

General George Washington:  
Charismatic Leader or Military Strategist

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## INTRODUCTION

Man or myth, legend or reality, much has been written about George Washington since he took command of the Continental Army in June, 1775. But how much of what has been written is distorted truth? How much of what has been said is slightly exaggerated? We know that Washington was chosen by the Continental Congress to become the first Commander-in-Chief of the newly formed Continental Army, but as for the rest of his legend, it is hard to tell where the myth ends and the reality begins.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the military career of General George Washington. To determine if he was a great general in the military sense, or if he was just a delegate to the Continental Congress from Virginia who was given a tremendous task and, for whatever reason - luck, charisma or Providence - achieved greatness by leading a small band of American colonists to victory against Great Britain, the greatest military power of that time.

In looking at General George Washington's military career I will try to show that what allowed America to win the war was **not** his ability to command. Rather it was his spirit, determination, and constant fear of failure. It was these characteristics that allowed an untrained mob of farmers and merchants to win a confrontation with the British Army.

In order to illustrate this position, I have chosen one of the many battles of the Revolutionary War in order to show that

it was Washington's heart that ruled the battlefield and not his head. The battle that I have chosen is the Battle of Monmouth Court House, fought in Freehold, New Jersey on June 28, 1778.

My thesis is comprised of three chapters. Chapter One covers the military characteristics of Washington from the point at which he took command of the Continental Army. Chapter Two covers the personal characteristics of Washington before and during the war years. Chapter Three covers the events leading up to the Battle of Monmouth, and the battle itself. In the final analysis I will have revealed that General George Washington was not the great military genius that the American people have always thought, but rather, that he was a man of great spirit and determination which in turn brought the Colonies to their ultimate victory.

## CHAPTER ONE

As far as the military abilities of George Washington are concerned, historians have been arguing for years. Some feel that, as a soldier, Washington was inept, and the only reason why he won the war was that he was fighting the unwitting army of Great Britain. Unfortunately, what the historians have failed to mention was that Washington was never a soldier, but a civilian at heart, a farmer by trade and tradition, who was thrust into a top ranking military position and ordered by the Continental Congress to perform.<sup>1</sup>

It was June, 1775 when the Continental Congress asked Washington to assume the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Washington was quick to tell the Congress that he felt he was incapable of handling the position because of his lack of experience. The Congress would not hear of his refusal and, reluctantly, he accepted. Washington himself said of his appointment that it was ". . . too boundless for my abilities and far, very far beyond my experiences." A story is told that after the announcement a group of the delegates had a party in Washington's honor. After dinner Washington was toasted in the following way, "To the Commander-in-Chief of the American Armies!" His action of slowly and reluctantly rising, almost as if he was afraid, quickly changed the mood of the party from one of gaiety to that of a serious moment. It was at this point that all became aware of the tremendous burden and responsibility that they had placed upon Washington's

shoulders.<sup>2</sup>

One short-coming of Washington was that he lacked a great deal of self-confidence regarding his own ability to make military decisions. His lack of self-confidence came from the fact that he lacked military experience. Up to the time of his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, the only experience he had in military matters was fighting Indians. That was a far cry from the type of war he would now have to fight with the British.<sup>3</sup>

Another weakness of Washington's was that he did not know how to train his troops. This caused a lack of communication among Washington, his officers, and the men. It was not until the arrival of General VonSteuben from Prussia, much later in the war, that the Continental Army finally performed like a real army. This point we shall see later for it also played an important part in the Battle of Monmouth.<sup>4</sup>

Experience was Washington's teacher, and he learned quickly. If he had an advantage over the British Army, this was it. Washington approached the war knowing very little about European battle tactics. The British, and later the Hessians, the greatest soldiers on the European continent, approached the war with a vast knowledge of European warfare. This situation was a blessing for the Americans and a curse for the British and Hessians because fighting in the Colonies was definitely **not** the same as fighting a war in Europe. For Washington, it was easier to learn something he did not know, than it was for the British and Hessians to forget what they knew in order to

learn the new style of fighting that the Americans had developed. The British felt that the war in the Colonies would be like any other European war, and at first it was so.<sup>5</sup>

