Lakes of enemy posts. In May of that year, he considered another invasion of Canada, giving as his reason the necessity to provide for the "future peace and quiet of these states." He also felt that a strike against Halifax would furnish the United States a superior claim to the lucrative northern fishing waters. The future shape of the new nation held his abiding interest to the moment itself when peace was actually declared. George Rogers Clark's destruction of Chillicothe in Ohio on 10 November 1782 was the war's final clash

in the West, but Washington, ever bent on expansion, suggested that Congress mount one last campaign against the Indian nations in 1783.[18]

As it turned out, few of the Commander in Chief's schemes during those final two years came to fruition. Euphoria swept the country after Yorktown, and it took all the General's powers just to keep his army intact through the extended negotiations. The struggle had seemed interminably long. The citizenry was tired and the soldiers wanted to go home. The British could not have won the war at that late date, but the Americans could have forfeited their victory—which they indeed verged on doing. Some say Washington's greatest achievement was preventing a collapse of national will and resolve during those last trying years. Circumstances blocked his ambition to annex Canada, limiting him to campaigns against the Indian nations while passively guarding against English excursions from their coastal bases. The British soon evacuated every enclave except New York City, which had been occupied continuously since its capture in 1776. When redcoats left that city too in 1783, the 13 original colonies controlled all territory from Maine (then part of Massachusetts) to Georgia, and from the Atlantic to the Mississippi Valley. Boundaries were ill-defined, and with Spaniards to the southwest and British to the northwest future disputes were certain, but the new republic was easily the dominant power in North America. The final peace treaties were favorable to the United States, largely because American negotiators had always bargained from a position of strength—strength whose continued maintenance was largely attributable to the vision and will of George Washington.[19]

In December 1783, Washington stode into the Continental Congress, which was then assembled in Annapolis, and resigned the commission he had accepted more than eight years earlier. Afterwards, he rode to Mount Vernon in time for Christmas dinner.

GENERAL WASHINGTON IN RETROSPECT

A modern biographer has characterized Washington's strategy as "a Darwinian achievement of adaptation to environment; it was evolved to overcome the specific problems with which he was faced." In a sense that is an accurate observation, but to the extent that it implies Washington merely reacted to external forces it is quite misleading. For the American leader did not merely react; he was an innovator as well. A general always has two aims; to defeat the enemy and to avoid his own defeat. Sometimes the two are convergent, sometimes not. Washington knew the difference. The distinction derives from an analysis of the particular situation prevailing at a given moment and the integration of that analysis with long-range or national goals.[20]

TO IMPLY THAT WASHINGTON MERELY REACTED TO EXTERNAL FORCES IS QUITE MISLEADING.

Keeping the twin objectives of independence and territorial expansion ever in mind, the Commander in Chief tailored the American strategies individually for each of the war's four phases. First, he attacked at every conceivable turn, taking the strategic offensive to the full extent of his powers. Beating the enemy was of primary importance. Then, in the second phase, he turned cautious, not refusing battle, but fighting with his wagons facing the rear. His strategic defense was designed to defend the United States, to be sure, but primarily its purpose was to avoid a decisive defeat. Next, in conjunction with French allies, he returned to the foremost aim of inflicting military defeat on his foe. His strategic offensive, though greatly prolonged because of problems inherent in cooperating with a foreign fleet operating from a base thousands of miles away, resulted finally in victory at Yorktown. After that, with independence all but won, he shifted his strategic offensive toward achieving the aim of expanding national borders. But once again avoiding defeat became more important than gaining victory. For the most part, the military weakness of a small nation tired of war frustrated his efforts

in this final phase, though by keeping an army together and exerting constant visible pressure on the enemy he helped assure a favorable settlement. He was completely successful in achieving the goal of independence, and partially successful in gaining that of expansion. Given what he had to work with, more could hardly have been hoped for.

Washington's place in history is secure. He needs no defenders. If he had possessed no strategic ability whatsoever, but rather, as some claim, had won the war in spite of his lack of a broad military vision, his outstanding traits and deeds in civil life would be enough to mark him as a great man. Nevertheless, in order to understand him fully and to comprehend the strategic framework of the Revolutionary War, one cannot ignore Washington the general, which is to say, Washington the strategist. And that he possessed unusual strategic grasp can hardly be doubted. Indeed, even before the word strategy was coined, George Washington had become this nation's first strategist—and perhaps one of its best.

NOTES

1. The General's two most recent biographies bear out this contention. North Callahan in *George Washington: Soldier and Man* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 279, backs the theory that "Washington did not really win the war but Britain lost it, mainly to circumstances rather than the American enemy." James T. Flexner in *George Washington in the American Revolution 1775-1783* (Boston: Little Brown, 1968), pp. 544-47, does credit Washington with creating an effective hit-and-run capability, but still clings to the traditional view that he was a Fabian strategist. The Roman general Fabius believed the best way to defeat Hannibal was to avoid battle, letting time, attrition, and frustration wear the Carthaginians out.

2. The first US census, taken in 1790, shows a population spread and density not much changed from that existing during the Revolution. See Francis A. Walker, *Statistical Atlas of the United States at the Ninth Census, 1870* (Washington, D. C., 1874), Plate XVI.

3. The best modern study of the war as seen by London is Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964).

4. Division of Archives and History of the University of the State of New York, *The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign in 1779* (Albany, 1920), p. 10. See also North Callahan, *Henry Knox, George Washington's General* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 39.

5. General accounts of the Revolutionary War abound. Probably the best remains John R. Alden, *The American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New York: Harper, 1954). A fine compendium is Mark Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966).

6. John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington,* III (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1931), 302-03, 374, 415, 437-38, 475-76, 511.

7. U.S., Naval History Division, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution,* ed. William Bell Clark, II (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1964-70), 1-2.

8. Fitzpatrick, III, 511.

9. Fitzpatrick, V. See all Washington's letters to the President of Congress between May and August 1776.

10. Quoted in North Callahan, *George Washington: Soldier and Man,* p. 47.

11. Sir George Otto Trevelyan. *The American Revolution* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), III, 143. Camillus was a Roman hero (c. 447-365 B.C.) who, through offensive campaigns, extended Rome's sway by the conquest of Veii, the rout of Brennus' Gauls, and victories in Latium.

12. Fitzpatrick, VII, 272-76.

13. Jared Sparks, ed., *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* (Washington, D. C., 1857) I, 259-545; Henri Doniol, *Histoire de la Participation de la France a L'etablissement Des Etas-Unis D'Amerique* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1888), I, 154.

14. Jay Luvaas, "'Baron' von Steuben: Washington's Drillmaster," *American History Illustrated,* 2 (April 1967), 4-11, 55-58.

15. Fitzpatrick, XX, 56-57, 76-81, 480-84; XXI, 416-28; XXII, frontispiece, 105-07.

16. Fitzpatrick, XXIII, 8.

17. Fitzpatrick, XXIV, 124.

18. Fitzpatrick, XXIII, 396, 402-03; XXIV, 17, 87, 197-200; XXVI, 368-69, 419-20.

19. Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), opposite p. 350. This sketch depicts the various boundary proposals between 1779 and 1783.

20. Flexner, p. 536.