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1776





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—David Walton, *Tribune-Review* (Greensburg, PA)

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—David L. Ulin, *Newsday* (New York)

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—Dean Barnett, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Illuminating . . . [David McCullough] recounts this unforgettable saga with a simplicity and economy that cannot fail to appeal to readers on both sides of the Atlantic.”

—*Sunday Telegraph* (UK)

“In rhythmic prose, clear yet richly textured, [McCullough] evokes powerful images of an army struggling to survive. . . . McCullough’s narrative is masterful.

—Ray Raphael, *The Baltimore Sun*

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—Steve Raymond, *The Seattle Times*

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1776

David McCullough

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For

Rosalee Barnes McCullough



Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages.

~General George Washington

The Siege



The reflection upon my situation and that of this army produces many an uneasy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few people know the predicament we are in.

~General George Washington
January 14, 1776

SOVEREIGN DUTY

*God save Great George our King,
Long live our noble King,
God save the King!
Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign o'er us;
God save the King!*

ON THE AFTERNOON of Thursday, October 26, 1775, His Royal Majesty George III, King of England rode in royal splendor from St. James's Palace to the Palace of Westminster, there to address the opening of Parliament on the increasingly distressing issue of war in America.

The day was cool, but clear skies and sunshine, a rarity in London, brightened everything, and the royal cavalcade, spruced and polished, shone to perfection. In an age that had given England such rousing patriotic songs as "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia," in a nation that adored ritual and gorgeous pageantry, it was a scene hardly to be improved upon.

An estimated 60,000 people had turned out. They lined the whole route through St. James's Park. At Westminster people were packed solid, many having stood since morning, hoping for a glimpse of the King or some of the notables of Parliament. So great was the crush that latecomers had difficulty seeing much of anything.

One of the many Americans then in London, a Massachusetts Loyalist named Samuel Curwen, found the "mob" outside the door to the House of Lords too much to bear and returned to his lodging. It was his second failed attempt to see the King. The time before, His Majesty had been passing by in a sedan chair near St. James's, but reading a newspaper so close to his face that only one hand was showing, "the whitest hand my eyes ever beheld with a very large rose diamond ring," Loyalist Curwen recorded.

The King's procession departed St. James's at two o'clock, proceeding at walking speed. By tradition two Horse Grenadiers with swords drawn rode in the lead to clear the way, followed by gleaming coaches filled with nobility, then a clattering of Horse Guards, the Yeomen of the Guard in red and gold livery, and a rank of footmen, also in red and gold. Finally came the King in his colossal golden chariot pulled by eight magnificent cream-colored horses (Hanoverian Creams), a single postilion riding the left lead horse, and six footmen at the side.

No mortal on earth rode in such style as their King, the English knew. Twenty-four feet in length and thirteen feet high, the royal coach weighed nearly four tons, enough to make the ground tremble when under way. George III had had it built years before, insisting that it be "superb." Three gilded cherubs on top—symbols of England, Scotland, and Ireland—held high a gilded crown, while over the heavy spoked wheels, front and back, loomed four gilded sea gods, formidable reminders that Britannia ruled the waves. Allegorical scenes on the door panels celebrated the nation's heritage, and windows were of sufficient size to provide a full view of the crowned sovereign within.

It was as though the very grandeur, wealth, and weight of the British Empire were rolling past—a empire that by now included Canada, that reached from the seaboard of Massachusetts and Virginia to the Mississippi and beyond, from the Caribbean to the shores of Bengal. London, its population

nearly a million souls, was the largest city in Europe and widely considered the capital of the world.

GEORGE III had been twenty-two when, in 1760, he succeeded to the throne, and to a remarkable degree he remained a man of simple tastes and few pretensions. He liked plain food and drank but little, and wine only. Defying fashion, he refused to wear a wig. That the palace at St. James's had become a bit dowdy bothered him not at all. He rather liked it that way. Socially awkward at Court occasions—many found him disappointingly dull—he preferred puttering about his farms at Windsor dressed in farmer's clothes. And in notable contrast to much of fashionable society and the Court where mistresses and infidelities were not only an accepted part of life, but often flaunted, the King remained steadfastly faithful to his very plain Queen, the German princess Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, with whom by now he had produced ten children. (Ultimately there would be fifteen.) Gossips claimed Farmer George's chief pleasures were a leg of mutton and his plain little wife.

But this was hardly fair. Nor was he the unattractive, dim-witted man critics claimed then and afterward. Tall and rather handsome, with clear blue eyes and a generally cheerful expression, George III had a genuine love of music and played both the violin and piano. (His favorite composer was Handel, but he adored also the music of Bach and in 1764 had taken tremendous delight in hearing the boy Mozart perform on the organ.) He loved architecture and did quite beautiful architectural drawings of his own. With a good eye for art, he had begun early to assemble his own collection, which by now included works by the contemporary Italian painter Canaletto, as well as watercolors and drawings by such old masters as Poussin and Raphael. He avidly collected books, to the point where he had assembled one of the finest libraries in the world. He adored clocks, ship models, took great interest in things practical, took great interest in astronomy, and founded the Royal Academy of Arts.

