THOMAS MIFFLIN—REVOLUTIONARY PATRIOT*

By KENNETH R. ROSSMAN

THERE is no biography of Thomas Mifflin, and usually historians angrily dismiss him as a plotter against Washington in the notorious "Conway Cabal." Although only a secondary figure in a period studded with great men, he nevertheless does not deserve this neglect. Provincial and state assemblyman, ardent patriot, delegate to the Continental Congress and once its president, quartermaster-general and major-general in the Continental Army, Board of War Commissioner, member of the Federal Convention, chairman of the state constitutional convention, president of the Supreme Executive Council, three-times governor of Pennsylvania—these bespeak eloquently his influence and prominence in local and continental affairs.

Several factors help to explain Mifflin's failure to receive biographical treatment. The materials for a full-length portrait are still wanting, especially private and personal letters. His supposed complicity in the Conway Cabal, as well as bitter controversy over his work as quartermaster-general, deterred other biographers who might have undertaken the task. This essay, a study of an early portion of his career, may in part fill the gap.

Thomas Mifflin, the oldest son of John Mifflin and Elizabeth Bagnell, was born in Philadelphia, January 10, 1744. Descendant of an old Quaker family of prominence and wealth in this city, he was assured a good start in life. His father was a prosperous merchant, and very active in public affairs.

*Before it was revised and completely documented, this article appeared originally in Abstracts in History, V, 1939-1943 (Iowa City, 1943). A research grant from the American Philosophical Society made it possible to examine further manuscript materials on this subject.


2 There is an interesting, but not altogether accurate account of the genealogy of the family in John H. Merrill, Memoranda Relating to the Mifflin Family (Private printing, 1890).
Young Thomas received his education in a Quaker school and at the College of Philadelphia, from which he was graduated at the age of sixteen. The following four years he spent in the office of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, William Coleman, in order to prepare for a mercantile career. Then came a year of travel in England and France, an experience which left him "better pleased" with his own country. Upon his return to Philadelphia he entered business in partnership with a brother, George. Two years later, at the age of twenty-three, he married a cousin, Sarah Morris, the daughter of Morris Morris. A charming couple, they at once took their place in Philadelphia society.

With his background, ambition, and talents, it was not surprising that Mifflin turned now to public affairs. In person he was not tall, but well-formed, and handsome. A man of agreeable manners and cultivated tastes, he had a lively temperament and a great talent for public speaking. In other words, he possessed all the attributes of the successful gentleman-politician.

It was a modest début, Mifflin's entrance into politics, when in 1771 he was appointed a warden of the city of Philadelphia. From this humble position he advanced the next year to the provincial assembly. His course there won the approbation of his constituents, for he was re-elected repeatedly until war forced his retirement late in 1775.

---

* So he declared in a letter to his uncle, Jacob Lewis, Nov. 23, 1764, cited in Merrill, *op. cit.*, 18.
* Their store was at the corner of Front and Chestnut Streets. See their advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Packet*, Sept. 21, 28, Oct. 5, 1772.
* Their marriage license, March 4, 1767, is in the library of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter cited HSP).
* Alexander Graydon, *Memoirs of His Own Time, with Reminiscences of Men and Events of the Revolution*, edited by J. S. Littell (Philadelphia, 1846), 153-154; Rawle, *loc. cit.*, 124; Charles Biddle, *Autobiography of Charles Biddle* (Philadelphia, 1883), 284. However, Graydon, who disliked Mifflin, observed also that the latter's "manners were better adapted to attract popularity than to preserve it."
* In this position he and five colleagues regulated the nightly watch, provided for the "enlightening the streets, lanes and alleys," and had charge of the pumps of the city, the only water supply. *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, 1682-1801* (Harrisburg, 1896 and subsequent dates), VIII, 96-115.
* He was elected four successive years, but did not fill out his last term because of his army duties. Joseph Reed was elected in his place January 26, 1776. *Ibid.*, 483, 546, 622, 663.
The exciting political questions of the day were not about local improvements and the like with which the Assembly so diligently and peacefully busied itself, but concerned the policy of the home government, which tended increasingly to stir up the feelings of the colonists. Like so many young people in all ages, Mifflin was a radical in politics. He early had displayed his “liberal” tendencies in opposing with other Philadelphia merchants the Stamp Act, promoting non-importation agreements, encouraging resistance to the East India Tea Act, and otherwise engaging actively in the struggle for trade reforms.\(^\text{11}\) These inclinations were certainly not stifled in any way by a summer visit to Boston (1773), the hot-bed of radicalism, where he met the Adamses and kindred spirits.\(^\text{12}\)

