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CONTENTS

2 **Joint and Coalition Warfare: A Historical Perspective**

3 **Santiago Campaign of 1898: Joint and Combined Operations**

by Lieutenant Colonel Peter S. Kindsvatter, US Army, Retired

15 **The Siege of Yorktown: Coalition Warfare**

by Captain Stephen C. Danckert, US Army Reserve

21 **The Army's Heritage as a Coalition Force**

by Major John W. Peabody, US Army

27 **Officer Development: A Doctrinal Imperative**

*by Major Mark D. Roche, US Army, and
Major Thomas W. Hayden, US Army*

38 **Fright Night: Task Force 2/34 Armor**

by Colonel Gregory Fontenot, US Army

53 **Commander Survivability**

by Robert F. Holz

58 **Military History and the Modern Soldier**

by David B. Hawke

67 **Dark Days of White Knights**

by Lieutenant Colonel Cole C. Kingseed, US Army

76 **World War II Almanac: Corporal Dunn: Citizen-Soldier**

by H. Warren Dunn

80 **Review Essay: Template for War and Peace**

by Lawrence A. Yates

83 **Insights: Challenges to Integrity in our Changing Force**

by Major Paul J. Selva, US Air Force

86 **Letters**

89 **From My Bookshelf**

by General Frederick M. Franks Jr., US Army

90 **Book Reviews** *contemporary reading for the professional*



The ARMY'S HERITAGE as a COALITION FORCE

Major John W. Peabody, US Army Copyright 1993

THE AMERICAN Revolution is generally treated at the strategic level as one, or a combination, of the following: a civil war, a colonial rebellion or a coalition war primarily with French allies, but the new American states themselves constituted a fragile coalition.¹ This multidimensional aspect of the war complicated the already difficult internal cohesion of the colonies, but the fundamental nature of the conflict evolved around the dynamics of keeping the states involved in a coalitional rebellion against Britain. As the single organization that steadfastly and most visibly fought the common enemy, the Continental Army provided the institutional symbol around which the 13 quarrelsome states constructed a new nation. The Continental Army served as the most significant institution binding the Colonies together and finds its very roots in coalition warfare.

From this perspective, the essential problem of the war involved preventing the 13 colonies' proclivities for asserting their autonomy from wrecking the combined effort to win independence. The principal political dynamics of the coalition included interstate and interregional rivalries for dominance, tensions over the supremacy of civil or military authority in prosecuting a war where the lack of clear political union militated against unified military authority and intrigues over military leadership by personalities seeking glory and honor. The coalition of states was most tenuous prior to the watershed events of the winter of 1777-1778, when the Battle of Saratoga achieved the first decisive American victory. As if to emphasize the sudden competence of the Americans following this resounding success,

[In 1775] most of the delegates to the Continental Congress still hoped and believed that a mutually satisfactory resolution with Britain could be achieved without escalating to a revolution. This difference of aims over reconciliation and independence haunted the coalition throughout the war, pushing it toward an often savage civil war . . . and making a unified coalition effort more difficult.

the Articles of Confederation established the first formal political agreement for union, and the failure of the Conway Cabal enshrined General George Washington as the supreme leader of the coalition and symbol of American union.

The Coalitional Context

The fact that the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress in May 1775 petitioned the other colonies for aid following Lexington and Concord indicates the degree of independent authority of the individual colonies. This beginning presaged the coalitional character of the war in which disparate states fought for what was to become, after 4 July 1776, the unified cause of independence. But in 1775, the colonist's only common cause consisted of dissatisfaction with the king's imperious disregard for colonial concerns about British administration. However, the level of dissatisfaction varied considerably between states and social classes, and a unified cause



1992 MILITARY REVIEW WRITING CONTEST

Deep sectional differences between the states further divided them. New Englanders tended to be more concerned with individual liberties and oriented war aims toward trade and fishing rights. The generally more conservative middle states initially responded slowly to the war effort and were ultimately concerned about western boundaries.

did not result in a solid political union until 1789, long after the war ended.