A step which Washington took to gain knowledge of European battle tactics was to completely envelop himself in reading every type of military material, all of which came from Europe. Another approach was to seek the advice of anyone who he felt had any type of military knowledge to offer. In this manner he listened very closely to two of his officers, Generals Gates and Lee, both of whom at one time served in the British Army. Both taught Washington the basic tactics and strategies of European warfare, marching, troop formation, canon placement and open field fighting. Even though Washington was gaining this new knowledge he was incapable of relaying this information to his men.<sup>6</sup>

When Washington began fighting, he used the same military tactics as did the enemy. This was a costly mistake, because the colonists were not adequately trained in the European style of combat . Washington and his forces suffered loss after loss until he changed his method fighting. What he did was turn to the only resources he had at his disposal, his men. Washington deeply depended on their loyalty to the American cause, and their willingness to suffer for the country at whatever the cost. Washington commanded an army of men who fought to defend not only their lives and limbs, but their country, their beginnings. The individualism of defending their own person was the American version of guerrilla warfare which the colonists

learned from the Indians. This type of fighting completely baffled the British. It confused them because the only type of fighting they were used to was the European style of meeting on an open battlefield. The Americans surprised them by constantly attacking far from any open battlefield. They did this by using the cover of the rugged terrain, and the wilderness conditions of the colonies to constantly catch the British off guard.<sup>7</sup>

Inexperience caused Washington to be pushed around for well over a year and a half. This lack of experience was the reason why the Continental Army lost Boston, New York and most of the New England Colonies early in the war to the British. It was not until he came to the conclusion that he could not beat the British at their own game that he began to change his tactics. Therefore, he had to make the British fight on his terms, and this the British could not at first easily handle. Washington did this by getting the British into predicaments or positions to which they were not accustomed. The Americans constantly harassed them, never risking a large-scale assault or battle. He even went so far as to say to both officers and Congress ". . . avoid a general action at all costs, never put anything to the risk unless compelled by a necessity into which we ought never to be drawn."<sup>8</sup> In other words, to fight a defensive war, they should not look for the enemy, but let the enemy look for them.

Another attribute of his troops, which Washington greatly valued and by which they proved themselves far superior to the British was their greater mobility . This was noted by

Washington when the Continentals got themselves into almost hopeless situations and ran before receiving orders to retreat. Washington never verbally praised the men for this action, but he never punished them for it either . This always kept the men's spirits high when they were able to say that they survived that day so they could fight again on the next.<sup>9</sup>

One of Washington's greatest virtues when it came to military strategies, was his army's mastery of the art of surprise attack. Washington used this skill to forge one of his main strategies of the war. This is best noted in his early morning surprise attack at Trenton, New Jersey on December 24, 1776, in which the American Army crossed the ice-choked Delaware River in the middle of a snowstorm in order to catch the Hessians off guard.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the Continental Congress had complete faith in him, they did insist that before any military action was taken, Washington had to confer with his senior officers, which he willingly did using what he called Councils of War. The senior officers who sat on this council were: Generals Gates, Lee, Arnold, LaFayette, Knox, Greene, Hamilton, Laurens, Reed, Mifflin, Conway and VonSteuben. The Councils were run in the following way: Washington set the problem before the Council; his proposals were discussed and either approved or denied. When Councils disagreed with Washington's proposals, he changed his mind to agree with the general consensus. This was a good example of how, at the beginning of the war, Washington was not fully in control of the American Armies, for he did not make



major decisions alone. As the war continued and Washington gained experience, becoming more self-confident, he called fewer Councils of War, which he did at his own accord; instead, in order to follow Congressional directives, he asked his officers to submit to him, in writing, their opinions and comments concerning the proposed military actions. After studying their comments, Washington himself made the final decision and, right or wrong, he had to live with the consequences.<sup>11</sup>

When Washington did meet the British on the battlefield, the only type of strategy he had to use against them was quite basic, that was to take up a position and fire, and when the enemy got close they rushed them with their bayonets. This was detrimental to the American Colonists, for this strategy was the reason that many battles had been lost. The blame cannot be fully laid at Washington's feet; for, even though he did know some military tactics, he could not plan complicated military actions and, even if he had this ability, the army itself was incapable of carrying out **any** such plan. The reason why the army was incapable was that these men were not professional soldiers. Most were just farmers and merchants, who when tired of the war just left. At this time in our nations history there was no draft, it was strictly volunteer and enlistments only ran for a few months. There was no stability in the Continental Army like there was in the British Army. Also there were no bootcamps to train the men, they learned on the battlefield. At the outset of the war, this was the cause of their many

losses.<sup>12</sup>

Another problem with Washington's command ability was that he was very vague when he issued orders. Washington is quoted as saying to one of his officers, who was preparing for battle, ". . . your own good sense, must govern in all matters not particularly pointed out as I do not wish to circumscribe you within narrow limits."<sup>13</sup> By allowing this to happen, Washington was sending officers, even less experienced than himself, into battle with little or no idea of what they were to do. This proved to be disastrous for the Continental Army, because some of these officers had no idea of how to lead troops into battle. There were many orders and counter orders given, both confusing the men and the officers giving them, creating at times kaos for the Continental Army.

