The Origins of the Nationalist Movement of 1780-1783: Congressional Administration and the Continental Army

Historians have generally agreed that the Nationalist movement of 1780-1783 emerged during the nadir of the Revolutionary War and sought to increase the powers of the Continental Congress. While noting the serious military reverses the Continental army suffered in 1780 and the near collapse of the nation’s financial structure during this period, some scholars have located the beginnings of the movement in 1781 and have identified the motivations of the Nationalists as economic self-interest and political conservatism rather than wartime experiences or revolutionary patriotism. Such an interpretation portrays the Nationalists as a coalition of reactionary interest groups attempting to roll back the democratic gains of the Revolution; or it pictures them as trying to protect their investments; or it sees them as grasping for government back-pay and pensions. In all these interpretations the Nationalists appear as little more than conservatives in revolutionary clothing who exploited the army’s defeats and the nation’s economic distress in an attempt to restore aristocratic rule and gain financial advantage.¹

A reexamination of the origins, composition, program, and purpose of the Nationalist movement reveals first that the initial impulse to strengthen the national government began in 1780, not 1781. Second, this impulse emerged primarily from the failure of congressional administrative policies and the terrifying consequences of military defeat. The realization that the war might actually be lost prompted popularly-elected state legislatures to call for increasing the powers of the central government and to send Nationalists to Congress to effect the change. Nationalists agreed on the broad goal of augmenting the powers of the Continental Congress, disagreed on the best means of achieving that goal, and, in the end, proved to be as inept as the localists who opposed them. At bottom, Nationalists' adherence to republican ideology undermined their administrative effectiveness. Yet none of these aspects of the Nationalist movement can be understood unless it is first placed in the context of Congressional administration of the Continental army and of the states' obstruction of logistical operations.

By almost any standard, congressional administration of the Continental army was inadequate through the war, as evidenced by the failure to furnish the army with sufficient food, clothing, camp equipment, and medical supplies. In 1775-1776, Congress tried to meet its responsibility to supply the army by haphazardly employing congressional committees, creating rudimentary staff departments, and calling upon military commanders, state officials, and private citizens to assist in the war effort. The results were disappointing and the army was ill-served. In 1777, Congress rationalized supply operations, relied more heavily on the staff departments, decentralized responsibility, and introduced a system of public accountability. That too failed. In 1778, Congress reversed itself by centralizing the quartermaster and commissary departments, abandoning restraints on department chiefs, and handsomely remunerating staff officers. And under the leadership of Quartermaster General Nathanael Greene and Commissary General Jeremiah Wadsworth, these reforms proved effective. But relief was short-lived: by late 1779 the army once again lacked every necessity and was on the verge of disbanding.

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2 This and the next two paragraphs are based on E. Wayne Carp, "To Starve the Army at Pleasure": Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill, forthcoming), Introduction, chaps. 1-3.
Congress's efforts at reform were bound to fail because of the strength of America's localistic perspective, a frame of mind common to colonists from all walks of life. Localism was both a product of the colonists' English cultural heritage—in New England, especially, opposition to Stuart centralism manifested itself in a deep suspicion of central authority and a desire to preserve an established way of life—and a tradition of self-government at the town and county level. Regional, religious, and ethnic differences, the isolation of rural life, the distance between seaboard and hinterland, and poor transportation and communication systems reinforced a narrow world view. Americans' predilection for provincial tendencies made them insular, parochial, and selfish, with all the strengths and weaknesses a restricted vision of the world provides. Localism contributed to colonial intolerance of strangers, exemplified in New England's system of warning out and in the mistreatment of religious minorities, such as Anglican persecution of Baptists in Virginia. But it also created the framework within which the colonists launched and nurtured their successful experiment in self-government and defended their liberties against encroachments.

Thus, state and local authorities had their own set of priorities, shaped by political practices in the colonial era, that defeated congressional attempts to centralize logistical operations. State officials and magistrates believed that their primary responsibility was to protect the citizens of their state, county, or town. They feared the army intensely and went to great lengths to uphold the primacy of the civil power over the military. As a result, they were fundamentally committed to defending their own territory from British attack and to equalizing the burdens of the war among their inhabitants, in defiance of national priorities. The consequence of state and local provincialism was constant disruption of logistical operations as staff officers struggled against state interference with the drafting of military supply officers into militias and state refusal to cooperate in drawing up impressment statutes. Repeatedly, state and local officials subordinated the needs of the army to the sanctity of private property and the liberties of their constituents.