He also had a gift for putting people at their ease. Samuel Johnson, the era's reigning arbiter of all things of the mind, and no easy judge of men, responded warmly to the "unaffected good nature" of George III. They had met and conversed for the first time when Johnson visited the King's library, after which Johnson remarked to the librarian, "Sir, they may talk of the King as they will, but he is the finest gentleman I have ever seen."

Stories that he had been slow to learn, that by age eleven he still could not read, were unfounded. The strange behavior—the so-called "madness" of King George III—for which he would be long remembered, did not come until much later, more than twenty years later, and rather than mental illness, it appears to have been porphyria, a hereditary disease not diagnosed until the twentieth century.

Still youthful at thirty-seven, and still hardworking after fifteen years on the throne, he could be notably willful and often shortsighted, but he was sincerely patriotic and everlastingly duty-bound. "George, be a *King*," his mother had told him. As the crisis in America grew worse, and the opposition in Parliament more strident, he saw clearly that he must play the part of the patriot-king.

He had never been a soldier. He had never been to America, any more than he had set foot in Scotland or Ireland. But with absolute certainty he knew what must be done. He would trust Providence and his high sense of duty. America must be made to obey.

"I have no doubt but the nation at large sees the conduct in America in its true light," he had written to his Prime Minister, Lord North, "and I am certain any other conduct but compelling obedience would be ruinous and . . . therefore no consideration could bring me to swerve from the present path which I think myself in duty-bound to follow."

In the House of Lords in March of 1775, when challenged on the chances of Britain ever winning the war in America, Lord Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, had looked incredulous. "Suppose the

colonies do abound in men, what does that signify?" he asked. "They are raw, undisciplined, cowardly men." And Lord Sandwich was by no means alone in that opinion. General James Grant, a member of the House of Commons, had boasted that with 5,000 British regulars he could march from one end of the American continent to the other, a claim that was widely quoted.

But in striking contrast, several of the most powerful speakers in Parliament, like the flamboyant Lord Mayor of London, John Wilkes, and the leading Whig intellectual, Edmund Burke, had voiced ardent support for and admiration of the Americans. On March 22, in the House of Commons, Burke had delivered in his heavy Irish brogue one of the longest, most brilliant speeches of his career, calling for conciliation with America.

Yet for all that, no one in either house, Tory or Whig, denied the supremacy of Parliament in determining what was best for America. Even Edmund Burke in his celebrated speech had referred repeatedly to "our" colonies.

Convinced that his army at Boston was insufficient, the King had dispatched reinforcements and three of his best major generals: William Howe, John Burgoyne, and Henry Clinton. Howe, a member of Parliament and a Whig, had earlier told his Nottingham constituents that if it came to war with America and he were offered a command, he would decline. But now duty called. "I was ordered, and could not refuse, without incurring the odious name of backwardness, to serve my country in distress," he explained. Howe, who had served in America during the Seven Years' War—or the French and Indian War, as it was known in America—was convinced the "insurgents" were few in number in comparison to those loyal to the Crown.

War had come on April 19, with the first blood shed at Lexington and Concord near Boston, and savagely on June 17 at Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill. (The June engagement was commonly known as the Battle of Bunker Hill on both sides of the Atlantic.) British troops remained under siege at Boston and were running short of food and supplies. On July 3, General George Washington of Virginia had taken command of the American "rabble."

With 3,000 miles of ocean separating Britain from her American colonies, accounts of such events took a month or more to reach London. By the time the first news of Lexington and Concord arrived, it was the end of May and Parliament had begun its long summer holiday, its members departing London for their country estates.

When the outcome at Bunker Hill became known in the last week of July, it only hardened the King's resolve. "We must persist," he told Lord North. "I know I am doing my duty and therefore can never wish to retract."

The ever-obliging North suggested that in view of the situation in America, it might no longer be regarded as a rebellion, but as a "foreign war," and thus "every expedient" might be employed.

At a hurried meeting at 10 Downing Street, on July 26, the Cabinet decided to send 2,000 reinforcements to Boston without delay and to have an army of no fewer than 20,000 regulars in America by the following spring.

Bunker Hill was proclaimed a British victory, which technically it was. But in plain truth Her Majesty's forces, led by General Howe, had suffered more than 1,000 casualties in an appalling slaughter before gaining the high ground. As was observed acidly in both London and Boston, a few more such victories would surely spell ruin for the victors.