When the struggle over trade reforms became a political dispute with the enactment by the British Parliament of the so-called “Intolerable Acts,” including the harsh measure closing the port of Boston, Mifflin and two other radical politicians, Joseph Reed and Charles Thomson, labored successfully to swing Pennsylvania into sympathetic line with that suffering and protesting northern city. This they accomplished through town meetings and revolutionary committees which they brought about and influenced.

At this point Mifflin believed that the correct approach to the crisis was the plan to call a continental congress first instead of using the economic boycott as urged by Sam Adams.\(^\text{13}\) “When we


\(^{13}\) Sam and his fellow radicals could not wax enthusiastic about a congress. That would be too slow, and they were men of action. A stiff boycott, effective at once, was truly the way to bring England to her senses. Peter Force, editor, American Archives (9 vols., Washington, 1837-1853), 4 ser.,
are thus united in Councils what Measure prudent & salutary may we not effect,” exclaimed Mifflin. “If you wish to agree in Sentiment with us & to lead us on to Something effectual,” he wrote Sam, “you must humour us in this Measure. We love Liberty as well as our Neighbours and will no Doubt keep an equal pace with them in pursuit of her.” Nearly all the colonies favored a congress. To their chagrin the Boston “Sons of Liberty” found it necessary to acquiesce in this step.

“A sprightly and spirited speaker,” Mifflin was a “very useful member” of the First Continental Congress. To the leading delegates he was a frequent host in his “grand, spacious, and elegant house.” He served on the committee in Congress which drafted its most important document, the Association of 1774. Sam Adams’ boycott was on. Back in the assembly, Mifflin, Dickinson, and Thomson worked arduously for the cause. Indeed, declared Charles Lee, “if it had not been for the smart whip of my friend Mifflin, I believe she [Pennsylvania] never would have advanced a single inch.” Thanks greatly to Mifflin, Pennsylvania was aroused to revolution.

Mifflin was elected to the Second Continental Congress, but,
before it convened, war broke out between the colonies and Britain. Though a Quaker by training, he could not remain aloof from the "amazing" outbreak of military activity, which for a time placed Pennsylvania in the forefront of resistance. He became a major, but John Adams thought he "ought to have been a general," for he was "the animating soul" of Philadelphia, "infusing into this province a martial spirit and ambition, which it never felt before." It was inevitable that the pacifistic Quakers should read him out of meeting.  

Miffin’s military career began auspiciously when General Washington chose him as aide-de-camp and took him along in late June to the camp before Boston. On August 14, 1775, Washington, impressed by his activity, integrity, and independence, appointed him quartermaster-general of the Continental Army. It was fitting that he, a merchant-soldier and one who had been successful in business in one of the greatest mercantile centers in the colonies, should be named to organize and administer this department. He now held one of the most difficult positions in his career. The place was new, and there were no precedents to follow. Much money and many contracts passed through his hands. Thoroughly honest himself, he nevertheless had to exercise great caution so as

Philadelphia, it was the same delegation as had served in the First Congress. Galloway, however, protested his own appointment, and he was finally excused. Votes, VI, 555, 587.


See notice of their departure in Pennsylvania Gazette, June 28, 1775; Pennsylvania Packet, June 26, 1775; Pennsylvania Evening Post, June 24, 1775.


He evidently sent a good deal of business through the hands of his cousin, Jonathan, and his partner, William Barret, important Philadelphia merchants. However, he took pains to point out to them that he expected "no part or Share of your Commissions or profits," for Congress allowed him five per cent on the sales at camp. Letter, Nov. 2, 1775, Emmet Collection (New York Public Library).
not to alarm the suspicious.\textsuperscript{27} With zeal and efficiency he proceeded to discharge his new duties.