Pennsylvania authorities' interference with continental supply operations exemplifies the problem of localism with which staff officers had to contend throughout the war. Staff personnel complained that key workers employed as assistant deputy quartermasters, wagonmasters,
and teamsters were called upon by state officials to perform militia duty and threatened with fines if they failed to comply. The fines levied by Pennsylvania authorities in August 1780 on Commissary General Ephraim Blaine's assistants for non-performance of militia duty were so prohibitive that the men quit the army and returned home. The consequences of departure from Philadelphia were severe: without the assistants, according to Blaine, "I must be under the necessity of shutting up my office and all Business cease."\(^3\) Similarly, Colonel Benjamin Flower, Commissary General of Military Stores, protested to Pennsylvania's President Thomas Wharton that a contract entered into for "a large quantity of Shott and Shells" would go unfilled because all of the furnace's workmen had been drafted into the militia. Though Pennsylvania was the worst offender, the identical problem existed in most of the other states.\(^4\) To avoid state interference with supply personnel, staff officers wanted their men exempted from militia service. Exemption would protect current workers but, staff officers believed, would also encourage others to volunteer for employment in the staff departments.\(^5\)

State authorities viewed the matter differently. They claimed they did not object to exemption from militia duty per se, but only to abuses of the exemption policy. A few states could even point to statutes already on the books exempting artisans, wagon drivers, post masters, and post

\(^3\) Ephraim Blaine to the President of Congress, Aug. 15, 1780, Papers of the Continental Congress, microfilm, M-247, Reel 182, Item 165, I, 328 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.) (Hereafter cited as PCC.)


\(^5\) Rippey to Davis, June 12, 1778, Davis Papers, Reel 79.
riders as evidence of their support for the army.\textsuperscript{6} State officials said they disapproved of attempts to evade militia service and avoid payment of a substitute by serving as staff personnel for as little as a month or two. One solution, proposed by the Pennsylvania Council, was to prescribe a fixed term of enlistment—anywhere from nine months to a year—for men who served in the staff departments.\textsuperscript{7} Though a reasonable idea, it was never enacted. Instead, in their zeal to meet their militia quotas and apprehend shirkers, state officials continued to disrupt continental supply operations by depriving staff officers of needed personnel. Although motivated by the best of intentions, state policies undermined the war effort in the name of the war effort.\textsuperscript{8}

When staff officers were unable to supply the army adequately, they turned to impressment—the taking of civilian property with or without the owner's permission and leaving with the citizen a promise to pay in the form of Quartermaster or Commissary certificates. By 1778, state legislatures had enacted into law elaborate impressment statutes that gave town and county magistrates a major role in impressment. In theory, state authorities expected magistrates to both mediate between the army and inhabitants and provide the troops with supplies. In practice, magistrates often protected citizens and harassed and delayed military supply officials.\textsuperscript{9}

Pennsylvania, however, which bore the brunt of impressment operations during the army's encampment at Valley Forge, did more than pass laws to control staff officers. To protect citizens from military impressment, Pennsylvania's General Assembly created in January 1778 a separate administrative system to procure wagons for the army. In this scheme, the Quartermaster General applied to the state's Waggonmaster General, who would in turn issue the necessary orders to his

\textsuperscript{6} The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, ed., William Waller Hening (Richmond, Virginia, 1809-1823), X, 177, 425; Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of Massachusetts Bay (Boston, 1869-1922), V, 729.

\textsuperscript{7} Clinton to the Mayor and Corporation of Albany, June 2, 1778, Clinton Papers, III, 388; Pennsylvania Council to Washington, Apr. 13, 1778, Pa. Arch., First Series, VI, 416.

\textsuperscript{8} This is a direct paraphrase of an idea expressed about Congress by Marcus Cunliffe in "Congressional Leadership in the American Revolution," Leadership in the American Revolution, Library of Congress Symposium on the American Revolution (Washington, D.C., 1974), 48.

\textsuperscript{9} Carp, "To Starve the Army," chap. 4.
county deputies, thus removing the military from contact with the populace.\textsuperscript{10} Later steps taken by Pennsylvania authorities reveal how serious they were about protecting their citizens. When complaints continued, the power to impress in Pennsylvania was lodged solely in the hands of the Council of Safety from whom all military officers, even General Washington, had first to secure permission to impress.\textsuperscript{11}

The need to consolidate citizen support for the new revolutionary regimes contributed to state authorities' hostility toward impressment. When fighting commenced in 1775, the political legitimacy of the new state governments was not in every case automatically conferred. In such states as New York, where loyalists and secessionists in the northeastern counties of the state challenged the central revolutionary government, and Pennsylvania, where disagreement over the newly instituted Constitution of 1776 encouraged opposition to the state's revolutionary leadership, impressment added to the instability of the new regimes by increasing the number of disaffected citizens.\textsuperscript{12}

Pennsylvania's Council of Safety expressed these fears when refusing to implement a congressional resolution in 1777 urging it to seize blankets for the army. Though the Council recognized the seriousness of the army's need for supplies, it feared that the "intrusion upon the private property of individuals [would] be unavoidably resented, as a grievance arising from the Constitution." And by identifying the fundamental law of Pennsylvania with the policy of impressment, state officials were apprehensive "that it will greatly weaken and disable the Council from performing essential services."\textsuperscript{13} In this case, Pennsyl-