At summer's end a British ship out of Boston docked at Plymouth bearing 170 sick and wounded officers and soldiers, most of whom had fought at Bunker Hill and "all in great distress," as described in a vivid published account:

A few of the men came on shore, when never hardly were seen such objects: some without legs, and others without arms; and their clothes hanging on them like a loose morning gown, so much were they fallen away by sickness and want of nourishment. There were, moreover, near sixty women and children on board, the widows and children of men who were slain. Some of these too exhibited a most shocking spectacle; and even the vessel itself, though very large, was almost intolerable, from the stench arising from the sick and wounded.

The miseries of the troops still besieged at Boston, and of those Americans loyal to the King who, fearing for their lives, had abandoned everything to find refuge in the town, were also described in letters published in the London papers or in correspondence to friends and relatives in London. In the *General Evening Post*, one soldier portrayed the scene in Boston as nothing but “melancholy, disease, and death.” Another, whose letter appeared in the *Morning Chronicle and Advertiser*, described being “almost lost for want of fresh provisions. . . . We are entirely blocked up . . . like birds in a cage.”

John Singleton Copley, the American portrait painter who had left Boston to live in London the year before, read in a letter from his half brother, Henry Pelham:

It is inconceivable the distress and ruin this unnatural dispute has caused to this town and its inhabitants. Almost every shop and store is shut. No business of any kind is going on. . . . I am with the multitude rendered very unhappy, the little I collected entirely lost. The clothes upon my back and a few dollars in my pocket are now the only property which I have.

DESPITE THE WAR, or more likely because of it, the King remained popular in the country at large and could count on a loyal following in Parliament. Political philosophy, patriotism, and a sense of duty comparable to the King's own figured strongly in both houses. So, too, did the immense patronage and public money that were his alone to dispense. And if that were not sufficient, there was the outright bribery that had become standard in a blatantly mercenary system not of his making, but that he readily employed to get his way.

Indeed, bribery, favoritism, and corruption in a great variety of forms were rampant not only in politics, but at all levels of society. The clergy and such celebrated observers of the era as Jonathan Swift and Tobias Smollett had long since made it a favorite subject. London, said Smollett, was “the devil's drawing-room.” Samuel Curwen, the Salem Loyalist, saw dissipation and “vicious indulgence everywhere he looked, “from the lowest haunts to the most elegant and expensive rendezvous of the noble and polished world.” Feeling a touch of homesickness, Curwen thanked God this was still not so back in New England.

To much of the press and the opposition in Parliament, the American war and its handling could not have been more misguided. The *Evening Post*, the most partisan in its denunciations, called the war “unnatural, unconstitutional, unnecessary, unjust, dangerous, hazardous, and unprofitable.” The *James's Chronicle* wrote contemptuously of “a foolish, obstinate, and unrelenting King.” *The Crisis*, a vehement new paper, attacked “all the gaudy trappings of royalty” and the villainy of the King.

“What, in God's name, are ye all about in England? Have you forgot us?” asked a British officer in a letter from Boston published in London's *Morning Chronicle*. He wished that all the “violent people who favored more vigorous measures in America could be sent over to see for themselves. Their vigor would be quickly cooled. “God send us peace and a good fireside in Old England.”

The King, meanwhile, had recalled General Thomas Gage, his commander-in-chief at Boston, and in his place put the stouthearted William Howe. When, in September, an emissary from the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, Richard Penn, arrived in London with an “Olive Branch Petition” in hand, expressing loyalty to the Crown and requesting, in effect, that the King find a way to reconciliation, George III refused to have anything to do with it.

Behind the scenes, Lord North had quietly begun negotiations with several German princes

Hesse and Brunswick to hire mercenary troops. And in a confidential note dated October 15, the King reassured the Prime Minister that every means of “distressing America” would meet his approval.

By the crisp, sunny afternoon of October 26, as George III proceeded on his way to the opening of Parliament, his popularity had never seemed higher. Opposition to the war, as everyone knew, was stronger and more vociferous in London than anywhere in the country, yet here were crowds greater than any since his ascension to the throne. Further, they appeared in the best of spirits, as even the *London Public Advertiser* took note. Their “looks spoke peace and good humor”; there was “but little hissing”; the King could feel secure “in the affection of his people.”

A BOOM OF CANNON saluted His Majesty’s arrival at Westminster, and with the traditional welcoming formalities performed, the King assumed his place on the throne at the head of the House of Lords, flanked by the peers in their crimson robes. The members of the House of Commons, for whom no seats were provided, remained standing at the rear.

The magnitude of the moment was lost on no one. As expected, the King’s address would be one of the most important ever delivered by an English monarch.

He had a good voice that carried well. “The present situation of America, and my constant desire to have your advice, concurrence, and assistance on every important occasion, have determined me to call you thus early together.” America was in open revolt, he declared, and he denounced as traitors those who, by “gross misrepresentation,” labored to inflame his people in America. Theirs was a “desperate conspiracy.”