There is, however, another critical factor that played a very important part in helping the Americans win the war, even though the military abilities of the two armies were so greatly different. The factor is that the British arrogantly approached the war thinking that they knew everything. Washington, on the other hand, approached the war knowing nothing about European battle tactics. In this he was thus forced, at every moment of every day, to gather as much knowledge as possible on this subject, eventually learning of the relaxed attitude of the British which gave them a much better position in the war.<sup>14</sup>

Along these lines, Great Britain helped the American cause by continually replacing the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in America. When the British Army was not performing to

the satisfaction of King George III and Parliament, the Commander-in-Chief would be replaced. This occurred on four separate occasions. It was the opinion of those directing the war that the change would advance the British position, but, in reality, the impact was negative. Each new commander was steeped in the tradition of European warfare and, in order to be successful, had to learn the tactics of wilderness fighting. The stability of command of the American Armies was a disadvantage for the unstable British Armies.<sup>15</sup>

Washington, not unlike his men, wanted desperately to return to his home, Mount Vernon. He did not enjoy the war. Yet, because of his sense of duty, he stayed and fought for liberty, which was evident time and again in his correspondence.<sup>16</sup> Every day Washington put on his blue and buff uniform, he did so reluctantly, for he was not a military man, never liked it, but wore it because he was called by the newly forming nation and he felt that it was his duty to defend his country. This burden weighed heavily on his heart continually through the war.<sup>17</sup>

We see that Washington was not the military man that historians have led us to believe, for the true mentality of the military man is how to best use the power in his possession. For Washington, power was not the ultimate factor in his military might, perseverance was. Washington firmly believed that the war could be won in less harsh way, that is through diplomatic channels. He himself was concerned with the frustration and disharmony among the American troops over what

they were fighting for.<sup>18</sup>

" It was in those mental arenas that the civilian -- soldier George Washington shone the brightest. He kept forever in his mind, as more radical statesmen of either [the] right or the left could not do, that the fundamental objective [of the war] was not to foster division but to increase unity." (James Thomas Flexner)<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

The physical and emotional characteristics of George Washington played a very important part in the colonists' success in winning their independence from Great Britain. Washington was described as a man who stood above the rest. He stood over others for two very important reasons. One was that he was highly respected by his peers, respected because of his aloofness, the fact that he only involved himself in matters of great importance. Washington was a man of very few words. He never allowed anyone to get very friendly with him. No one ever joked about him or even tried giving him a nickname. He was a very private man, almost withdrawn. The other reason why he stood above the rest was because he stood over six feet tall, a very uncommon height for colonial days. So his officers, troops and peers had literally to look up at him. Hence, "he gave the impression of great physical strength." Another factor which gave him a very impressive look was that he looked good in the saddle. Thomas Jefferson referred to Washington as "the best horseman of his age and the most gracious figure that could be seen on horse back." Just by his physical presence George Washington commanded strength.<sup>20</sup>

When in the presence of Washington for the first time, people were awed by his stature. A soldier in the Continental Army stated that he seems "intended for a great position - his appearance alone gave confidence to the timid and imposed respect on the bold." This deep respect for Washington is shown

in the titles given to him. From the first day of the war he was referred to as "**Excellency**" or "**The General.**" It was even suggested that when Washington became President he should be addressed as "**His High Mightiness.**" This shows the deep loyalty and respect for the man, something Washington himself felt was done over.<sup>21</sup>

To the people of the colonies it seemed as though George Washington were a gift from God to free them from their trouble. According to them he had all that it would take to do the impossible. He had ability, determination, drive, and respect. In the eyes of the colonists, who were at one time loyal to King George III of England, Washington now commanded the same type of stature.<sup>22</sup>

