

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Letter to Congress

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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We celebrate the birth of the nation on the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, we risk forgetting that the nation would have been stillborn had we not won the lengthy war of independence that lasted until 1781 and whose outcome was anything but assured. In June 1775, after the April skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, the British won the Battle of Boston's Bunker Hill, albeit with heavy casualties, and the war was truly on. King George III declared that the American colonists were rebels. The Continental Congress appointed George Washington commander in chief of the Continental Army, but the army he commanded was hardly equal to the task. In this letter from his headquarters outside Boston on September 21, 1775, General Washington (1732–99) outlines some of the challenges he and the fledgling army faced on the ground. The letter also gives evidence of Washington's capacities of leadership.

Review the challenges Washington faces in trying to maintain a functioning army in the field. How is he attempting to meet these challenges? What is his proposed approach to the attachment and morale of the troops? What is his rhetorical approach in addressing the Congress, and why must he adopt it? What is the significance of his report about the Canadian campaign? Were you a member of the Congress, how would you respond to his appeal? What orders, and what promises of support, would you—could you—give him?

Camp at Cambridge, 21 September 1775

Sir,

I have been in daily expectation of being favored with the commands of the honorable Congress on the subject of my two last letters. The season now advances so fast, that I cannot any longer defer laying before them such further measures as require their immediate attention, and in which I wait their direction.

The mode in which the present army has been collected has occasioned some difficulty, in procuring the subscription of both officers and soldiers to the Continental

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articles of war. Their principal objection has been, that it might subject them to a longer service, than that for which they engaged under their several provincial establishments. It is in vain to attempt to reason away the prejudices of a whole army, often instilled, and in this instance at least encouraged, by their officers from private and narrow views. I have therefore forbore pressing them, as I did not experience any such inconvenience from their adherence to their former rules, as would warrant the risk of entering into a contest upon it; more especially as the restraints, necessary for the establishment of essential discipline and subordination, indisposed their minds to every change, and made it both duty and policy to introduce as little novelty as possible. With the present army, I fear, such a subscription is impracticable; but the difficulty will cease with this army.

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The Connecticut and Rhode Island troops stand engaged to the 1st of December only; and none longer than the 1st of January. A dissolution of the present army therefore will take place, unless some early provision is made against such an event. Most of the general officers are of opinion, that the greater part of them may be reenlisted for the winter, or another campaign, with the indulgence of a furlough to visit their friends, which may be regulated so as not to endanger the service. How far it may be proper to form the new army entirely out of the old, for another campaign, rather than from the contingents of the several provinces, is a question which involves in it too many considerations of policy and prudence, for me to undertake to decide. It appears to be impossible to draw it from any other source than the old army, for this winter; and, as the pay is ample, I hope a sufficient number will engage in the service for that time at least. But there are various opinions of the temper of the men on the subject; and there may be great hazard in deferring the trial too long.

In the Continental establishment no provision has been made for the pay of artificers,¹ distinct from that of the common soldiers; whereas, under the provincial such as found their own tools were allowed one shilling *per diem* advance, and particular artisans more. The pay of the artillery, also, now differs from that of the province; the men have less, the officers more; and, for some ranks, no provision is made, as the Congress will please to observe by this list, which I have the honor to enclose. These particulars, though seemingly inconsiderable, are the source of much complaint and dissatisfaction, which I endeavor to compose in the best manner I am able.

¹ *A skilled worker.*

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By the returns of the rifle companies, and that battalion, they appear to exceed their establishment very considerably. I doubt my authority to pay these extra men without the direction of the Congress; but it would be deemed a great hardship wholly to refuse them, as they have been encouraged to come.

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The necessities of the troops having required pay, I directed that those of the Massachusetts should receive for one month, upon their being mustered, and returning a proper roll; but a claim was immediately made for pay by lunar months; and several regiments have declined taking up their warrants on this account. As this practice was entirely new to me, though said to be warranted by former usage here, the matter now waits the determination of the honorable Congress. I find, in Connecticut and Rhode Island, this point was settled by calendar months; in Massachusetts, though mentioned in the Congress, it was left undetermined, which is also the case of New Hampshire.

The enclosure No. 2 is a petition from the subalterns,² respecting their pay. Where there are only two of these in a company, I have considered one as an ensign, and ordered him pay as such, as in the Connecticut forces. I must beg leave to recommend this petition to the favor of the Congress, as I am of opinion the allowance is inadequate to their rank and service, and is one great source of that familiarity between the officers and men, which is so incompatible with subordination and discipline. Many valuable officers of those ranks, finding themselves unable to support the character and appearance of officers, I am informed, will retire as soon as the term of service is expired, if there is no alteration.

For the better regulation of duty, I found it necessary to settle the rank of the officers, and to number the regiments; and, as I had not received the commands of the Congress on the subject, and the exigence of the service forbade any further delay, the general officers were considered as having no regiments; an alteration, which, I understand, is not pleasing to some of them, but appeared to me and others to be proper, when it was considered, that, by this means, the whole army is put upon one footing, and all particular attachments are dissolved.

Among many other considerations which the approach of winter will demand, that of clothing appears to be one of the most important. So far as regards the preservation of the army from cold, they may be deemed in a state of nakedness. Many of the men have been

² A junior officer.

