QUAKER LADY DETAINING THE ENGLISH GENERAL.

THE CONWAY CABAL: MYTH OR REALITY

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During the latter half of 1777 and the beginning of 1778 Washington and his friends felt that certain men were plotting to remove Washington as commander-in-chief and to replace him with someone such as Horatio Gates. The Washington men found proof of a cabal's existence in the actions and in the written and oral statements of men whom they believed were Washington's enemies. The cabal was named after its most verbal progenitor, Thomas Conway. Conway and the others involved later denied that they took part in any cabal. However, most historians of the following century included the story in their volumes on the revolutionary period. In recent years some historians have pointed out that the evidence is not conclusive. Therefore, they deny the existence of any plot. As a result, a controversy has grown as to whether the Conway Cabal actually occurred.

To understand why men turned against Washington, a look at the state of the nation from the fall of 1777 to the spring of 1778 is necessary. A feeling of apprehension spread throughout the nation in the fall, for Washington's army was unable to keep the British in check, the Continental Congress was fleeing from its meeting place, and Gates and his army were untested. Washington faced the British at Brandywine and Germantown and lost. On September 26, 1777, Howe entered Philadelphia as the Congress escaped to Lancaster and then to York. Washington led his troops to Valley Forge to encamp for the winter during which there was extreme suffering caused by a lack of food and supplies. Meanwhile, Gates and the army of the north met Burgoyne's troops at Saratoga and won the battle. The joyous news spread quickly. This news did nothing to alleviate the suffering of Washington's army. The victorious Gates was entertained in York while Washington pleaded with Congress to send aid.

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With the victory of one general and the lack of victory of another, conflicts within the army became predominant. Congressman Abraham Clark worried so much about the quarrels among the army officers that he wrote to Lord Stirling expressing his great concern over the matter. The quarrels that Clark found so evident during the fall of 1777 and the winter of 1777-78 began when some men found that they did not have the influence over Washington that they felt they should have. Others sulked, grumbled, and politicized among members of Congress demanding the advancement that they felt was theirs while foreign officers wooed both Washington and Congress hoping for promotions that would be revered in their homelands. As the quarrels persisted, two groups appeared, those for Washington and those against him.

One of the more vocal men in the anti-Washington camp was Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania. Mifflin at one time was close to Washington but later found himself replaced in favor by Nathanael Greene. Mifflin served as quartermaster-general. He was not satisfied with this position, since he desired, but was refused by Washington, the appointment of a separate command. Mifflin also disagreed with Washington's strategy in allowing Philadelphia to be captured by the British. He deplored Washington's lack of discipline over his troops. As the breach between Mifflin and Washington grew, Mifflin became involved with Gates and Conway. When Mifflin, due to ill health, resigned his post as quartermaster-general and then accepted a post on the board of war, the break between him and Washington was complete.

A second and even more outspoken opponent of Washington was Thomas Conway. Conway, born in Ireland and raised in France, was a professional soldier engaged by the American representative to France, Silas Deane. The understanding was that Conway would become a brigadier general when he arrived in America. But Conway decided that because of his military background and experience, he should be promoted to a major

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general. At first Conway tried to impress Washington with his qualifications. When Washington failed to include him in his official family, he traveled to York to mingle with members of Congress. In York he thought he found success, for his promotion was proposed before the Congress. Since Washington could not see Conway being promoted while more deserving men were overlooked, he spoke against Conway's advancement. Thus, the two were fully alienated.4

A third officer who thought the commander-in-chief to be lacking in military ability was Horatio Gates. When Gates emerged as the hero of Saratoga, many of Washington's opponents flocked to him. They sought to use Gates for their own self-interests. By flattering Gates and denouncing Washington, the anti-Washington men gained a pliable leader for their group.5

Two other generals who became opponents of Washington were Charles Lee and Anthony Wayne. In December, 1776, Lee wrote to Gates complaining about Washington's military abilities.6 Later, when Lee was a prisoner of the British, he planned for Washington's removal and for Gates's promotion to commander-in-chief.7 After Saratoga Wayne wrote that Lee, Gates, and Mifflin were the generals whose conduct he admired and would follow.8 Both these men were dissatisfied with Washington's leadership and felt other, more capable men should command the army.

Most of the Continental army officers remained loyal to Washington. Some knew about and became involved in the events that revolved around the so-called Conway Cabal. These men criticized Washington's opponents, wrote to other officers informing them of their fellow officers' treasonable actions, and were willing to fight duels to clear the name of their commander-in-chief. Alexander Hamilton wrote to George Clinton that he had discovered a plot, and that the friends of Washington should be on the alert. In addition, he named Conway as one of the

main conspirators. Colonel Tench Tilghman, who was in Valley Forge with Washington, wrote to General Cadwalader telling him that Mifflin and Conway were involved in a plot against Washington. He saw these men using Gates as a dupe. Later, an angered Cadwalader challenged Conway to a duel and gravely injured him. Others who actively defended Washington were Lafayette, Greene, Earl of Stirling, Henry Knox, John Laurens, and John Fitzgerald.