When men came into the presence of Washington and saw all the people who catered to him, his servants and soldiers and then noticed the peace and power in his face, the depressed mouth and the cold stare they felt that they were in the presence of a powerful man.<sup>23</sup>

An aspect of Washington's character that was detrimental to the type of position that he held was that even though he was considered a god, he was not a good public speaker. Unfortunately, Washington was not as gifted as his peers Thomas Paine or Patrick Henry were at public speaking. Even as a delegate to the Continental Congress he was incapable of speaking unless forced. Thus he also had this problems on the battlefield. He could not inspire his men for battle with those thrilling patriotic speeches that generals customarily gave

their men during the eighteenth century. Washington therefore relied on his officers to relay all order to the troops.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the way which Washington inspired his troops was very different from that of his counterparts in the British Army. He inspired by **"example and deed."** He fought right beside his men in battle, and suffered the same hardships they faced. This is what the soldiers wanted in their Commander-in-Chief. When members of the army were asked to describe Washington many of them commented on his remoteness from them on the personal level, and the fact that it seemed that he always had a stern look on his face. Interestingly though they usually ended their description with the statement "...but we loved him. We'd sell our lives for him." The quality historians felt that Washington had to command the army "... might be described inadequately as the ability to inspire respect and admiration and love."<sup>25</sup>

Washington was the type of commander who would not order his men to do anything that he himself would not do. For this the men greatly respected him. Washington was so dedicated to his men, and his command, that he refused both pay and time off for rest.<sup>26</sup> This he was capable of doing because of both the deep love and respect that the men had for him. He was then capable of asking his men to do things that other commanders could only dream of asking their men to do. There was a very special bond which developed between Washington and his men.<sup>27</sup>

That is why the Continental Congress chose George Washington for the job. The fact is that Washington was above the average man. Congress felt that Washington would thus be

very prudent in whom he put in command positions, and he was. They realized he would not show favoritism or allow himself to become exclusive with any of his men. The Congress also realized that his appointment would keep peace among his subordinates, and that they would have to work hard to get anywhere in the Army. Unfortunately Washington did have another fault that the Congress also recognized, that of excessive ambition.<sup>28</sup>

There was ambition in George Washington, but it was very much tied to his pride. Washington by the time he was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army had already made a name for himself and he was proud of his accomplishments. When asked to lead the newly formed army he felt he was putting his reputation on the line, and if he failed, which he thought he might because of his lack of inexperience, he felt that socially and politically he would be ruined. Washington said very emotionally to Patrick Henry the day he was appointed Commander-in-Chief, "Remember, Mr. Henry, what I tell you now. From the day, I enter upon the command of the American Armies, I date my fall and the ruin of my reputation." With regard to his ambition, all Washington wanted to do was to come out of the army with the same social status and respect that he went in with.<sup>29</sup>

If anyone grew during the war, it was Washington. The day he arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts to take command of the Continental Army, he knew it was going to be a long tough fight, and he could not let anyone know how afraid he was at



that moment.<sup>30</sup>

When the time came for the first review of his new troops men on hand said he mounted his horse and waited under an elm tree for them to pass by. They went on to describe the sight of Washington sitting on his horse under that tree as "truly noble and majestic", filling all present with hope for the future.<sup>31</sup>

It took every ounce of sheer will power on the part of Washington to even try to begin the task of running an army. Those first few days at Cambridge, Massachusetts were the toughest for Washington, for it was then that he saw first hand all that he was responsible for, and it looked like an obstacle that could not be so easily come over.<sup>32</sup>

An example of Washington's determination and personal commitment to the war is shown by the way he handled himself in the opening months of the war. It was September 15, 1775, at the battle of Kips Bay in the East River of New York. As Washington rode up to the front line he was shocked to find his men retreating. He ordered reinforcements to replace the fleeing men, who dug in to face the British as they approached from the river. The closer the British came to the men, the more frightened the Continentals became, finally dropping their backpacks and running. Washington rode after them but to no avail. He became so incensed over the incident that he flung his hat to the ground and yelled out, "Are these the men with whom I am to defend America?" Washington determined to defy the British, and also to show his courage so his men would not retreat as the enemy approached stood his ground. It not for

the help of an aide who removed Washington from the field, he might have been shot or taken prisoner. General Nathanael Greene said of the incident, Washington was "so vexed at the intamous conduct of his troops that he sought death rather than life." This shows how Washington tried to both save face and inspire his men.<sup>33</sup>