\textsuperscript{10} The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801, eds., James T. Mitchell and Henry Flanders (Harrisburg, Pa., 1896-1915), IX, 181-82.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 384-87; Elizabeth Cometti, "Impressment During the American Revolution," in The Walter Clinton Jackson Essays in the Social Sciences, ed., Vera Largent (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1942), 102.
\textsuperscript{13} Supreme Executive Council to the President of Congress, Sept. 17, 1777, Pa. Arch., First Series, V. 630.
Vania authorities preferred to strengthen long-term support for the regime rather than to give short-time aid to the army. Also implicit in Pennsylvania's decision was a recognition of the need to tread lightly on constituents who annually voted on the government's policies.

State impressment laws effectively protected citizens but they made it extremely difficult for staff officers to supply the army in emergencies. Pennsylvania's refusal to include in its wagon law of 1778 a clause allowing the army to impress carriages in a crisis is an excellent example of state authorities' interference with continental supply operations. The convoluted logic guiding the Pennsylvania Council's decision is worth quoting in its entirety to convey the state's distrust of military supply officers:

Notwithstanding there is no provision in the Law for cases of real emergency, it is nevertheless the opinion of Council that there may be instances which will fully justify the Quartermaster General, his deputies and the officers commanding detachments in impressing Waggons. If the Law had given authority to the military to impress, there would have been some reason to fear that very little attention would have been paid to the regular mode of calling upon the Farmers, whereby the burthen might possibly be very unequal.14

In essence, Pennsylvania authorities declared they would not permit the army to take wagons because the military would abuse the privilege; nevertheless, in emergencies impressment was permissible, though expressly prohibited by statute. Staff officers were thus invited to act without sanction of law but risked prosecution should their judgment prove wrong. State laws such as Pennsylvania's contributed to the distress of the Continental army.

Congress paid little heed to these problems with the states. Indeed by 1780, Congress was so deeply troubled by the increasing evidence of national bankruptcy that it adopted on February 25, 1780, the system of specific supplies by which the states assumed responsibility for provisioning the army. In the act's final form, each state was assigned specific quotas and was required to collect and deliver provisions to various magazine sites designated by the commander in chief.

From its inception the system of specific supplies worked poorly. Congressional administrative oversights and failure to keep informed of the states' internal affairs contributed to the system's lack of success. But state legislatures' sluggish response to congressional resolves, in some cases willful disregard of them, and states' reliance on uncooperative local officials compounded the problem. In addition, state and local authorities now discovered at first hand what staff officers had been charging for the past year: supplies could not be purchased without money; engrossers and speculators were everywhere; and the French, with specie in hand, preempted state purchasers, especially in Maryland and Connecticut. At bottom, the problem was financial. State treasuries were empty, towns bankrupt, continental currency worthless, and the marketplace glutted with Quartermaster and Commissary certificates. At every level of government—national, state, and local—the system of specific supplies had failed.\textsuperscript{15}

Aside from sending a committee to army headquarters, Congress's only reaction to the breakdown of the system of specific supplies was to rely even more heavily on the states. As Rhode Island's Congressman Ezekiel Cornell despairingly noted, Congress wished

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to see their States without control (as the term is) free, sovereign, and independent. If anything appears difficult in regard to supply, etc., what can we do? Why, we can do nothing; the States must exert themselves; if they will not, they must suffer to consequences.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Cornell's disgust at Congress's passivity presaged a widespread sentiment which began in August, 1780, to gain adherents for increasing the powers of Congress. Forming the backdrop to the movement was the worsening state of Continental finances, the mutiny of the Connecticut line, and the inability of the states to comply with congressional tax requisitions or supply quotas. Between May and September, 1780, three additional events immediately galvanized revolutionaries to advocate strengthening the authority of Congress. Disastrous military defeats in South Carolina at Charleston on May 12 and at Camden on August 16 dealt an almost mortal blow to the revolutionary war effort. At Charleston, General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered a force of more

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\textsuperscript{15} Carp, "To Starve the Army," chap. 7.
\textsuperscript{16} Ezekiel Cornell to Greene, July 21, 1780, \textit{LMCC}, V, 281.
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than 3,300 men, the largest single loss of American soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Three months later, at Camden, in the bloodiest battle of the war, the Americans suffered their worst defeat: the British killed or wounded more than 1,000 Continental soldiers and decisively routed General Horatio Gates' army. Upon reassembling, only 700 soldiers of the original 4,000-man army showed up. Finally, the treason of General Benedict Arnold dramatized the weakness of the Continental army and sent shock waves through the country.17

Rather than demoralizing Americans, these events awakened revolutionaries from the apathy they had slipped into during the past two years.18 The loss of Charleston, according to one observer, had the effect of reviving "a spirit unknown since the year 1776, a spirit which is fast pervading the mass of the community."19 The hoped for revival of the rage militaire of 1775 never occurred, but among a significant number of revolutionaries the very real possibility of losing the war provided the main impetus to advocate new ways to win.