Just how many civilians actually became involved in this conflict concerning Washington has never been determined. However, it is evident that Washington had both friends and enemies in Congress and among other supporters of the Revolution.

The two men who openly disliked Washington were Congressman James Lovell of Massachusetts and Dr. Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania. Lovell, an adherent of Gates, belittled Washington in both his letters and in conversation. Rush, too, had only harsh words for Washington. When he became upset over the state of the army hospitals and the inaction of Director-General Dr. William Shippen, he wrote to his friends in Congress condemning Washington and his leadership. His unsigned letter to Patrick Henry soon reached Washington's hands. But Washington had been warned earlier of Rush's indiscretions. Both Lovell and Rush agreed that Washington's abilities were overrated and that others were more competent.

Washington's most important friend in Congress was President Henry Laurens. Laurens exchanged letters with Washington and his son, John Laurens, who was with Washington at Valley Forge. He wrote of his meeting with Conway and of his doubts about him. He also forwarded to Washington an anonymous paper found on the steps of Congress Hall. This letter contained

12 Burnett, Letters of the Continental Congress, III, 42.
serious charges against Washington. Although he kept Washington informed of the intrigue around him, he did not believe that any group had the power to depose Washington. Washington and his followers became convinced that a cabal existed when much confusion grew around the Conway letter, a board of war was formed to control the army, Conway was promoted, and invasion plans involving Lafayette were made without consulting Washington.

After Saratoga Gates sent his adjutant, Colonel Wilkinson, with a message of victory not to his commander-in-chief but to Congress. Wilkinson dallied in Reading where he told Major McWilliams, Lord Stirling’s adjutant, about a letter Conway had written to Gates condemning Washington and praising Gates. McWilliams then informed Stirling, who took the message to Washington. On November 9, 1777, Washington penned a brief but important note to Conway.

A letter which I receivd last Night, containd the following paragraph. In a Letter from Genl. Conway to Genl. Gates he says: “Heaven has been determin’d to save your Country; or a weak General and bad Councellors would have ruin’d it.”

When Mifflin warned Gates that portions of Conway’s letter were known by Washington, Gates contacted Conway and asked which letter was copied and who the informer was. Since Hamilton had been alone in the room where Gates kept his letters, he became the logical suspect. So Gates planned a way to embarrass both Hamilton and Washington. He wrote to Washington saying that he had no knowledge of Conway’s letter but inquired about the culprit who read his personal letters. Then he informed Washington that he had sent a copy of this letter to Congress, for he expected to see Washington discredited before these men. When Washington answered Gates’s letter, he decided to play Gates’s game. He notified Gates that a copy of

17 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 174.
18 Fitzpatrick, Writings of George Washington, X, 29.
19 Mitchell, Alexander Hamilton, 150.
20 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 174.
his letter had been sent to Congress, and then he told Gates that
his own adjutant, Wilkinson, had told him the contents of the
Conway letter.\textsuperscript{21} Gates next struck out at Wilkinson, who felt
he was dishonored. As a result, he challenged Gates to a duel.
But the matter was settled peaceably.\textsuperscript{22} Because Gates's plan to
dishonor Washington backfired, Gates wrote Washington that
someone had forged the Conway statement. Washington's reply
to Gates posed some new questions. He asked why he did not
deny the statement earlier and why he so anxiously wanted to
find the informer.\textsuperscript{23} President Laurens added the final bit of
credibility to the existence of the letter when he wrote that he
had seen the letter and that it was ten times worse than origi-
nally stated.\textsuperscript{24}

While all this bickering went on over Conway's letter, the
enemies of Washington were with the help of Congress be-
coming more powerful. On October 17, 1777, Congress estab-
lished a board of war and stated that everyone connected with
the army must obey the board. On November 7 Mifflin, Timothy
Pickering of Massachusetts, and Robert Harrison were elected
to the board. Furthermore, Washington's opponents did not
stop here. On November 27 Gates was elected president of the
board with Joseph Trumbull of Connecticut and Richard Peters
of Philadelphia chosen to complete the board's membership.
Consequently, according to the October 17th congressional ac-
tion, Gates was Washington's superior. There still remained one
more active opponent of Washington to be appeased. On De-
cember 13 Congress made Conway inspector general.\textsuperscript{25} The
enemies of Washington seemed to be holding the trump cards.
But Washington could not be counted out, for the game had
yet to be played to its conclusion.