Washington time and time again proved his courage to his men and to Congress. Time after time he managed to get himself out of one predicament after another. It was said that Washington was a quick thinker which allowed him to escape from some almost hopeless situations. A rule by which he lived was to stay alive at all costs, so he could fight again the next day. There was only one thing on his mind, to be victorious, and to be victorious he must be persistent.<sup>34</sup>

Washington won the men over by inspiring them to see the glory of the cause. Washington was capable of doing this because of his deep feelings for his country. Everything he said came from the heart because he was a true patriot, this is what he showed both his fellow officers and troops, not to live for the glory of the battle, but to fight for the triumph of independence.<sup>35</sup>

Thus Washington's troops believed in him and sacrificed greatly for him. The men believed even death was worth independence . It became that simple for them, they fought for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Once they understood that, it then became their war. They were thus capable of doing more than anyone could ask them to do, even

going as far as to march barefoot, live in unheated cabins for two consecutive winters and never having enough food, clothing or weapons with which to fight. It was because of these savage conditions that the American Army developed its Indian style of attack, the raiding party, something with which the British were totally unfamiliar with.<sup>36</sup>

Washington was also very honest with his men. He always laid it on the line to them. He never pretended that he had it easy. "He complained as loudly as any hungry private bitching by a cold fire; and yet he was the bravest of the brave - the way he took risks in battle may have horrified his aides but it delighted his men. And he never dispaired: he was always sure that the virtue of the men and the nobility of the cause would inspire beneficent and rewarding Providence to carry them all to victory..."(James Thomas Flexner)<sup>37</sup>

With a stone cold stare, Washington would periodically ride through his troops, but when on occasion he said a few words to the men, his look of ice melted into a warm caring expression, as he spoke of home and farming, things with which they could all identify. This was his way of reaffirming the reasons for which they were all out there.<sup>38</sup>

Washington was no super-human. He became tired of the war, especially after he got off to a bad start. After only two and a half months he was in the pit of desperation and was finding it difficult to keep going.<sup>39</sup>

Washington wrote to his brother telling him of his frustration. He said the only reason the British had not won

the war was that the Continental Army was never in one place at one time, and therefore the British could not wipe them out in one blow. Washington also informed his brother that the real enemy was not the British, "...but in dealing with an unending series of administrative crises - the crises of insufficiency - not enough clothing, food, ammunition, weapons, blankets, transport, troops." This was Washington's other enemy, and it was to hound him throughout the entire war.<sup>40</sup>

Washington's worst moments of frustration and doubt came when the war was at its lowest; but for Washington this was fortunate because it denied him the opportunity to dwell on his own problems. The war always came first to him, thus consuming his time, forcing him to draw on his inner spirit and will to get him through.<sup>41</sup>

Washington therefore found strength in misfortune. When hearing of the countless calamities of the war it only made him more determined to do his best to win the war. The cause became ever more important when times got tough. The war then became very personal to Washington. Whatever the outcome Washington felt it would have a direct bearing on him personally; therefore for his sake it had to be a victory for America.<sup>42</sup>

The personal character of Washington can be summed up in a statement General DeRochambeau of the French Army made to General LaFayette, aide to Washington in August 1780. DeRochambeau said,

"...the surest way of losing the confidence of troops was to expose them to danger through private and personal ambition: the colonial forces were never in danger of this from Washington's deep determination of spirit, his innate refusal to accept defeat, his calm and firm bearing which justifiably inspired confidence...Washington certainly looked a good general in height, composure, dignity - all important when high commanders share the actual process of fighting with their men."(Eric Robson)<sup>43</sup>

Washington had this and more, he was a man of exceptional character, thus enabling him to survive .