The outbreak of violence between Massachusetts and Britain did not preordain a united colonial response in 1775. On the contrary, most of the delegates to the Continental Congress still hoped and believed that a mutually satisfactory resolution with Britain could be achieved without escalating to a revolution.² This difference of aims over reconciliation and independence haunted the coalition throughout the war, pushing it toward an often savage civil war, further polarizing its participants and making a unified coalition effort more difficult.³

Deep sectional differences between the states further divided them. New Englanders tended to be more concerned with individual liberties and oriented war aims toward trade and fishing rights. The generally more conservative middle states initially responded slowly to the war effort and were ultimately concerned about western boundaries. The more aristocratic southern states also were reticent to respond to the New England rebellion and proved intent on preserving slavery and gaining Mississippi River navigation rights.⁴ Fortunately for the United States, the British public harbored serious reservations about the war, and British imperial overstretch hampered executing an effective strategy once France and Spain entered the war.⁵

These substantial problems were further complicated by differences concerning the internal political character of the nascent union. Even for those who agreed on aims, basic disagreements about the type of society and government to be realized after independence caused infighting

over the conduct of the war. Nationalists wanted a centralized government to more effectively prosecute the war by taxing, printing money and conscripting citizens, tending to support the Continental Army and conventional warfare. On the other hand, antifederalists, jealous of state sovereignty and concerned over the dangers a central government posed for individual liberties, supported a loose federation without an executive and emphasized the importance of militia and guerrilla tactics. They substantially won politically when the Articles of Confederation were adopted in November 1777, determining that the entire war would be prosecuted as a coalition among states. It was to be the Army that kept this fractious coalition together.

Establishing the Coalition

In the summer of 1775, initial resolutions by the Continental Congress attempted to limit the war. However, individual actions by states against Britain, such as the seizure of Fort Ticonderoga and St. Johns by New York and Connecticut militia, compelled Congress to attempt to rein in the separate militias. By adopting a Continental Army, Congress created the institution whose actions of war against Britain symbolized, for British and colonists alike, a unified effort that would inevitably lead to open rebellion, despite the reservations of the reconciliation faction. The Massachusetts delegates, already feeling British military pressure, understood the need to tie the other colonies to their fate, and so acceded to the Southern condition for involvement by nominating Washington, a southern candidate, for the Army's leadership, thus cementing the southern to the northern sectors.⁶

Selecting an overall military commander was only the beginning of the difficulties in designating the men who would lead the war. Provincial jealousies resulted in endless congressional debates and delayed decision over the apportionment of general officers among the states. Compromises resulted in designating incompetent general officers, such as Philip J. Schuyler of New York, based on political connections. Congress made a unified war effort even more complicated by failing to consider fully the previous militia rank or European military experience when con-

John Adams of Massachusetts (standing center) proposes that Colonel Washington be named commander in chief of the Continental armies. Washington (extreme right) left the room so that the delegates could discuss him freely, 15 June 1775.



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firming general officers' Continental Army rank and position. Officers like David Wooster complained bitterly when a former subordinate in the Connecticut militia, Major General Israel Putnam, was appointed over him in the Regular Army.⁷

Like most coalitions, political considerations impeded the efficient prosecution of the war by creating tensions among generals and keeping inept leaders in key positions despite repeated evidence of military incompetence. Schuyler's case is a clear example. He stayed in the crucial Northern Command despite serious setbacks in the Canadian Campaign, a direct result of his procrastination and personal fussing over administrative details important only to his headquarters near Albany. He also engaged his subordinates, Horatio Gates and Wooster, in running battles over the most insignificant perceived personal slights. But largely because he was related

directly or through marriage to all of the New York delegates to Congress, his political connections repeatedly foiled attempts to sack him.⁸ Only after his continuous retreats from Major General John Burgoyne's advance in 1777, without even skirmishing, was he finally fired.

The confederate form of government frustrated any establishment of the Continental Army's preeminence over militia, since state authority exceeded that of Congress in practice. Schuyler discovered this to his chagrin when Wooster invoked his major general's rank in the militia over his brigadier's rank in the army when he reinforced the Northern Command in 1775. When winter closed in on the Canadian Campaign that December, the Connecticut militia ultimately refused to fight on to Quebec, returning home when their enlistments expired.⁹ This parochial behavior caused the Regular generals to complain about the amateurish

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militia and the impracticality of short-term enlistments, but to no avail.¹⁰

These and a plethora of other problems concerning the failure to appoint staff officers, the assignment of apparently duplicate commands and, in particular, the struggles by generals such as Charles Lee, Benedict Arnold and Schuyler for glory and prestige, all combined to preclude truly national direction of the war. An objective observer would have had every reason to suspect the United States would self-destruct under the weight of its own internal tensions before the British brought significant military power to bear. Fortunately for the United States, a number of factors developed to keep the coalition together.