All the time they had been professing loyalty to the parent state, “and the strongest protestations of loyalty to me,” they were preparing for rebellion.

They have raised troops, and are collecting a naval force. They have seized the public revenue, and assumed to themselves legislative, executive, and judicial powers, which they already exercise in the most arbitrary manner. . . . And although many of these unhappy people may still retain their loyalty . . . the torrent of violence has been strong enough to compel their acquiescence till a sufficient force shall appear to support them.

Like the Parliament, he had acted thus far in a spirit of moderation, he said, and he was “anxious to prevent, if it had been possible, the effusion of the blood of my subjects, and the calamities which are inseparable from a state of war.” He hoped his people in America would see the light, and recognize “that to be a subject of Great Britain, with all its consequences, is to be the freest member of any civil society in the known world.”

Then came a new charge, based on opinions received from his commander at Boston. There must be no more misconceptions about the true intent of those deceiving the unhappy people of America. “The rebellious war . . . is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent empire.”

I need not dwell upon the fatal effects of the success of such a plan. The object is too important, the spirit of the British nation too high, the resources with which God hath blessed her too numerous, to give up so many colonies which she has planted with great industry, nursed with great tenderness, encouraged with many commercial advantages, and protected and defended at much expense of blood and treasure.

Since, clearly, it was the better part of wisdom “to put a speedy end” to such disorders, he was increasing both his naval and land forces. Further, he was pleased to inform the Parliament, he had received “friendly offers of foreign assistance.”

“When the unhappy and deluded multitude, against whom this force will be directed, shall become sensible of their error, I shall be ready to receive them with tenderness and mercy,” he pledged, and as evidence of his good intentions, he would give authority to “certain persons” to grant pardon

“upon the spot” in America, though beyond this he said no more.

In sum, he, ~~George III, Sovereign of the Empire, had declared America in rebellion.~~ He confirmed that he was committing land and sea forces—as well as unnamed foreign mercenaries—sufficient to put an end to that rebellion, and he had denounced the leaders of the uprising for having American independence as their true objective, something those leaders themselves had not as yet openly declared.

“Among the many unavoidable ill consequences of this rebellion,” he said at the last, “none affect me more sensibly than the extraordinary burden which it must create to my faithful subjects.”

His Majesty’s appearance before Parliament had lasted just twenty minutes, after which, as reported, he returned to St. James’s Palace “as peaceably as he went.”

THE MEMBERS of the House of Commons filed out directly to their own chamber, and debate on the King’s address commenced “brisk and warm” in both houses, the opposition marshaling the case for conciliation with extraordinary force.

In the House of Lords, expressions of support were spirited though comparatively brief. The King was praised for his resolution to uphold the interests and honor of the kingdom, praised for his decisiveness. “We will support your majesty with our lives and fortunes,” vowed Viscount Townsend.

Those in opposition had more to say, and spoke at times with pronounced emotion. The measures recommended from the throne, warned the Marquis of Rockingham, were “big with the most portentous and ruinous consequences.” The hiring of foreign troops was an “alarming and dangerous expedient.” Even more deplorable was the prospect of “shedding British blood by British hands.” Any notion of conquering America was “wild and extravagant,” said the Earl of Coventry. The administration was “no longer to be trusted,” said Lord Lyttleton bitterly.

“How comes it that the colonies are charged with planning independency?” the Earl of Shelburne demanded to know. “Who is it that presumes to put an assertion (what shall I call it, my Lords) contrary to fact, contrary to evidence? . . . Is it their intention, by thus perpetually sounding independence in the ears of the Americans, to lead them to it?”

As the afternoon light began to fade and the chamber grew dim, the candles of the chandeliers were lit.

The one surprise, as the debate continued, was a vehement speech by the Duke of Grafton Augustus Henry Fitzroy, former Prime Minister, who had not previously opposed the administration. Until now, he said, he had concurred in the belief that the more forceful the government in dealing with the Americans, the more likely matters could be “amicably adjusted.” But he had been misled. Deceived. Admitting to his ignorance of the real state of things in America—and inferring that this was no uncommon handicap in Parliament—he boldly proposed the repeal of every act concerning America since the incendiary Stamp Act of 1765.

This, I will venture to assert, will answer every end; and nothing less will accomplish any effectual purpose, without scenes of ruin and destruction, which I cannot think on without the utmost grief and horror.

The Earl of Dartmouth, Secretary of State for the Colonies, was astonished. How could any noble lord possibly condemn the policies of the administration, or withdraw support, without at least giving them a fair trial?

IT WAS IN THE COMMONS that the longer, more turbulent conflict ensued. Of the twenty or so who

rose to speak, few held back. Attacks on the King, Lord North, the Foreign Ministry in general, and on one another at times brought the heat of debate to the boiling point. There were insults exchanged that would long fester, bombast and hyperbole in abundance, and moments when eloquence was brought to bear with a dramatic effect remarkable even in the Commons.