### CHAPTER THREE

The event leading to the turning point of the war came during the 1777-78 winter respite at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. It was here during their winter training that the Continental Army finally became united and all that they had learned would be put to the test on the battlefield in Freehold, New Jersey during the famous Battle of Monmouth Court House. It was because of this battle that the British Army never again engaged the Continental Army in an all out offensive.<sup>44</sup>

This major turnaround for the American Army resulted from the tremendous help of General VonSteuben of Prussia, an expert in military training and discipline. He was capable of turning a small band of farmers and merchants into a fighting army in only a short time. The Battle of Monmouth, in which these men proved their new fighting ability, would have been a total victory for Washington if it had not been for the ineptitude of his second in command, Major General Charles Lee.<sup>45</sup>

As was the practice set down by the Continental Congress, Washington called a Council of War on June 17, 1778 to discuss with his officers what to do about General Clinton and the British forces which were on their way from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to New York. Washington's officers were to pick one of four possibilities and to give their choice to him in writing. The four choices the officers had were "...1) to attack the British immediately; 2) to march across New Jersey by a parallel route without attacking them at all; 3) to harass

them en route without risking a major battle; or 4) to attack them with full force somewhere along the road." (Noel F. Busch)<sup>46</sup>

General Clinton only had 10,000 men in his ranks whereas Washington had 11,000 with him at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and about 800 in New Jersey. Washington felt he had the upper hand but his officers felt differently. Two officers wanted to attack the British on their journey; six officers wanted to tag along behind them and send small raiding parties to bother them, not allowing for a major battle. All the remaining officers sided with second-in-command Major General Charles Lee, who felt they should leave them alone. Again at Hopewell, New Jersey Washington had another council, for a decision had not yet been reached. When Washington again asked if they should attack, most in the room this time sided with General Lee's suggestion to leave the British alone.<sup>47</sup>

Still other councils were called, all to no avail. This forced Washington to make a decision. He realized that if he were to attack, the only place it could be was at Monmouth, for it was the most suitable area wise, for an attack. The terrain was high and this would give the Continental Army a slight advantage over the British, for they would have to march up hill to engage the Americans, also it was only a day's march from their present location. Taking all this into consideration, Washington made his decision and informed his officers that they would attack the enemy at Monmouth. Washington then ordered his troops to split into two divisions.

The first division with over five thousand men were to engage the enemy first; then Washington himself would bring in the remaining men, who would be following three miles behind, to finish off the attack. Washington, following the custom of the time, offered Major General Lee the opportunity to lead the first division.<sup>48</sup>

Lee, who felt that the Continental Army had no chance of winning a major battle against the British, would not accept the command. Washington then offered it to General LaFayette who quickly accepted, for this would be his first time to lead troops in battle and he was eager for the chance. Later Lee discovered that the command he turned down had over five thousand men in its ranks, he quickly changed his mind and demanded from Washington his command back. Washington, following the rules of war, graciously asked LaFayette to turn his command over to Lee, which he did. By giving this command back to Lee, Washington made the basic error of the campaign, as pointed out by the military historian Baron Henri Jomini, who wrote: " To commit the execution of a purpose to one who disapproves of the plan of it, is to employ but one third of the man; his heart and his head are against you; you have command only of his hands."<sup>49</sup> Later Washington realized his mistake. Washington felt that since Lee accepted the command he had a change of heart, Washington was wrong. Deep down Lee still felt that the British held the upper hand, but took the command out of pride.

Monmouth, New Jersey, Sunday June 28th, 1778. It was



almost one hundred degrees in the sun. Here the course of the war would finally change in favor of the Americans. It was on the battlefield at Monmouth Court House that the military career of Major General Charles Lee would come to a dramatic end. And it was here that all the hard work of General VonSteuben would be put to the test to show the British once and for all that the Continental Army was now a major threat. Finally, it was here that Washington showed his troops what the war was really about. Undaunted in his resolve, Washington was capable of turning a major retreat into a major victory, in a battle which became one of the high points of his career. Even though the war still had another five years to go nothing could compare to the events of that day.<sup>50</sup>

At approximately six o'clock on the morning of the 28th of June, Lee and his army of five thousand left Englishtown, New Jersey (approximately five miles north of the battle site) to engage the British. Washington's orders to Lee were to harass the British without provoking a major assault. It was noon when Lee finally reached Monmouth and the fighting began. Lee began by ordering Brigadier General Anthony Wayne and his six hundred men to attack the rear guard of the British Army, which contained approximately five hundred men. Within a few moments approximately two thousand British soldiers came to give aid to the men under fire. Lee, aware that his men under Wayne could not hold off this attack, ordered them to fall back toward the town of Freehold. After making a new stance outside of Freehold, Lee became aware that approximately five to six

thousand more British soldiers were beginning to form near his troop placement. When this force began to attack Lee opened fire on them, but ran out of ammunition quickly. Thus, some men began to run. As Lee watched the British advance and his front line fall, he ordered all of his troops to retreat to the town of Freehold, where they would try to make a new stance. After arriving in Freehold, Lee watched as the entire 1st Division of the British Army, seven thousand men in all, advance on his position rather quickly. This division of British soldiers were commanded by Generals Charles Cornwallis and Henry Clinton. Clinton was also Commander-in-Chief of the entire British operation in North America. Lee was unable to get a shot off before they retreated back even farther. Not comfortable with his new location, and missing about a third of his army, Lee fell back again.<sup>51</sup>