Sustaining the Coalition

Three watershed events in late 1777 and early 1778 combined to steel Americans' resolve to fight on and keep the coalition together. Most historians agree that Gates' defeat of the overextended and overly confident Burgoyne at Saratoga was instrumental in France's decision to enter the war, which prompted Spain's alliance with France a year later. The war could not have been won without the benefit of allied assistance to divert British forces from North America. French ground forces assisted American troops late in the war at Yorktown, but the more important naval forces diverted the British navy to a fight for the West Indies.¹¹ Moreover, the combined French and Spanish forces threatened an invasion of the home island, requiring consider-

able British efforts for home defense. Finally, Spain's Bernardo de Galvez tied down significant ground forces to defend the coastal area of the southern United States.¹²

The second critical event occurred in November 1777 when the Congress adopted the Articles of Confederation, confirming a modicum of political unity and the coalition's political dedication to independence. This also had the important consequence of removing one of the primary causes for factionalism in the Congress. The articles finally provided a reference document for political discourse, unifying what had been a coalition of separate states into a political body, although they retained significant authority. This was far different from separate political bodies forming a military coalition for expediency, which had characterized the first three years of the war. The remaining congressional differences centered on the nationalist versus antifederalist debate over the appropriate type of government reflected in their respective preferences over the conduct of the war.¹³ This political debate evolved into one of emphasis over a standing army to fight a conventional war or a militia to conduct guerrilla warfare. In practice, the limited funding of the Continental Army required guerrillas in an economy of force role, and the two complemented each other.¹⁴

The nature of the government militated against the effective prosecution of the war because it failed to support the Regular forces with adequate supplies or pay. Unable to gain sufficient funds to either pay the soldiers or provide them with food and equipment, the Army was held together by infusions of aid from France, periodic reinforcement from the militia, the leadership of men such as Washington and the power of the idea of independence. Benjamin Franklin's famous exhortation about hanging separately notwithstanding, following the defeat at Saratoga, the British government made overtures to the American representatives in Paris that they were "willing to grant the Americans everything they might ask 'except the word independence.'"¹⁵ But by now, the power of the idea of separating themselves from the hated "tyranny" of King George III overcame any temptation they might have felt to treat

with the British, and they rejected the offer.

The final key event happened in the winter of 1777–1778 when the Irish–French army veteran and volunteer Thomas Conway, unhappy with his subordination to less-experienced Americans, allegedly conspired to depose Washington in the so-called Conway Cabal. Washington's subordinates implicated Washington's only serious rival for leadership, Gates, the hero of Saratoga, publishing information indicating a possible plot by him against Washington.¹⁶ Following Gates' embarrassment at being accused of such a shameless act, Washington "emerged from the controversy somewhat of a demigod, immune from all criticism."¹⁷

The fact that a particular person (Washington, less talented as a military tactician than as a strategist and coalition leader), emerged as the supreme military leader, is less important than the fact that a clear leader now symbolized the unity of effort of the war, around which the rest of the military and the country could rally. Washington was the only executive agent of the Continental Congress charged with the central goal of achieving independence. The Army, despite its weakness from lack of funds, was the only institution that symbolized to the states and the outside world that the US coalition was more than an ad hoc rabble. Consequently, the Continental Army was indispensable for a military alliance with France, which could more readily perceive an actual country with which it could deal, as opposed to the confusion of quarrelling former colonies. Furthermore, the hardships borne by Regulars gave them a "special internal cohesion" from the sense of "being victimized by an ungrateful society."¹⁸ Thus, ironically, the factors that served to make the Army ineffective (or at least highly inefficient) on the battlefield, simultaneously helped keep the coalition together militarily because of the sense of martyrdom the hardships created.

The potential existed for civil–military discord to result in the subordination of civil authority to military necessity because of the military's monopoly of force. Historians make much of Lee's exaction of loyalty oaths from civilians in his areas of operation as well as attempts to override local civil authority in establishing the

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defense of New York City and environs. But Congress censored Lee and prohibited loyalty oaths, and the conflict over the defense of New York was settled amicably.¹⁹ In fact, in no case did the Army seriously jeopardize the coalition by imposing its will over civil authority.

Thomas Flexner emphasizes Washington's character as the critical factor in holding the military subordinate to civil authority. Officers exasperated with congressional failures to pay and resource them begged him to overthrow Congress and establish clear authority and direction to the war effort.²⁰ Washington's character was indeed an important factor in maintaining the fealty of the soldiers to civil authority, especially during the Newburgh conspiracy of 1783, the only serious attempt to overthrow civil authority throughout the war. Despite the highly charged civil–military friction, even the Newburgh conspiracy involved only a small group of extremists.²¹ The most critical factor was that no senior general capable of leading a coup existed. Those who had previously rivaled Washington were either "silenced, discredited, or driven out of the army," leaving Washington as the unchallenged leader.²²