But Mifflin preferred action, and despite the burdens of his office he somehow managed to see it. In the skirmish at Lechnere’s Point during November, 1775, he “flew about as though he would have raised the whole army,” and played the part “of a Hero.”\textsuperscript{28} His “great exertions” in his department contributed to the success of the occupation of Dorchester Heights, which ended the siege of Boston.\textsuperscript{29}

On May 16, 1776, Mifflin was appointed a brigadier-general.\textsuperscript{30} The next month, of his own accord he resigned as quartermaster-general, the better to achieve his ambitions for military glory; he desired to play another and vastly more exciting role in the new theatre of war in New York.\textsuperscript{31} Unable to participate in the battle of Long Island, Mifflin was given command of the covering party in the retreat to Manhattan Island.\textsuperscript{32} Then came staff changes. The quartermaster department was “in an exceeding bad way.”\textsuperscript{33} Washington, “confident that there was not another man in the army who could carry on the business upon the present large plan,” and Congress, October 1, 1776, induced Mifflin to resume that office. But he did so reluctantly.\textsuperscript{34}

With the approach of winter came serious times. In the face of daily desertions and few or no reënlistments, Washington sent Mifflin to Philadelphia to apprise the authorities of the desperate

\textsuperscript{27} At one time it seems that even Washington was apprehensive about Mifflin’s being “concerned in trade.” Letter, Washington to Joseph Reed, March 25, 1776, Washington, \textit{Writings}, VII, 301.


\textsuperscript{29} Gordon, \textit{History}, II, 29.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Journals}, IV, 359.

\textsuperscript{31} June 5, 1776, \textit{Journals}, V, 419. On June 29 General Mifflin was given a command under Major-General Heath, and the two Pennsylvania battalions of Colonels Shee and Magaw were placed in his charge. He was ordered to the post near Kingsbridge to “forward the works there.” \textit{General Orders for June 29, July 2, 1776, Washington, \textit{Writings}, V, 196, 210.}

\textsuperscript{32} Gordon, \textit{History}, 101 et seq.

\textsuperscript{33} So a member of an investigating committee of Congress reported from camp. Letters, Gerry to Gates, Sept. 27, 1776, Burnett, \textit{Letters}, II, 105; from Gerry, Sept. 28, 1776, James T. Austin, \textit{The Life of Elbridge Gerry; with Contemporary Letters to the Close of the American Revolution} (2 vols., Boston, 1828-1829), I, 214.

situation. Mifflin, in animated speeches, succeeded in arousing the militia of the city and back country to join Washington's broken army, thus enabling him to take the offensive at Trenton. Too late for that battle, Mifflin was with the army at Princeton, but he had no chance to distinguish himself. His greatest service was his "happy Eloquence," which won recruits and held many men in the army beyond the expiration of their terms. In recognition of this service Congress appointed him a major-general, February 19, 1777.

Mifflin's duties became excessive, and with Washington's aid he sought relief. He perhaps regarded it as an opportune time to ease himself gracefully out of the quartermaster-generalship. But Congress, having experimented before with a new quartermaster-general with ill success, turned a deaf ear to his appeal. Mifflin continued faithfully to execute his arduous duties.

Pennsylvania was torn by political strife, and its support of the war consequently was seriously weakened. In the fight against the

---

86 Letter, Washington to Congress, Nov. 23, 1776, Washington, Writings, VI, 303. See letter, Board of War to Washington, Nov. 14, 1776, 5 Am. Arch., III, 670. At the same time Joseph Reed was sent on a like mission to the Governor of New Jersey, but he was less successful than Mifflin.

87 See letter, Washington to Governor Trumbull, Dec. 12, 1776, Washington, Writings, VI, 352.

88 Returning home December 27 from a recruiting tour west, Mifflin reported to Washington that Pennsylvania was "at length roused, and coming in great numbers to your Excellency's aid." Letter, Dec. 28, 1776, Jared Sparks, Correspondence of the American Revolution, being Letters of Eminent Men to George Washington . . . (4 vols., Boston, 1853), I, 314-315.


90 Journals, VII, 133.

91 Washington himself declared that the department of quartermaster-general "must be eased of part of the load, which is at present thrown upon it." Letters, Washington to Congress, Jan. 26, 1777, and to Reed, Jan. 15, 1777, Washington, Writings, VII, 65, 17.