The Nationalist movement of 1780-1783 was a product of these supply failures and military reverses. Its dominant aim was to win the war, and its supporters believed the only way to do that was to strengthen the powers of Congress. Army officers and popularly elected state legislatures were its major proponents. What these groups had in common and what compelled them to act was either their first-hand acquaintance with the army’s plight or their knowledge of Congress’s impotence in commanding the resources and cooperation of the states.

As early as October, 1779, Nathanael Greene, who as Quartermaster General was painfully aware of the disruption of military operations resulting from Congress’s inability to furnish his deputies with money,


18 Charles Royster, A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 284-86.

advocated "a new plan of civil constitution," one which permitted Congress at once to be more independent of the states and to exercise more control over them.\(^20\) General Washington fully shared Greene's view, basing his opinion on the unreliability of the states in providing for the army. "One state will comply with a requisition of Congress," he wrote Virginia Congressman Joseph Jones on May 31, 1780, "another neglects to do it. A third executes it by halves, and all differ either in the manner, the matter, or so much in point of time, that we are always working up hill, and ever shall be."\(^21\) In the following months, Washington reiterated his dissatisfaction with state jealousies, stubbornness, and delays, and he repeatedly called for "an entire new plan" that would lodge ample powers in Congress "adequate to all the purposes of the War."\(^22\) Without this crucial reform, Washington was convinced that "our Independence fails and each Assembly under its present Constitution will be annihilated, and we must once more return to the Government of Great Britain, and be made to kiss the rod preparing for our correction."\(^23\)

The first step in achieving this goal was upgrading the quality of congressmen. Washington believed that the states must send the ablest and best men to Congress, men who understood the country's interests and the need to increase congressional powers.\(^24\) Other revolutionaries agreed with him. As early as the Valley Forge winter of 1777-1778, Benjamin Rush and Alexander Hamilton criticized the absence of outstanding patriots in Congress and decried the lack of effective congressional leadership.\(^25\) A year later in March, 1779, similar thoughts

\(^{20}\) Greene to [?], Oct. 29, 1779, quoted in William Johnson, *Sketches of the Life and Correspondence of Nathanael Greene.* (Charleston, S.C., 1822), I, 144. See also PCC, Reel 46, Item 39, I, 209; Reel 193, Item 173, V, 161.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., XX, 242. For additional expressions of Washington's need to strengthen Congress's powers, see 117, XXI, 164, 183, 320. See also Harold W. Bradley, "The Political Thinking of George Washington," *Journal of Southern History*, 11 (Nov. 1945), 473-74.


\(^{24}\) Ibid.

about congressmen crossed Washington's mind, prompting him to ask, "where are our men of abilities?" The answer was that many revolutionaries preferred to serve at the state level as governors and legislators. It was extremely difficult to overcome the attraction to high state office, the traditional locus of power and distinction in colonial society. In addition, state service had the added appeal of being near the comforts of family and home. The high turnover rates in Congress suggest that this was no small enticement. Service in Congress proved to be arduous, tedious, inconvenient, and expensive. Coupled with its lack of power, loss of deference and prestige, and manifest ineffectiveness, Congress had become by 1779 a distinctly unattractive place in which to serve one's country.

The Nationalists hoped to attract superior individuals to Congress by replacing congressional executive boards with a single administrator at the head of each department. Boards needed to be abolished because they extinguished the passion which "topped all others in the eighteenth-century hierarchy of passions": the love of glory and fame. It followed from this belief that "men of the first pretensions" were reluctant to serve on boards because they would "be less conspicuous, of less importance, have less opportunity of distinguishing themselves." But by allowing individuals to take charge of a department and by conferring "real trust and importance" on the office, gifted and enterprising men would be attracted to Congress and the management of the war greatly improved. Seen from this perspective, the form the Nationalist program assumed was prompted not only by the desperate circumstances of the war, but also by the desire to make Congress more appealing to men of ability and ambition.