The vicious internecine struggles that characterized the early years helped to eliminate the sources of inner conflict in the later years of the war and had the ironic effect of solidifying support for Washington after the Conway Cabal. Indeed, these conflicts within the Army, along with the constant imperative to fight the British, kept

the generals from cooperating to intervene against civil government. The exaction of loyalty oaths and the occasional quartering of soldiers are actually examples of individual meddling, not a serious corporate military challenge to civil authority. Only Washington had the prestige with both the military and civil political institutions to effect such a challenge, but he tenaciously held to his principles. Perhaps more important, the vast majority of the generals came from aristocratic backgrounds, and staging a coup would have involved "turning out Congress and state administrations peopled by relatives, friends and former officers."²³ Such conduct would have created conditions of political chaos inimical to the interests of the generals, and they knew it.

Domestic politics framed the factors for the conduct of a coalition war in the case of the American Revolution since the country was still in the process of formation, and domestic political rules and the relative strengths of various factions and sections were still being worked out. The watershed events of 1777–1778 produced the necessary catalyst for the coalition to func-

tion adequately, if imperfectly. The addition of European allies diverted sufficient British forces to enable the Americans to conduct guerrilla-style war in the south, principally under Nathaniel Greene's leadership, until the strategic opportunity to defeat the main British body presented itself at Yorktown. The adoption of the Articles of Confederation permitted the minimum political working mechanism necessary to sustain the military effort. Finally, the Conway Cabal solidified the prestige of Washington to such an extent that his force of personality could prevent any serious military coup attempt.

The US Army was born the bastard child of a fractious coalition of colonies. Through success in a few key battles such as Saratoga, its perseverance in the face of extraordinary hardships and neglect and the coalition leadership of Washington, the Army came to symbolize a national effort that forged a political union out of 13 quarrelsome states. More important for the Army's heritage, it was founded steeped in coalition warfare that transcended the coalition with the French alone. **MR**

NOTES

1. Michael Pearlman of the Combat Studies Institute at the US Army Command and General Staff College pointed out these three strategic characteristics of the war.
2. Jonathan Gregory Rossie, *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1975), 2.
3. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The First Salute* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 202; Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), Chapter 2; John Shy, "The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War," in Robert D. Ramsey and Roger J. Spiller, eds., *The Evolution of Modern Warfare* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1991). The brutal character of the civil war dimension is particularly well documented by John Shy.
4. Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 116.
5. Tuchman, 147–59. Tuchman gives an outstanding account of the complex strategic factors that coalesced to defeat the British. See also Hoffman Nickerson, *The Turning Point of the Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 414–19.
6. Rossie, 12.
7. *Ibid.*, 16.
8. *Ibid.*, 152–68. Rossie devotes major portions of several chapters to Schuyler's failures as a military commander as well as his phenomenal success at political intrigue.
9. *Ibid.*, 21, 48–55, 94–99.
10. Richard H. Kohn, "American Generals of the Revolution: Subordination and Restraint," in Don Higginbotham, ed., *Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War: Selected Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 117; James Thomas Flexner, *Washington, The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little

Brown, 1974), 85.

11. For an excellent discussion of the importance of French naval forces to the winning of the American Revolution, see Tuchman.
12. Dull, 110–11. See Tuchman and Nickerson for a reference of sources discussing the strategic aspects of the war.
13. Rossie, 203.
14. The debate born of coalition warfare over how to fight the war resonates down to the present in the debates over the appropriate emphasis between the Regular Army and the Guard and Reserve, as well as the heating up discussions over AirLand Operations versus LIC.
15. Alexander DeConde, "The French Alliance in Historical Speculation," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1981), 7.
16. There is serious scholarly disagreement over the details of the Conway Cabal. Flexner gives the conspiracy complete credibility, while Rossie in Chapter 13 and Bernhard Knollenberg, *Washington and the Revolution: A Reappraisal* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941) in Chapter 7, believe it was a product of Washington's subordinates' imaginations, hypersensitized to criticism of Washington's leadership following the retreat from New York and Gates' victory at Saratoga and therefore anxious to defend his military conduct.
17. Rossie, 188.
18. Kohn, 107.
19. Rossie, 81–86.
20. Flexner, 86–89.
21. Kohn, 122.
22. *Ibid.*, 117.
23. *Ibid.*, 119.

Major John W. Peabody, an engineer officer, is assigned to the 13th Corps Support Command, Fort Hood, Texas. He received a B.S. from the US Military Academy, an M.P.A. from Harvard University, and is an Olmsted Scholar. He is a graduate of the Engineer Officer Basic and Advanced courses, and the US Army Command and General Staff College. He has served in a variety of command and staff assignments in the Continental United States and Panama.