93 Washington wrote Mifflin, March 19, 1777, that he was "glad" to find preparations in his department so well advanced. Washington, Writings, VII, 303; see letter too, March 18, ibid., 301.

"sickly" new state constitution, adopted in 1776, Mifflin joined forces with the "most respected whig characters." "The General," Rush wrote Wayne, "curses the government, and adds that its administration is in the hands of rascals." But as the British advanced toward Philadelphia, Mifflin and his fellow-Pennsylvanians agreed to suspend the political dispute and to unite in opposing the enemy.

Having been in Philadelphia for some time to secure reinforcements for Washington's army, Mifflin was directed that summer to assist in the defenses of the capital. Despite fierce fighting at Brandywine Creek and later at Germantown, Philadelphia was lost. Congress fled to York, and Mifflin retired to Reading. On October 8, 1777, ostensibly because of ill health, he resigned as quartermaster-general and major-general, declaring himself, however, "still warmly attached to the Cause" of his country. It was a step which caused him no end of embarrassment.

After the disasters of 1777 a spirit of defeatism gripped the country. The obvious object of censure and blame was General Washington. Congress "buzzed" with criticism. Certain army officers were outspokenly critical, among them General Mifflin. Though once close to Washington, he felt himself now out of favor at headquarters. From Washington's point of view, it was a bad time for Mifflin to quit his post. The commander-in-chief was "obliged often to stand Quartermaster," according to General Greene; "the line and the staff were at war with each other." Washington's regard for Mifflin cooled perceptibly.

Seemingly as rapidly as Mifflin fell in Washington's favor, General Greene advanced. Mifflin disliked Greene, whom he held greatly responsible for the loss of Mount Washington in 1776.

44 Letter, June 18, 1777, Wayne Papers (HSP); see those also of May 19, June 3, 1777, ibid.
45 Through the influence of Mifflin, Reed, et al., a coalition was effected. Letter, Reed to Washington, June 18, 1777, Sparks, Letters to Washington, I, 389-390.
47 Letter of that date to Congress, Papers Cont. Cong. (LC).
49 Letter to Washington, April 24, 1779, Nathanael Greene Papers (Henry E. Huntington Library); all letters referred to in this collection are nineteenth century copies. See Washington's letter to Congress, Dec. 23, 1777, Jan. 1, 1778, Washington, Writings, X, 194, 243.
and the “sacrifice” of Philadelphia in 1777. The enemies of Greene could scarcely be the friends of Washington. The Mifflin-Greene feud spread in the army, and reached the pricked ears of Congress in retreat, where each of the officers had his loyal supporters.

Mifflin denied vigorously any disloyalty to Washington himself. But, as he frankly admitted and much to the damage of his own reputation, he opposed Washington’s “favourites” like Greene and Knox, who he felt “had an undue Influence over him,” and he quoted Long Island and Mount Washington as instances of that influence. He lamented that the General did not follow his own good judgment. His free and unguarded remarks naturally reached the ears of his commander, and undoubtedly worsened relations, once so friendly, between them. His friends “accidentally” hurt him further “by talking too freely of many Faux Pas” which he mentioned. In the end, his fault-finding was bound to lead him into trouble.

Yet Mifflin stood not alone in his views. In mid-October, the President of Congress was writing of Washington, “I wish I was well acquainted with the man whom I think, all in all, the first of the age, and that he would follow my advice. He accepts the opinion of some who have no superior claim, all vanity apart.”


51 James Lovell, writing to General Gates, Oct. 5, 1777, predicted that “by the Winter the middle Army will be divided into Greenites and Mifflineans, if Things do not take a great Turn from their present Situation.” Letter in Gates Papers (New York Historical Society Library, hereafter cited NYHS).


53 Letter, Reed to Greene, Nov. 5, 1778, Charles Lee Papers, op. cit., VI, 252; Fitzgerald to Washington, March 17, 1778, Gratz Mss (HSP); George Lux to Greene, May 26, 1778, Greene Papers (William L. Clements Library).

54 Letter, Mifflin to Colonel Delany, Feb. 1, 1778, Rawle, loc. cit., 125.

55 Ibid.


Pickering repeatedly said that “from an extreme diffidence in himself, he [Washington] was likewise led, in some cases, to adopt the opinion of others, in whom he placed a confidence, when his own would have been more correct.” To Gates, General Wayne, whose loyalty to Washington was unquestioned, wrote impetuously, “I don’t yet despair . . . if our worthy General will but follow his own good Judgment without listing too much to some Council.” Reed entertained similar opinions. De Kalb wished Washington “would take more upon himself, and trust more to his own excellent judgement than to Councils.”