The idea of restructuring congressional administrative boards was

only one part of the most comprehensive plan put forth by any Nationalist in 1780. The plan was advanced, not surprisingly, by an army officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton, who—having fought at the Battle of Long Island, wintered at Valley Forge and witnessed the fruitless attempts to fight a war without sufficient men, money, or matériel—developed strong convictions about what changes were needed at the national level. Though comprehensive, Hamilton’s program was neither extreme nor atypical. In one form or another, most of the ideas Hamilton proposed were widely shared and would eventually be implemented by Congress. In a lengthy letter written in September, 1780, to Congressman James Duane, Hamilton went quickly to the heart of the problem: “The fundamental defect is a want of power in Congress.” Congressional powerlessness was a product of uncontrollable state sovereignty—the states, jealous of their independence, reserved to themselves the right to reject congressional resolves—and a timid and indecisive Congress which lacked the means or energy to provide for the exigencies of the war. As a result, Congress was overly dependent on the states.30

To counteract the influence of the states, Hamilton called for a reversal of the balance of power within the Confederation by vesting Congress with “complete sovereignty,” making it both more independent of the states and more efficient.31 Specifically, he proposed that Congress be granted a permanent revenue—for that government “which holds the purse strings absolutely, must rule”—by giving it the power to tax the states.32 In addition, Congress should appoint “great officers of state—A secretary for foreign affairs—A President of War—A President of Marine—A Financier”—to succeed congressional executive boards.33 With congressional revenue assured and its administrative apparatus centralized, Hamilton believed that the army could finally be built into a respectable fighting force. He recommended that Congress put the army on a more permanent footing and insure its loyalty by making good on the depreciation of the soldier’s pay

30 Hamilton to Duane [Sept. 3, 1780], Hamilton Papers, II, 401.
31 Ibid., 407-408. Hamilton quickly qualified the meaning of “complete sovereignty” by adding “except as to that part of internal police, which relates to the rights of property and life among individuals and to raising money by internal taxes.” In enumerating those areas over which Congress should have complete sovereignty, Hamilton gave first place to military affairs and second place to commercial matters.
32 Ibid., 404.
33 Ibid., 408.
and by conferring half-pay for life on officers. To provide the army with supplies, that being "the pivot of every thing else," Hamilton proposed abolishing the state supply system. In its place, he called for "a foreign loan, heavy pecuniary taxes, a tax in kind, [and] a bank founded on public and private credit." He suggested two methods to carry this program into effect. The first was for Congress simply to assume the discretionary powers needed and which, according to Hamilton, it already possessed. But Hamilton was not optimistic about this strategy because he believed Congress would shrink from such a bold expedient. The second method, in which he had more confidence, was to call a convention of states, whose delegates would possess sufficient wisdom and power to implement the necessary changes in the balance of power between Congress and the states.

That the movement to strengthen Congress should originate among army officers is readily understandable. They witnessed the states' inability to provide for the army, observed the damage caused by the refusal of the states to cooperate with Continental measures, and, most important, feared that the failure of the states to support the army would result in the Revolution's collapse. Yet it should be pointed out, if only because it is easy to overlook what is so often taken for granted, that Continental officers' first impulse during those discouraging months in late 1780 was to seek civilian solutions to military problems. In the flurry of rancorous letters Continental officers wrote to each other during 1780, in which they acidulously condemned the people's lack of virtue and the "supi[ne]ness & stupidity" of civil authorities, the most radical method they advanced to redress their grievances was simply to petition Congress. Significantly, they never contemplated a coup d'etat against the national government: the tradition of civilian primacy over the military continued inviolate.

34 Ibid., 411, 406.
35 Ibid., 407. See also Hamilton to Isaac Sears [Oct. 12, 1780], 472-73.
State governments were the second major group to advocate increasing the powers of Congress. This point needs to be underscored because it reveals that support of the Nationalist movement was widespread and popular. During the war, legislative bodies became even more representative of colonial society as artisans and ordinary farmers filled assembly halls and as backcountry areas gained seats in the legislature. Between 1774-1779, in New York, for example, the men who once dominated the streets and extralegal committees now ruled the state's assembly and senate. Similarly, in Pennsylvania by 1776, the old Assembly leaders had been overthrown, their places taken by men of the mechanic, or middle classes. Likewise in Connecticut, a political revolution occurred between 1779-1782 as citizens' anger with the way the state waged war resulted in an unprecedented turnout of incumbent office-holders. That the Nationalist movement received popular support is surprising only if one views the Nationalists as a conservative, economically motivated group of aristocrats attempting to overturn the political rule of equalitarian radicals. Because the movement to strengthen the power of Congress was primarily a response to the desperate military situation of 1780, these Progressive categories make little sense. New York’s Governor George Clinton, for instance, was at once the principal architect of Antifederalism in the Empire State and one of the staunchest advocates of Congress exercising implied powers. According to Clinton, if Congress did not have the requisite powers “it ought to have them.” Indeed, “these were powers that necessarily existed in Congress and we cannot suppose that they should want the Power of compelling the several States to their Duty and thereby enabling the Confederacy to expel the common Enemy.” Inspiring Clinton’s analysis was his awareness of the British army camped in New York City, British-provoked Indian attacks on New York’s western frontier, and widespread disaffection throughout the state.