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without blankets the whole campaign, and those which have been in use during the summer are so much worn as to be of little service. In order to make a suitable provision in these articles, and at the same time to guard the public against imposition and expense, it seems necessary to determine the mode of continuing the army; for should these troops be clothed under their present engagement, and at the expiration of the term of service decline renewing it, a set of unprovided men may be sent to supply their places.

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I cannot suppose it to be unknown to the honorable Congress, that in all armies it is an established practise to make an allowance to officers of provisions and forage proportionate to their rank. As such an allowance formed no part of the continental establishment, I have hitherto forbore to issue the orders for that purpose: but as it is a received opinion of such members of the Congress, as I have had an opportunity of consulting, as well as throughout the army, that it must be deemed a matter of course, and implied in the establishment of the army, I have directed the following proportion of rations, being the same allowance in the American armies last war:—

Major General: 15
Brigadier General: 12
Colonel: 6
Lieut. Colonel: 5
Major: 4
Captain: 3
Subaltern: 2
Staff: 2

If these should not be approved by the honorable Congress, they will please to signify their pleasure as to the alterations they would have made, in the whole or in part.

I am now to inform the honorable Congress, that, encouraged by the repeated declarations of the Canadians and Indians, and urged by their requests, I have detached Colonel Arnold with a thousand men, to penetrate into Canada by way of Kennebec River, and, if possible, to make himself master of Quebec. By this manœuvre, I proposed either to divert Carleton from St. John's, which would leave a free passage to General Schuyler; or, if this did not take effect, Quebec, in its present defenceless state, must fall into his hands an easy prey. I made all possible inquiry, as to the distance, the safety of the route, and the danger of the season being too far advanced; but found nothing in either to deter me from proceeding, more especially as it met with very general

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approbation from all whom I consulted upon it. But, that nothing might be omitted, to enable me to judge of its propriety and probable consequences, I communicated it by express to General Schuyler, who approved of it in such terms, that I resolved to put it in immediate execution. They have now left this place seven days; and, if favored with a good wind, I hope soon to hear of their being safe in Kennebec River. For the satisfaction of the Congress, I here enclose a copy of the proposed route. I also do myself the honor of enclosing a manifesto, which I caused to be printed here, and of which Colonel Arnold has taken a suitable number with him. I have also forwarded a copy of his instructions. From all which, I hope the Congress will have a clear view of the motives, plan, and intended execution of this enterprise, and that I shall be so happy as to meet with their approbation in it.

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I was the more induced to make this detachment, as it is my clear opinion, from a careful observation of the movements of the enemy, corroborated by all the intelligence we receive by deserters and others of the former of whom we have some every day, that the enemy have no intention to come out, until they are reinforced. They have been wholly employed for some time past in procuring materials for barracks, fuel, and making other preparations for winter. These circumstances, with the constant additions to their works, which are apparently defensive, have led to the above conclusion, and enabled me to spare this body of men where I hope they will be usefully and successfully employed.

The state of inactivity, in which this army has lain for some time, by no means corresponds with my wishes by some decisive stroke, to relieve my country, from the heavy expense its subsistence must create. After frequently reconnoitring the situation of the enemy in the town of Boston, collecting all possible intelligence, and digesting the whole, a surprise did not appear to me wholly impracticable, though hazardous. I communicated it to the general officers some days before I called them to a council, that they might be prepared with their opinions. The result I have the honor of sending in the inclosure No 6. I cannot say that I have wholly laid it aside; but new events may occasion new measures. Of this I hope the honorable Congress can need no assurance, that there is not a man in America, who more earnestly wishes such a termination of the campaign, as to make the army no longer necessary.

The season advances so fast, that I have given orders to prepare barracks and other accommodations for the winter. The great scarcity of tow cloth in this country, I fear, will totally disappoint us in our expectations of procuring hunting shirts. Gov. Cooke informs

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me, few or none are to be had in Rhode Island, and Gov. Trumbull gives me little encouragement to expect many from Connecticut.

I have filled up the office of quartermaster-general, which the Congress was pleased to leave to me, by the appointment of Major Mifflin, which I hope and believe will be universally acceptable.

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It gives me great pain to be obliged to solicit the attention of the honorable Congress to the state of this army, in terms which imply the slightest apprehension of being neglected. But my situation is inexpressibly distressing, to see the winter fast approaching upon a naked army, the time of their service within a few weeks of expiring, and no provision yet made for such important events. Added to these, the military chest is totally exhausted; the paymaster has not a single dollar in hand; the commissary-general assures me he has strained his credit, for the subsistence of the army, to the utmost. The quartermaster-general is precisely in the same situation; and the greater part of the troops are in a state not far from mutiny, upon the deduction from their stated allowance. I know not to whom I am to impute this failure; but I am of opinion, if the evil is not immediately remedied, and more punctually observed in future, the army must absolutely break up. I hoped I had expressed myself so fully on this subject, both by letter, and to those members of the Congress, who honored the camp with a visit, that no disappointment could possibly happen. I therefore hourly expected advice from the paymaster, that he had received a fresh supply, in addition to the hundred and seventy-two thousand dollars delivered him in August; and thought myself warranted to assure the public creditors, that in a few days they should be satisfied. But the delay has brought matters to such a crisis, as admits of no farther uncertain expectations. I have therefore sent off this express with orders to make all possible despatch. It is my most earnest request, that he may be returned with all possible expedition, unless the honorable Congress have already forwarded what is so indispensably necessary. I have the honor to be, &c.