While Mifflin and the many of like feeling nursed their depression and gloom, came the thrilling news of Saratoga, which enhanced General Gates’s reputation, and intensified dissatisfaction with Washington. Not unnaturally, Mifflin, close friend of Gates that he was, rejoiced in his brilliant success. Congress, meanwhile, refused to accept Mifflin’s resignation, and requested him temporarily to continue in the exercise of his quartermaster duties. In a move planned some time previous and with Washington’s approval, they established a new Board of War. Then:

As it appeared by the letters of Gen. Mifflin that he objected only to serve in the Quartermasters department, that his health was returning, and that he was willing to continue his aid to the public cause, Congress appointed him one of the Commissioners of the new Board, because he is competent to the right discharge of its duties, because that would best suit his valetudinary state, and as shewing a just sense of his uniform, vigorous, and well-founded patriotism.

---

This was written to Washington by Richard Henry Lee.65 Mifflin accepted the appointment, retaining his rank of major-general, but without the salary of that position.66 Believing his military knowledge and popularity necessary to procure needed military reforms, Mifflin strongly urged that General Gates be appointed president of the new Board.67 His recommendations were effective and the appointment was made.68

Washington's hands were tied more or less as long as his critics in the army only gave their opinions verbally and privately, but if they should commit them to writing, and such material should accidentally fall into his possession, he could take appropriate measures. This was precisely what happened. General Conway was the indiscreet letter-writer, who was supposed to have said something about "a weak General and bad Councillors,"69 and Gates was the recipient, who by his blunders badly involved himself and his friends.70 The upshot of the affair was several damaged reputations, and enhancement of Washington's position.

Mifflin, who was in the circle of those implicated and who was known as a critic of the commander-in-chief, particularly suffered a loss of prestige. Although his detractors placed him at the head of it,71 he was vehement in his denials of complicity in any con-


66 He was appointed November 7, 1777. See Journals, IX, 874; and his letter of acceptance to Congress, Nov. 12, 1777, Papers Cont. Cong. (LC).

67 Nov. 24, 1777, Journals, IX, 959; see also letter, R. H. Lee to Sam Adams, Nov. 23, 1777, Lee, Letters, I, 358.

68 Nov. 27, 1777, Journals, IX, 971. The new War Board consisted then of Gates as President, Mifflin, Richard Peters, Joseph Trumbull, and Timothy Pickering.

69 See Letter, Washington to Conway, Nov. 9, 1777, Washington, Writings, X, 29. Mifflin, who was in touch with Conway at the time, described that statement as "a Collection of just Sentiments." Letter to Gates, Nov. 28, 1777, Gates Papers (NYHS).

70 Unaware that Washington possessed not the Conway letter but only the indirect quotation of a single statement, and without waiting first to hear from him, Gates hastily wrote his Chief, and made the issue the theft of private letters. He aggravated his blunder in sending a copy of this letter to Congress, and so made the affair public.

71 For example, see letters, Tench Tilghman to General Cadwalader, Jan. 18, 1778, Cadwalader Papers (HSP); John to Henry Laurens, Jan. 13, 1778, John Laurens, Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens, 1777-1778, with a Memoir by William Gilmore Simms (Bradford Club series, No. 7, New York, 1867), 100, 103; General Greene to [brother, Jacob?], Jan. 3, Feb. 7, 1778, Greene Papers (Huntington Lib.); Washington to Patrick Henry, March 28, 1778, Washington, Writings, XI, 164, 165.
spionage. He was said to have declared publicly that he looked upon Washington as "the best friend he ever had in his life." Several years later, Gordon, going through his and Gates's papers for material for his history, failed to find incriminating evidence, "tho' there was some very free and confidential letters from certain gentlemen." All suspicions and all talk of it notwithstanding, the "Conway Cabal," as this episode has been called, remains a vague affair. Evidence of personal disgusts and jealousies is not wanting, but there is nothing which reveals a concerted plot or fixed purpose. Although, as a colleague on the War Board said, "there appeared but too much colour" for suspicions, yet one is not satisfied a conspiracy was formed either with Miffin as chief engineer or simply as one of several plotters. However, the one significant historical fact which emerges from the shadows is that doubts of Miffin were widely held at the time, whether well- or ill-founded, and were productive of serious mischiefs. The charge was a bogey which haunted him for the remainder of his life. As his troubles magnified, he assumed an air of injured innocence and persecution.