Other state governments threatened by British military power or unable to comply with congressional resolves shared Clinton’s desire to strengthen Congress. They acted on this concern in two ways: by electing nationalist-minded men to Congress and by taking the lead in initiating conventions of states. As early as October, 1779, New York and Virginia, two states most seriously menaced by British military operations, sent four Nationalists to Congress. The New York Assembly elected Philip Schuyler and Robert R. Livingston. Schuyler, an aristocratic, wealthy landlord was a veteran of the Great War for the Empire and had been elected to Congress in 1775. At the commencement of the war, he had the distinction of being appointed one of the four Major-Generals under Washington and had commanded the troops of the Northern Department until 1777. Livingston, graduate of King’s College, member of the bar, and former delegate to Congress in 1775-1776, was politically conservative and had only reluctantly accepted America’s decision for Independence. Nevertheless, he remained a revolutionary and was active in state politics. From Virginia came Joseph Jones and James Madison, both strong Whigs, who in the Convention of 1776 were members of the committee that drafted the state’s constitution and Declaration of Rights. These men joined two long-standing members of Congress who shared their Nationalist views, New York’s James Duane and South Carolina’s John Mathews. Although these men were of different economic status, social background, and political persuasion, they could all agree on the need to increase the powers of Congress.

During most of 1780 the Nationalists were a distinct minority in Congress. As a result, they had little success in implementing their program or relieving the distress of the army. Their one major resolution, calling on the states to levy a one percent impost on exports and imports, was easily defeated. And those resolutions that were referred to committee, a motion to reorganize the department of foreign affairs and another one to revise the civil executive departments, became bogged down in Congress’s institutional inertia. In their one administrative achievement, the reorganization of the Hospital Department, the cure

proved worse than the disease. Cutting back on medical personnel and expenses was no way to improve the soldiers’ health. The ineffectiveness of the national government became increasingly evident.  

With the army unable to keep men in the field for lack of food and clothing and with Congress standing by helplessly, several New England states in the summer of 1780 decided that more drastic measures were required if the war were to be won. To express their views, they met in a series of conventions. The first, composed of delegates from New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, met in Boston from August 3 to 9, 1780, to promote measures for strengthening the war effort. The Boston Convention passed thirteen resolutions, most of which exhorted the others states to redouble their efforts to comply with congressional resolves regarding the collection of taxes and the provision of supplies and recruits to the army. The twelfth resolution, however, sounding an entirely new note, called on the states to “invest their Delegates in Congress with powers competent for the government and direction of . . . national affairs” and also urged that all matters concerning the nation as a whole “be under the superintendency and direction of one supreme head.” In effect, these New England states were asking Congress to assume sufficient power to coerce all the states into doing their duty with respect to the army. Upon adjourning on August 9, the delegates called for another convention to be held at Hartford in early November and invited New York and Rhode Island to attend.  

Upon receiving the report of the Boston convention and noting its contents “with Pleasure,” Governor Clinton laid it before the New York Assembly. The Assembly fully shared Clinton’s assessment of the “defects in the present System, and the Necessity of a supreme and coercive Power in the Government of the States” and on September 26 voted to send commissioners to Hartford. “Unless Congress [is] au-

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40 Carp, “To Starve the Army,” chap. 8.  
authorized to direct uncontrollably the Operations of War, and enabled to enforce a Compliance with their Requisitions," the Assembly asserted, "the Common Force can never be properly united."\textsuperscript{43} Two weeks later, on October 10, New York spelled out exactly what it meant by enforcing a compliance. Should any state fail to provide its quota of men, money, provisions, or other supplies, the Assembly wrote its congressional delegates, Congress must "direct the Commander-in-Chief, without delay, to march the Army. . . . into such state; and by a Military Force, compel it to furnish its deficiency."\textsuperscript{44} Like the other states, the New York's Assembly's justification for this unprecedented and radical action was the fear of the revolution's imminent collapse and the urgent need for concerted action to prevent it. Rhode Island likewise agreed to send delegates.

The Hartford Convention, which met from November 11 to 22, was in many respects similar to its predecessor: its delegates again urged the states to execute promptly every congressional resolve relating to the army's support. They went beyond the Boston Convention's resolves, however, by calling for Congress to lay taxes upon "specific Articles, or duties or imposts."\textsuperscript{45} Even more far-reaching, a measure of the states' desperation over the future of the revolution, was their recommendation that Congress confer upon General Washington the power "to induce the several States to a punctual compliance with the requisitions which have been or may be made by Congress for supplies for the year 1780 and 1781."\textsuperscript{46} In effect, the Hartford commissioners asked Congress to make George Washington a military dictator. Finally, in a cover letter to the President of Congress, the commissioners endorsed the idea of centralizing congressional executive boards and recommended the appointment of a man of "Talents, abilities, and integrity" to manage the nation's finances.\textsuperscript{47}

In other ways, the states demonstrated the depth of their commitment to winning the war. While state commissioners sat in conventions, state