It was Parliament as theater, and gripping, even if the outcome, like much of theater, was not always understood all along. For importantly it was also well understood, and deeply felt, that the historical chamber was again the setting for history, that issues of the utmost consequence, truly the fate of nations, were at stake.

The passion of opposing opinion was evident at once, as the youthful John Dyke Acland of Devonshire declared emphatic support of the King's address. True it was that the task of "reducing America to a just obedience" should not be underestimated, he said, but where "the interests of a great people" were concerned, "difficulties must be overcome, not yielded to."

Acland, a headstrong young army officer, was ready to serve in America himself (and would), and thus what he said had unusual force, if not perfect historic validity. "Recollect the strength, the resources, and above all the spirit of the British nation, which when roused knows no opposition."

Let me remind you of those extensive and successful wars that this country has carried on before the continent of America was known. Let me turn your attention to that period when you defended this very people from the attacks of the most powerful and valiant nation in Europe [France], when your armies gave law, and your fleets rode triumphant on every coast. Shall we be told then that this people [the Americans], whose greatness is the work of our hands, and whose insolence arises from our divisions, who have mistaken the lenity of this country for its weakness, and the reluctance to punish, for a want of power to vindicate the violated rights of British subjects—shall we be told that such a people can resist the powerful efforts of this nation?

At about the time the chandeliers were being lighted in the House, John Wilkes, Lord Mayor of London, champion of the people and the homeliest man in Parliament, stood to be heard, and to be heard there be no doubt that he was John Wilkes.

"I speak, Sir, as a firm friend to England and America, but still more to universal liberty and the rights of all mankind. I trust no part of the subjects of this vast empire will ever submit to be slaves. Never had England been engaged in a contest of such import to her own best interests and possessions," Wilkes said.

We are fighting for the subjection, the unconditional submission of a country infinitely more extended than our own, of which every day increases the wealth, the natural strength, the population. Should we not succeed . . . we shall be considered as their most implacable enemies, an eternal separation will follow, and the grandeur of the British empire pass away.

The war with "our brethren" in America was "unjust . . . fatal and ruinous to our country," he declared.

There was no longer any question whether the Americans would fight, conceded Tory Adam Ferguson, but could anyone doubt the strength of Great Britain to "reduce" them? And this, he said, must be done quickly and decisively, as an act of humanity. Half measures would not do. Half measures could lead only to the horrors of civil war.

In response, George Johnstone, a dashing figure who had once served as governor of West Florida, delivered one of the longest, most vehement declamations of the night, exclaiming, "Every Machiavellian policy is now to be vindicated towards the people of America."

Men are to be brought to this black business hood-winked. They are to be drawn in by degrees, until they cannot retreat. . . . we are breaking through all those sacred maxims of our forefathers, and giving the alarm to every wise man on the continent of America, that all his rights depend on the will of men whose corruptions are notorious, who regard him as an enemy, and who have no interest in his prosperity.

Johnstone praised the people of New England for their courage and fortitude. There was a wide difference, he said, between the English officer or soldier who merely did his duty, and those of the New England army, where every man was thinking of what further service he could perform. No one who loved “the glorious spirit of freedom” could not be moved by the spectacle of Bunker Hill, where “an irregular peasantry” had so bravely faced “the gallant Howe” leading the finest troops in the world. “Who is there that can dismiss all doubts on the justice of a cause which can inspire such conscientious rectitude?”

Alexander Wedderburn, the Solicitor General, belittled the very idea of standing in the way of the King and called for the full-scale conquest of America. “Why then do we hesitate?” he asked.

Because an inconsiderable party, inconsistent in their own policies, and always hostile to all government but their own, endeavor to obstruct our measures, and clog the wheels of government? Let us rather second the indignant voice of the nation, which presses in from all quarters upon the Sovereign, calling loudly for vigorous measures. . . . Sir, we have been too long deaf. We have too long shown our forbearance and long-suffering. . . . Our thunders must go forth. America must be conquered.

As the night wore on, Lord North, the stout, round-shouldered Prime Minister, remained conspicuously silent in his front-bench seat, his large, nearsighted eyes and full cheeks giving him the look, as the wit Horace Walpole said, of a blind trumpeter. North was much liked—moderate, urban, and intelligent. He had made his career in the Commons and, with his affable manner, had acquired few if any enemies among his political opponents. When attacked, he took no offense. He could be a markedly persuasive speaker but was equally capable, when need be, of remaining silent, even napping a bit.

From years of experience North had also learned to count votes in advance, and he knew now, as did nearly everyone present, that the decided majority of the Commons, like the people at large, stood behind the King.