It was now around three o'clock in the afternoon when Washington approached the battlefield. It has been said that the entire time Lee was fighting the British he had General LaFayette with him, and it was General LaFayette who sent the report to Washington that there was trouble at the front. Upon receiving the report, Washington quickly rode to the front and went looking for Lee. Soon he was met by a mob of retreating soldiers. Washington in a fit of anger confronted Lee and called him a "**darned poltroon**" and ordered him to the rear, thereby taking the command himself.<sup>52</sup>

It has also been reported that Washington recieved no such warning from LaFayette about the retreat, and that it was not

until his arrival at the front that he learned about the retreat first hand. With the British troops closing on their position, Washington stopped Lee as he was retreating, and confronted him. **"For God's sake, General Lee,"** said Washington with great warmth, (anger), **"what's the cause of this ill-tim'd prudence?"** "No Man, sir" replied Lee, quite convulsed with rage, **"can boast** a larger portion of that rascally virtue than your **Excellency!!**"<sup>53</sup> Whichever way it happened Lee was severally reprimanded and ordered to the rear.

After his confrontation with Lee, Washington turned toward his fleeing men. When they saw him approach them in his blue and buff uniform riding upon a great white horse, a gift from the Governor of New Jersey, William Livingston, they were filled with awe. General LaFayette, who was present at the scene, allows us a glimpse of what Washington's appearance at that moment did for the downtrodden men: "His presence stopped the retreat...his fine appearance on horseback, his calm courage, roused to animation by the vexation of the morning..."<sup>54</sup> When the troops saw him they all shouted **"God save great Washington!"**. Washington's reply to their shouts was **"My brave fellows; can you fight?"** The men answered with three **cheers**. Washington then commanded them to **"...face about my heroes and charge."** Washington gave this command with unending vivacity and courage.<sup>55</sup>

Washington's presence had alone stopped the retreat and had reassured the men that he was with them. Again General LaFayette reports on how Washington **"...rode all along the**

lines amid shouts of soldiers, cheering them by his **voice and example** and restoring to our standard the fortunes of the fight. [He concluded by saying.] I thought then, as now, that never had I beheld so superb a man."<sup>56</sup> Washington therefore had turned an almost disastrous moment into a moment of glory. His presence and demeanor played a very major part in turning around an almost hopeless battle. An factor which is equally important and should not be over looked was that once the troops rallied around, they were capable of holding their own against the British, because of the discipline instilled in them earlier by VonSteuben.

But who won the battle? There are three possible answers to that question, equally fair to both sides. The first answer is that the Battle of Monmouth was a draw, at least according to the rules of European warfare. That is, if both armies occupy the battlefield after the engagement is over, then the battle is considered a draw, both did. The second answer is that the British won because General Clinton and his army got away. Clinton's main objective was to get to New York, and he did. The third possible solution to the question is that because the American Army controlled the battlefield, after the British continued on their march to New York, and because the Continental Army was able to hold its own against the British, the Americans were victorious.<sup>57</sup> Also if you were to measure the victory by the number of lives lost, then the Americans won because the had only 58 dead and 140 wounded to the British who has 249 dead and just as many wounded.<sup>58</sup>

In my opinion the Continental Army under the command of George Washington won the battle. I say this because though Lee almost ended the war before it began the Continental Army was able to turn the situation around with the help of Washington, and strike a major blow to the British. The Continental Army, for the first time fought as an army. They had finally become the army that both the new nation and George Washington had always hoped for. This, therefore became the turning point in America's fight for freedom.