\textsuperscript{43} Address of the New York Assembly to Clinton, \textit{ibid.}, entry for Sept. 9, 1780.
\textsuperscript{44} Resolutions of the New York Assembly, Oct. 10, 1780, \textit{LMCC}, V, 445 n. 6.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Records of the State of Conn.}, III, 564-74 (quotation from 571).
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, 571.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, 573. For other accounts of the Hartford Convention, see Crosskey and Jeffrey, Jr., \textit{Politics and the Constitution}, III, 535 n. 21; Patterson, "From Revolution to Constitution," 82-84.
legislatures gave bite to their proposals by sending an additional contingent of Nationalists to Congress to put them into effect. Significantly, most of the new Congressmen had served in the Continental army. From New Hampshire came General John Sullivan, a lawyer who had fought in every major engagement of the war, had commanded the Newport Expedition of 1778, and had laid waste to the Seneca lands in Western Pennsylvania and New York in 1779. The Rhode Island legislature elected Generals Ezekiel Cornell and James Mitchell Varnum, who had participated in the siege of Boston and the Battle of Long Island. Cornell, a self-educated mechanic, had served as Deputy Adjutant General and distinguished himself at the Battle of Rhode Island in August, 1778. Varnum, a lawyer admitted to the Rhode Island bar in 1771, had been with Washington at Valley Forge and was later made Commander of the Department of Rhode Island. Also returned to Congress was John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian clergyman, who immigrated to America in 1768 to become President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Witherspoon, first elected to Congress in 1776, was an enthusiastic signer of the Declaration of Independence. During his three-year tenure, he served on more than one hundred committees and became a staunch advocate of centralizing the civil executive departments. 48

The Nationalists had been given a mandate. How they would implement it remained to be seen. Before Robert Morris took de facto command of the movement in May, 1781, the Nationalists acknowledged no leader. They were an abrasive, individualistic group united less by their economic status or social position than by their contempt for Congress’s impotent and lethargic management of the war and by their conviction that the powers of Congress had to be strengthened if the war were to be won.

But although they agreed that Congress’s powers needed to be increased, the Nationalists were not of one mind over the best means to

achieve their goals. Rather, as is characteristic of a heterogeneous group thrown together to solve a problem during a crisis of unprecedented magnitude, the Nationalists advocated different measures at different times and even disagreed among themselves. In the fall of 1780, the most common solution proposed was to call a convention of states which would vest Congress with authority to coerce "those States which Refuse to comply with reasonable requisitions." This plan was especially popular with army officers in and out of Congress who viewed it as a quick, forceful, and legal method to secure their ultimate end, the success of the Revolution.\(^49\) The Hartford Convention's resolves, presented to Congress on December 12, in great measure fulfilled these Nationalists goals, but a good many in Congress, including other Nationalists, shrank from the use of military force, even when sanctioned by civil authority. "Few persons have a high opinion of or confidence in Gen. Washington than myself or a greater desire of having vigorous executive powers put into the hands of persons at the head of our affairs either in the military or civil department," John Witherspoon declared to the Governor of New Jersey on December 16, "yet that resolution is of such a nature that I should never give my voice for it unless you or my constituents should specifically direct it, perhaps *even not then.*" Revolutionaries' fear of concentrating power in the hands of the military was too strong to be easily overcome even in an emergency.\(^50\)

With the rejection of the resolves that would have authorized Congress to use force against the states, Nationalists' efforts to strengthen Congress focused on centralizing the civil executive departments and securing a permanent revenue for Congress. In the aftermath of the mutiny of the Pennsylvania Line on January 1, 1781, and with reports circulating that the mutineers were heading for Philadelphia, a renewed


\(^{50}\) John Witherspoon to the Governor of New Jersey, Dec. 16, 1780, *LMCC*, V, 487 (emphasis in the original). See also Duane to the Governor of New York, Nov. 14, 1780, 443; Burnett, *Continental Congress*, 485. The issue of using military force against the states was raised in March 1781 by a congressional committee composed of James Madison, James Duane, and James Mitchell Varnum. The committee's report, which favored the use of force, was deferred until May and overwhelmingly rejected in August 1781. See *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 1774-1789, eds., Worthington C. Ford *et al.* (Washington, D.C., 1904-1937), XIX, 236, XX, 469-71, 773 (hereafter cited as *JCC*); Rakove, *Beginnings of National Politics*, 289-91.
sense of urgency pervaded Congress. In the following weeks, measures that had languished in committee for months or which earlier had been easily voted down were now brought before Congress and approved. To handle foreign policy matters, Congress established on January 10, 1781, the position of Secretary for Foreign Affairs.\(^1\) On February 3, an amendment to the yet unratified Articles of Confederation proposed by John Witherspoon and seconded by North Carolina’s militant spokesman for state rights, Thomas Burke, was approved, vesting Congress with the power to levy a duty of five percent \textit{ad valorem} on imports and prize goods.\(^2\) Four days later, Congress approved a plan prepared primarily by James Duane, creating the posts of Secretary at War, Secretary of Marine, and the Superintendent of Finance.\(^3\) With these reforms, the Nationalists hoped to achieve two of their foremost goals: the efficient administration of the army and the establishment of an effective power for Congress to tax the states.