On January 30, 1778, Congress vigorously directed Miffin to prepare all his accounts of the quartermaster department for their inspection. His feelings "greatly wounded," he determined to

---

72 See references supra, n. 53.
73 Letters, George Lux to Greene, April, May [?], 1778, Greene, Life of Greene, II, 37, 38; Lux to Greene, May 26, 1778, Greene Papers (Clements Lib.).
75 See the author's article, "Conway and the Conway Cabal," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLI, 32-38 (January, 1942). The most recent books on it are Bernhard Knollenberg, Washington and the Revolution (New York, 1940), and Samuel White Patterson, Horatio Gates (New York, 1941).
77 Mifflin almost became involved in a duel with General Cadwalader because of this affair. It seems that the latter, who had fought a duel with Conway, suspected Mifflin of instigating Conway to fight him. Letter, Washington to Fitzgerald, Feb. 28, 1778, Washington, Writings, X, 529; Graydon, Memoirs, 301.
78 See, e.g., his letter to Gates, April 17, 1778, Gates Papers (NYHS).
79 Journals, X, 103. To Pickering it appeared that Congress by such a move deliberately had taken means to keep Mifflin away from York, for their order would have precisely that effect. "If we do not lay aside jealousies and resentments, and apply hard to real business, we shall be ruined," he warned. Letters, to Scammell, Feb. 17, 1778, Pickering and Upham, Pickering, I, 207; to Harrison, Feb. 20, 1778, Pickering Papers (Mass. Hist. Soc. Lib.).
remain away from the Board of War and to comply with their order immediately. As soon as the Board learned of the turn affairs had taken, they, before several members of Congress, pointed out the impolicy of the step, and urged that Mifflin be called to resume his duties on the board. Congress yielded to the appeal, and, on February 19, passed another resolution requiring his immediate attendance. In March, 1778, they rejected Mifflin’s plan for reorganization of his late department, and appointed his rival General Greene his successor as quartermaster-general.

Mifflin’s stock hit a new low.

In late spring Mifflin left the War Board, and, much to Washington’s wonder and Greene’s disgust, rejoined the army. But the next move of Congress prevented any active participation, for on June 11, 1778, after acrimonious debate, they ordered an inquiry into his conduct of the quartermaster department, and a court martial if “the extraordinary deficiencies thereof, and the consequent distresses of the army” were chargeable to him or his assistants. He at once obtained permission to leave the army, and set about preparing his defense. Earnestly he pressed for “a speedy, public and candid Enquiry,” but, getting no satisfaction and his becoming patience exhausted, he presented to Congress (August 17, 1778) his resignation as major-general. Goaded

82 Journals, X, 182.
83 Congress had adopted Mifflin’s plan February 5, but upon receiving the proposals and recommendations of their committee, which had conferred with Washington, Greene, and other officers at camp, they rejected it. Journals, X, 126, 210.
84 Letters, Washington to Gouverneur Morris, May 18, 1778, Washington, Writings, XI, 413-414; Greene to G. Morris, June 1, 1778, Greene Papers (Huntington Lib.); May 21, 1778, Journals, XI, 520.
85 Journals, XI, 591. “There was a violent opposition [to the motion for an inquiry] of near four hours,” declared Henry Laurens in a letter to Rawlins Lowndes, June 12 [1778], Burnett, Letters, III, 287; see also his letter to F. Dana, March 1, 1778, ibid., 102-103.
86 Letters, Washington to Congress, June 15, 1778, Washington, Writings, XII, 64; Mifflin to Gates, June 18, 1778, Gates Papers (NYHS).
finally into some action, they advanced to Mifflin one million dollars with which to close the business of his late department, and on February 25, 1779, accepted his resignation. No formal inquiry was ever held. This was the rather prosaic end of the military phase of Mifflin's career.