Perhaps the most telling moment of the whole heated session came near midnight, when another army officer, but of an older generation than John Dyke Acland, rose to speak. Colonel Isaac Barré was a veteran of the French and Indian War who had come home from the Battle of Quebec badly disfigured. He had been hit in the head by a musket ball that blinded him in one eye and left his face twisted into a permanent sneer. Further, it had been Isaac Barré, in a past speech in defense of the Americans, who had first called them “Sons of Liberty,” and the name had taken hold.

He had lost one eye, the colonel reminded his listeners, but the one good “military eye” he had left did not deceive him. The only way to avert “this American storm” was to reach an accommodation just as soon as possible.

BETWEEN THEM, Edmund Burke and young Charles James Fox filled the next several hours. Burke, in his customary fashion, took his time. Nearly all that he said, he and others had said before, but he saw no harm in repetition, or any need for hurry. He held the floor for nearly two hours, a large part of his speech devoted to the disgrace of British forces cooped up in Boston by those said to be an undisciplined rabble.

There were no ringing lines from Burke this time, little at all for the newspapers to quote. Possibly he did not wish to outshine Fox, his protégé, who spoke next and who, at twenty-six, was already a dazzling political star.

Born to wealth and position, Fox was an unabashed fop, a dandified “macaroni,” who at times appeared in high-heeled shoes, each of a different color, and happily spent most nights drinking and gambling away his father’s fortune at London’s best clubs. But his intellect and oratorical gifts were

second to none. He always spoke spontaneously, never from notes or a prepared text. Fox, it would be observed, would as soon write down what he was going to say as pay a bill before it came due.—

He attacked immediately and in searing fashion, calling Lord North the “blundering pilot” who had brought the nation to a terrible impasse. If Edmund Burke had failed to provide a memorable line for the night’s efforts, Fox did at once:

Lord Chatham, the King of Prussia, nay, Alexander the Great, never gained more in one campaign than the noble lord has lost—he has lost a whole continent.

It was time for a change in the administration, time for new policies. The present ministers were enemies of freedom.

I cannot consent to the bloody consequences of so silly a contest about so silly an object, conducted in the silliest manner that history or observation has ever furnished an instance of, and from which we are likely to derive nothing but poverty, disgrace, defeat, and ruin.

Once Fox finished, North stood at his place and calmly allowed he had no wish to remain a day in office were he to be judged inactive, inattentive, or inconsiderate.

North was not a man enamored with war. He had nothing of the look or temperament of a war leader. Privately he was not at all sure it would be possible to vanquish the Americans, and he worried about the cost. To General Burgoyne he had written, “I would abandon the contest were I not more intimately convinced in my own conscience that our cause is just and important.” George III relied on him, calling him “my sheet anchor,” and it was, and would remain, North’s role to explain and defend the King and administration policies and decisions before the Commons.

The intention now, he affirmed, was to send a powerful sea and land force across the Atlantic. But with these forces would also go “offers of mercy upon a proper submission.” How “proper submission” was to be determined, or who was to bear such offers, he did not say. As time would show, however, the real purpose of such peace gestures was to speed up an American surrender.

“This will show we are in earnest, that we are prepared to punish, but are nevertheless ready to forgive. This is, in my opinion, the most likely means of producing an honorable reconciliation.”

On that note the debate ended.

In the House of Lords, where work had wound up at midnight, the opposition to the King’s address and thus to all-out war in America, was defeated by a vote of more than two to one, 69 to 29.

In the House of Commons, their impassioned speeches notwithstanding, the opposition was defeated by an even greater margin, 278 to 108.

By the time the vote in the Commons had concluded, it was four in the morning.

ONE OF THOSE MEMBERS of the House of Commons who had refrained from speaking, and who felt extremely pleased with the outcome, was the gentleman-scholar Edward Gibbon. A supporter of Lord North, Gibbon never spoke on any issue. But in private correspondence from his London home, he had been assuring friends that “some[thing] will be done” about America. The power of the empire would be “exerted to the utmost,” he wrote. “Irish papists, Hanoverians, Canadians, Indians, etc. will all in various shapes be employed.”

Gibbon, who was then putting the final touches to the first volume of his masterpiece, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, now felt even more confident about the course of history in his own time. “The conquest of America is a great work,” he wrote.

Soon after, in early November, King George III appointed a new Secretary for the American

colonies, Lord George Germain, a choice that left little doubt, if any remained, that the King, too, considered the conquest of America serious work to which he was seriously committed.

Germain was to replace the Earl of Dartmouth, whose attitude toward the war seemed at times less than wholehearted. He was a proud, intelligent, exceedingly serious man of sixty, tall, physically impressive, and, notably unlike the King and Lord North, he was a soldier. He had served in the Seven Years' War in Germany and with good reputation, until the Battle of Minden, when, during a cavalry attack, he was accused of being slow to obey orders. He was not charged with cowardice, as his critics liked to say. At a court-martial called at his own insistence, he was found guilty only of disobedience. But his military career ended when the court declared him unfit for further service.