### CONCLUSION

Washington was not a Caesar or a Napoleon on the battlefield; but he did learn and eventually became skilled enough to lead his army to victory. Unfortunately, he did not have a successful war record, for he had great defeats in New York, Brandywine, and Germantown and a draw/victory at Monmouth. So as the war went on Washington did not look like a great general, but he was able to show his men courage; and that in itself was inspiring. Moreover, he never gave up easily, fighting bitterly to the end of every battle. It was in these areas or skills that he showed his true colors, for "no American could have matched his performance. The splendor of his character far outweighed his deficiencies in tactics and strategy."<sup>59</sup>

When the British entered the war with the colonies they assumed that there was no human way for the colonists to win the war. The British believed that America would quickly tire of the war. Had it not been for the determination of Washington, the British would have been right and the American Army would have defeated itself. Washington, at least united the thirteen colonies into one country and it was through this union that victory was achieved.<sup>60</sup>

We know that George Washington spent six years fighting an enemy to whom he usually lost, and that he was also learning how to cope with "...the feeding, lodging, disciplining, rebuking, warming, cleaning, gathering together, and [the] maintaining of his army, and not allow them, as they tended to

do, to take their flight as easily as a flock of sparrows."<sup>61</sup>  
This was a burden only a man of deep convictions could accomplish and this man was Washington. It is said best that "...Washington was the Revolution, that the cause and command were synonymous, that the existence of the army and the liberties of America depended on him." (Eric Robson)<sup>62</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James Thomas Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Richard M. Ketchum, The Winter Soldier (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>James Thomas Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 535.

<sup>4</sup>John R. Alden. A History of the American Revolution ( New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969), P. 185.

<sup>5</sup>Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup>Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 537.

<sup>7</sup>Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man, pp. 182-183.

<sup>8</sup>Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, p. 395.

<sup>9</sup>James Morton Smith, George Washington, a Profile (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup>George M. Wrong, Washington and His Comrades in Arms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), p. 109.

<sup>11</sup>Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 537.

<sup>12</sup>Eric Robson, The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspect, 1763 - 1783 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 171.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>14</sup>Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 535.

<sup>15</sup>Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man, p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 542.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 531.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 533.



- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 534.
- <sup>20</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-36.
- <sup>23</sup> Bernard Fay, George Washington, Republican Aristocrat (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), p. 203.
- <sup>24</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, p. 330.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>26</sup> Smith, George Washington, a Profile, p. 97.
- <sup>27</sup> Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 540.
- <sup>28</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, p. 34.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.
- <sup>30</sup> Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 535.
- <sup>31</sup> Wrong, Washington and His Comrades in Arms, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>32</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, p. 36.
- <sup>33</sup> Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man, pp. 83-84.
- <sup>34</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, pp. 35-36.
- <sup>35</sup> Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 543.
- <sup>36</sup> Smith, George Washington, a Profile, p. 102.
- <sup>37</sup> Flexner, George Washington in the American Revolution, 1775 - 1783, p. 542.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 542.
- <sup>39</sup> Ketchum, The Winter Soldier, pp. 119-120.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 36.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 206.
- <sup>42</sup> Robson, The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspects, 1763 - 1783, pp. 170-171.

- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 170.
- <sup>44</sup> Smith, George Washington, a Profile, p. 140.
- <sup>45</sup> Robson, The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspects, 1763 - 1783, pp. 158-159.
- <sup>46</sup> Noel F. Busch, Winter Quarters (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1975), pp. 122-123.
- <sup>47</sup> Christopher Ward, The War of the Revolution, Vol. II. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1952), pp. 572-573.
- <sup>48</sup> Busch, Winter Quarters, p. 125.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-126.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 125.
- <sup>51</sup> Samuel S. Smith, Monmouth Battlefield (New Jersey: Philip Freneau Press, 1978), pp. 6-12.
- <sup>52</sup> Wrong, Washington and His Comrades in Arms, pp. 188-189.
- <sup>53</sup> Mason Weems', Life of Washington (U.S.A.: Grosset and Dunlap, 1927), pp. 166-167.
- <sup>54</sup> Ward, The War of the Revolution, p. 581.
- <sup>55</sup> Weem's Life of Washington, p. 167.
- <sup>56</sup> Ward, The War of the Revolution, p. 581.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 585.
- <sup>58</sup> Weem's, Life of Washington, p. 168.
- <sup>59</sup> John R. Alden, George Washington, a Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. 305.
- <sup>60</sup> Flexner, Washington, the Indispensable Man, p. 182.
- <sup>61</sup> Fay, George Washington Republican Aristocrat, pp. 206-207.
- <sup>62</sup> Robson, The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspects, 1763 - 1783, pp. 169-170.

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