Mifflin was not guilty of peculation; at least the charge was never supported. Certainly Congress had given him positive demonstration of confidence and trust. His utter willingness and desire for the inquiry further bespeak his innocence. Moreover, the distresses of the army at Valley Forge, ascribed to his negligence, or other mismanagement as quartermaster-general, proceeded from a combination of circumstances not connected solely, or perhaps even largely, with him, though necessarily implicating him. If complaint there was, the department head—and through the winter Mifflin was still officially that officer—obviously had to bear the odium.

Rightly, however, Congress severely deserved censure. In the first place, they were exceedingly and inexcusably dilatory in appointing Mifflin's successor in the quartermaster department, for many months had elapsed before it was done. And secondly, they bungled in their management, or rather mismanagement, of the departments of supply, which broke down completely. So serious had the shortage of provisions become, Washington warned, that the army was on the verge of dispersion. The scarcity existed, although the country abounded with supplies, and Congress actually scolded Washington for his reluctance to seize forcibly what his army so badly needed; thus they partly attributed the shortages to his own undue "delicacy in exerting military authority on the citizens."

While Mifflin's resignation from so important an office at such a critical time may appear unpardonable and regrettable, whatever may have been his reasons for it, the move nevertheless could have come as no surprise. Early in 1777, he had sought some relief from his duties, much too burdensome as Washington acknowledged. And he especially endeavored to wriggle out of the quartermaster

89 Mifflin resigned October 8, 1777, and his successor was not appointed until March 2, 1778.
90 Preface of Burnett, Letters, III, v-vi, II, ix; see especially the Trumbull letters in the latter volume.
department which he so intensely disliked, with little success. Finally, literally sick of the place, and for other reasons undoubtedly, he resigned, knowing well enough that he ran some risk in doing so. It is inconceivable that he wished to desert his duty in a time of crisis, but it had become “impossible” for him, he averred, to continue in his department. He more than reaped the harvest of that decision.

In January, 1780, amidst some opposition, Mifflin was appointed by Congress one of three commissioners to devise various staff retrenchments and reforms. Greene keenly resented the appointment, and even Washington was said to be displeased. Still a suspect, Mifflin was accused of “party business,” and reviving “the old scheme.” The commissioners drew up their report, and received the rather perfunctory thanks of Congress for their work. So closed forever Mifflin’s official connections with the quartermaster department.

Mifflin retired now into the background of the picture, “separated from the throng that occup[ied] the Summit of the mountain.” It was not altogether a quiet retirement for him, however, for he mixed in local politics, where gradually he regained some lost ground. But never again was he to recover his former prominence and influence.

Like Mifflin, in 1780 General Greene, ironically enough, was censured too for resigning as quartermaster-general “at a critical hour.” In words strikingly applicable also to Mifflin, he said he wanted to leave the department because it was “injurious to my health, harassing to my mind, and opposed to my military pursuits.” Greene, Life of Greene, II, 261, 332, 336.


Letter, James Lovell to Sam Adams, Jan. 21, 1780, Burnett, Letters, V, 12.

Mifflin, who was nominated by Elbridge Gerry, was appointed January 22, 1780, and his colleagues, Schuyler and Pickering, were elected January 21. Since Schuyler, evidently out of friendship for Greene, declined to serve as a commissioner, Congress, upon a suggestion made by Mifflin and Pickering, appointed a committee from their body to act with them. Journals, XVI, 75-76, 77, 79, 244; letter, Mifflin and Pickering to Congress, March 10, 1780, Papers Cont. Cong. (LC).

Letters, Greene to Reed, Feb. 9, 29, 1780; Greene to Washington, March 22, 1780, Greene Papers (Huntington Lib.).

The report was submitted to Congress March 27, 1780. Journals, XVI, 293 et seq., 364; for comments on it see letters, Schuyler to Washington, April 5, 1780, Burnett, Letters, V, 107; Mifflin to Gates, March 23, 1780, Gates Papers (NYHS); Greene to Washington, March 31, 1780, Greene Papers (Huntington Lib.).

Rush urged Gates likewise to retire “before you are thrust from your rank and degraded in your character by the slander and persecutions which have ruined them [Mifflin and Charles Lee].” Letter, March 1, 1779, Charles Lee Papers, op. cit., VI, 317.