As a politician in the years since, he had performed diligently, earning a high reputation as an administrator. In his new role he would direct the main operations of the war and was expected to take a firm hand. To many he seemed the perfect counterpart to the obliging, unassertive North.

For the "riotous rebels" of America, he had no sympathy. What was needed, Germain said, was a "decisive blow." The King thought highly of him.

RABBLE IN ARMS

His Excellency General Washington has arrived amongst us, universally admired. Joy was visible on every countenance.

~General Nathanael Greene

I

HERE WE ARE AT LOGGERHEADS," wrote the youthful brigadier general from Rhode Island, appraising the scene at Boston in the last days of October 1775.

I wish we had a large stock of [gun]powder that we might annoy the enemy wherever they make their appearance. . . . but for want thereof we are obliged to remain idle spectators, for we cannot get at them and they are determined not to come to us.

At age thirty-three, Nathanael Greene was the youngest general officer in what constituted the American army, and by conventional criterion, an improbable choice for such responsibility. He had been a full-time soldier for all of six months. Unlike any of the other American generals, he had never served in a campaign, never set foot on a battlefield. He was a foundryman by trade. What he knew of warfare and military command came almost entirely from books.

Besides, he was a Quaker, and though of robust physique, a childhood accident had left him with a stiff right leg and a limp. He also suffered from occasional attacks of asthma.

But Nathanael Greene was no ordinary man. He had a quick, inquiring mind and uncommon resolve. He was extremely hardworking, forthright, good-natured, and a born leader. His commitment to the Glorious Cause of America, as it was called, was total. And if his youth was obvious, the Glorious Cause was to a large degree a young man's cause. The commander in chief of the army, George Washington, was himself only forty-three. John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress, was thirty-nine, John Adams, forty, Thomas Jefferson, thirty-two, younger even than the young Rhode Island general. In such times many were being cast in roles seemingly beyond their experience and capacities, and Washington had quickly judged Nathanael Greene to be "an object of confidence."

He had been born and raised in Kent County, Rhode Island, on a farm by Potowomut Creek, near the village of Warwick, approximately sixty miles south of Boston. He was the third of the eight sons of a prominent, industrious Quaker also named Nathanael, and the one, of all the sons, his father counted on most to further the family interests. These included the home-farm, a general store, a gristmill, a sawmill, a coasting sloop, and the Greene forge, all, as was said, in "constant and profitable operation." The forge, the most thriving enterprise, which produced anchors and chains and employed scores of men, was one of the leading businesses in the colony, and the Greenes, as a result, had become people of substantial means. The fact that the patriarch owned a sedan chair was taken as the ultimate measure of just how greatly the family had prospered.

Because education did not figure prominently in his father's idea of the Quaker way, young Nathanael had received little schooling. "My father was a man [of] great piety," he would explain. "[He] had an excellent understanding, and was governed in his conduct by humanity and kindness and benevolence. But his mind was overshadowed with prejudices against literary accomplishments." With his brothers, Nathanael had been put to work at an early age, on the farm at first, then at the mills and the forge. In time, determined to educate himself, he began reading all he could, guided and encouraged by

several learned figures, including the Rhode Island clergyman Ezra Stiles, one of the wisest men of the time, who would later become the president of Yale College.

Nathanael read Caesar and Horace in English translation, Swift, Pope, and Locke's *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*. On visits to Newport and Boston, he began buying books and assembling his own library. Recalling their youth, one of his brothers would describe Nathanael during lulls in the clamor of the foundry, seated near the great trip-hammer, a leather-bound volume of Euclid in hand, calmly studying.

"I lament the want of a liberal education. I feel the mist [of] ignorance to surround me," he wrote a like-minded friend. He found he enjoyed expressing himself on paper and had a penchant in such correspondence for endless philosophizing on the meaning of life. Yet for all this no thought of a life or occupation other than what he knew seems to have crossed his mind until the threat of conflict with Great Britain.

The description that would come down the generations in the family was of a "cheerful, vigorous, thoughtful" young man who, like his father, loved a "merry jest or tale," who did comic imitations of characters from *Tristram Shandy*, and relished the company of young ladies, while they, reportedly, "never felt lonely where he was." Once, accused by a dancing partner of dancing stiffly, because of his bad leg, Nathanael replied, "Very true, but you see I dance strong."

His defects were perceived to be a certain "nervous temperament" and susceptibility to poor health, impetuosity, and acute sensitivity to criticism.

Full-grown, he was a burly figure, about five feet ten inches tall, with the arms and shoulders of a foundryman, and handsome, though an inoculation for smallpox had left a cloudy spot in his right eye. A broad forehead and a full, "decided" mouth were considered his best features, though a soldier sent to deliver a message to the general would remember his "fine blue eyes, which struck me with a considerable degree of awe, that I could scarcely deliver my message."