Congress demanded of its board of war and inspector general
that several duties be performed. As instructed, Conway visited
Valley Forge. Believing that he had not been received properly,
Conway complained to Congress. Washington immediately sent
copies of letters exchanged with Conway to Congress. He

\textsuperscript{21} Fitzpatrick, \textit{Writings of George Washington}, X, 263.
\textsuperscript{22} John Gibson, ed., \textit{History of York County, Pa.} (Chicago, 1886), 139.
\textsuperscript{24} Burnett, \textit{Letters of the Continental Congress}, III, 52.
\textsuperscript{25} Worthington C. Ford, ed., \textit{Journals of the Continental Congress, 1777-}
\textit{1789} (Washington, 1908), IX, 818-1026.
claimed that Conway was greeted with the respect accorded any officer.\footnote{Fitzpatrick, \textit{Writings of George Washington}, X, 249.} Congress then asked Gates to visit the camp. He refused with such strong language that the reasons were crossed out in the \textit{Journal of the Continental Congress}. Other members of the board also found excuses for not visiting Valley Forge, and so congressional members had to be sent.\footnote{Ford, \textit{Journals of the Continental Congress}, X, 27-67.} The board members claimed that they had more pressing problems to discuss in York.

The board’s more pressing problems concerned planning an invasion of Canada. They discussed this invasion without consulting Washington. Lafayette, an officer of Washington’s military family, was offered the command of this expedition because members of the board wanted to alienate him from Washington,\footnote{Frederic A. Godcharles, \textit{Daily Stories of Pennsylvania} (Milton, Pa., 1924), 836.} and they needed a Frenchman to rally the French in Canada. When Lafayette was offered the command, he found that he would be directly under Congress and his second in command would be Conway.\footnote{Loth, \textit{People’s General}, 104-105.} Even before this Lafayette sensed the scheming that went on around him. He wrote to Washington telling him how his enemies had been trying to win him to their side and how he had remained faithful to the commander-in-chief. As a result, Lafayette, when offered the command, did not go straight to Albany but instead rushed to York. On February 2, 1778, Lafayette dined at Gates’s house. As the evening progressed, he noted the lack of toasts to the commander-in-chief. And so he offered a toast to Washington while the rest of the guests momentarily lost their poise.\footnote{32 Burnet, \textit{Letters of the Continental Congress}, III, 63-69.} Lafayette appeared before Congress on both the second and third of February and demanded that Washington be informed of the northern expedition and that Conway be replaced as second in command. He succeeded with both requests.\footnote{Loth, \textit{People’s General}, 105.} Henry Laurens noted in a letter to his son that on February 3, the day after the Gates’s banquet, Gates came to visit him and professed his friendship for Washington.\footnote{In all probability Gates at last realized that his future...}
and the future of the country were in Washington's hands. He was not wrong, for the ill-planned northern expedition never materialized.

By the spring of 1778 the threat of a cabal to overthrow Washington ceased to exist. Gates and Mifflin were replaced on the board of war. Gates, after making friendly overtures, was assigned to a command under Washington. Conway suffered severe wounds in a duel and resigned as inspector general. To his surprise, Congress accepted his resignation. Finding that his former friends avoided him, Conway returned to France.33 Dr. Rush continued writing letters and was finally reprimanded by John Adams.34 Washington survived the cabal as the untarnished symbol of unity in the new United States.

Some historians saw the Conway Cabal as a myth. The biographer of Mifflin, Kenneth Rossman, felt that Washington never had proof that anyone was really plotting against him. Instead he pictured Washington as imagining a plot and finding his proof in the information forwarded to him by his friends. Furthermore, Rossman found no evidence of a cabal in his research.35 George Billias felt that Washington was too easily offended by criticism which made him overly suspicious of critics.36 Bernhard Knollenberg agreed with Billias that Washington was too sensitive, especially since it was common practice for officers to criticize each other. In addition, he found no incriminating letters written by either Gates or Mifflin. Moreover, he discounted as untrue the story written by Lafayette in his Memoirs.37 Because these and other authors have not found conclusive proof of a cabal, they have chosen to disregard its existence.

A closer look at the evidence shows that the Conway Cabal actually occurred, for the available facts are decisive and displace any doubts that may arise. The letters and papers of Washington and his friends contain considerable evidence concerning the existence of the cabal. With these letters can be

34 Alden, General Charles Lee, 354.
35 Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, 132-137.
placed the two anonymous letters criticizing Washington. The letters and papers of the conspirators may not be available to be examined for proof of a cabal, for the authors or recipients may have destroyed them when the cabal failed. Nevertheless, proof of a cabal does not lie merely in the written word. The most conclusive evidence of a plot against Washington can be found in the formation of a board of war by the Congress. In addition, Congress delegated to this board the power to control the army and then elected Gates to be its president. Congress did not stop here, for it elevated to inspector general, Thomas Conway, the man whom Washington had openly opposed. Neither the board of war nor Conway conferred with Washington during this period from November, 1777, to February, 1778. The actions of Congress and the behavior of Washington's opponents during these months prove that the Conway Cabal actually existed.