In 1770, when Nathanael was still in his twenties, his father had put him in charge of another family-owned foundry in the neighboring village of Coventry, beside the Pawtuxet River, and on a nearby hill Nathanael built a house of his own. Following the death of his father late that same year, he took charge of the entire business. By 1774, when he met and married pretty, flirtatious Katherine Littlefield, who was fourteen years his junior, he was perceived to be a "very remarkable man."

It was then, too, with war threatening, that he turned his mind to "the military art." Having ample means to buy whatever books he needed, he acquired a number of costly military treatises few could afford. It was a day and age that saw no reason why one could not learn whatever was required—learn virtually anything—by the close study of books, and he was a prime example of such faith. Resolved to become a "fighting Quaker," he made himself as knowledgeable on tactics, military science, and leadership as any man in the colony.

"The first of all qualities [of a general] is courage," he read in the *Memoirs Concerning the Art of War* by Marshal Maurice de Saxe, one of the outstanding commanders of the era. "Without this the other are of little value, since they cannot be used. The second is intelligence, which must be strong and fertile in expedients. The third is health."

He took a leading part in organizing a militia unit, the Kentish Guards, only to be told that his stammering leg disqualified him from being an officer. To have it declared publicly that his limp—his "halting"—would be a "blemish" on the company was, as he wrote, a "mortification" beyond any he had known.

If unacceptable as an officer, he would willingly serve in the ranks. Shouldering an English musket he had bought at Boston from a British deserter, he marched as a private in company drills for eight months, until it became obvious that for a man of such knowledge and ability, it would be best to forgo

about the limp.

~~Almost overnight he was given full command of the Rhode Island regiments. Exactly how this came about remains unclear. One of his strongest admirers and mentors was Samuel Ward of Rhode Island, a delegate to the Continental Congress, who was also the uncle of Nathanael's wife Katherine and presumably used his influence. But that Nathanael had so willingly marched in the ranks could only have favored him strongly among his fellow volunteers when it came to choosing a commander.~~

General Greene had been at Boston since early May of 1775, at the head of what was called the Rhode Island Army of Observation, applying himself every waking moment, at times sleeping only a few hours a night. Thus far no one had found cause to complain about his youth or inexperience.

Whatever he lacked in knowledge or experience, he tried to make up for with "watchfulness and industry," he would later confide to John Adams.

As commander of the "Army of Observation," encamped at the American citadel on Prospect Hill, he tried to take in everything, to observe and appraise the situation as realistically as possible. While the American army controlled the land around Boston, the British, strongly fortified in the city and on Bunker Hill, had control of the sea and could thereby supply their troops and send reinforcements. (Only weeks before, in September, reinforcements of five regiments had arrived.) The task at hand therefore, seemed clear enough: to confine the King's men in Boston, cut them off from supplies of fresh provisions, and keep them from coming out to gain what one of their generals, Burgoyne, called "elbow room."

If it ever came to a fight, the American army had scarcely any artillery, and almost no gunpowder. Yet to Greene the greater weakness and worry was the continuing disorderly state of the army itself. As he wrote to his friend Samuel Ward at the Continental Congress, the prospect was deeply disturbing: "when you consider how raw and undisciplined the troops are in general, and what war-like preparations are going on [in] England."

AT THE START of the siege there had been no American army. Even now it had no flag or uniform. Though in some official documents it had been referred to as the Continental Army, there was no clear agreement on what it should be called in actual practice. At first it was referred to as the New England army, or the army at Boston. The Continental Congress had appointed George Washington to lead "the army of the United Colonies," but in correspondence with the general, the President of Congress John Hancock, referred to it only as "the troops under your command." Washington, in his formal orders, called them the "Troops of the United Provinces of North America." Privately he described them as the "raw materials" for an army.

To the British and those Loyalists who had taken refuge in Boston, they were simply "the rebels," or "the country people," undeserving the words "American" or "army." General John Burgoyne disdainfully dubbed them "a preposterous parade," a "rabble in arms."

In April, when the call for help first went out after Lexington and Concord, militia and volunteer troops from the other New England colonies had come by the thousands to join forces with the Massachusetts regiments—1,500 Rhode Islanders led by Nathanael Greene, 5,000 from Connecticut under the command of Israel Putnam. John Stark's New Hampshire regiment of 1,000 had marched through snow and rain, "wet and sloppy," "through mud and mire," without food or tents, seventy-five miles in three and a half days. The Massachusetts regiments, by far the strongest of the provincial troops, possibly numbered more than 10,000.

By June a sprawling, spontaneous, high-spirited New England army such as had never been seen before was gathered about Boston. Washington, arriving in the first week of July, was told he had 20,000 men.

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