The Nationalists were unanimously in favor of abandoning congressional boards, but they were less united on the question of the impost. Reflecting the Nationalists’ tactical differences, their individualism, and the absence of a strong party leader, prominent Nationlists such as James Madison, John Sullivan, Joseph Jones, and John Witherspoon voted against the impost.\(^4\) Defections from the Nationalists’ ranks were compensated for by unexpected support from localists such


\(^{4}\) Madison’s about-face was pragmatic. He thought the measure too strong and would be voted down by the states. See Brant, \textit{Madison}, II, 211-12. For an insightful analysis of Madison’s inconsistent Nationalism, see Lance Banning, “James Madison and the Nationalists 1780-1783,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly}, 3d Ser., 40 (Apr. 1983), 227-55. Sullivan’s biographer suggests that his inconsistency might be explained either by not wanting to alienate his state’s commercial interests or by his dislike of Thomas Burke with whom he almost fought a duel in 1777. See Whitmore, \textit{General of the Revolution}, 164. I have been unable to discover why Witherspoon or Jones voted against the impost. Witherspoon may have believed the amended version of his motion too weak.
as Virginia's Theodorick Bland and Massachusetts's James Lovell, who usually opposed any resolve that even hinted at diminishing state power.\textsuperscript{55} Localists' support of Nationalist measures is testimony to the widespread fear that the Revolution might indeed fail.

Although broad-based, the congressional consensus was a fragile one as localists remained apprehensive about concentrating power in the hands of individuals. Hence, the question of who would head up the new civil executive posts led inevitably to temporizing as the two factions wrangled over nominations. An extreme example of this tendency was Congress's lengthy delay in filling the position of Secretary at War. General John Sullivan was a strong candidate for the post, but the opposition of Samuel Adams was sufficient to defer a final decision on the matter until October 31, 1781. On that date Congress settled upon Major-General Benjamin Lincoln to perform the duties of Secretary at War, but he did not arrive in Philadelphia until November 20 and did not have the Department of War fully functioning until sometime in January, 1782, nearly three months after the victory at Yorktown.\textsuperscript{56}

Similar delays, though not as extensive, characterized the appointment of officials to the posts of Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of Marine, and Superintendent of Finance.\textsuperscript{57}

Even if the localists were entirely to blame for preventing nominees from taking office promptly, it is evident from the Nationalists' reorganization of Congress's top managerial posts that they were every bit as deficient in administrative expertise as their predecessors. A surprising lack of boldness and a reliance on previous administrative practices characterized the Nationalists' reform of the civil executive departments. Most striking was the similarity that the powers and responsi-

\textsuperscript{55} JCC, XIX, 111-12; Henderson, \textit{Party Politics}, 273-75.

\textsuperscript{56} The genesis of the office of the Secretary at War is fully covered in Harry M. Ward, \textit{The Department of War}, 1781-1795 (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1962), 7-11. For Adams's objections to Sullivan, see Sullivan to Washington, Mar. 6, 1781, LMCC, VI, 11-12; William V. Wells, \textit{The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams} . . (Boston, 1865), III, 128-30; Jennings B. Sanders, \textit{Evolution of the Executive Departments of the Continental Congress 1774-1789} (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1931), 98-99.

\textsuperscript{57} For the delay in appointing the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, see Sanders, \textit{Executive Depts.}, 110. For the Secretary of Marine, see Champagne, \textit{McDougall}, 171-72. For the Superintendent of Finance, see RM to the President of Congress, Mar. 13, 1781, \textit{Morris Papers}, I, 18; Clarence L. Ver Steeg, \textit{Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier: With an Analysis of his Earlier Career} (Philadelphia, 1954), 59-61; Ferguson, \textit{Power of the Purse}, 118.
bilities of the new department chiefs bore to those of the congressional boards they were replacing: their functions were still mostly clerical. Thus, the Secretary at War was not authorized to direct military strategy, but, like the Board of War before him, empowered only to keep military records, communicate congressional orders and resolves to the army, and report to the Finance Department estimates of the army's manpower, supply, and pay needs. The power of directing the war remained divided between the Secretary at War, the Finance Department, the Congress, the commander in chief, and the states.\textsuperscript{58} Similarly, the Nationalists envisioned the new Secretary for Foreign Affairs not as the architect of America's foreign policy, but rather as Congress's amanuensis, a mere recorder and transmitter of congressional foreign policy initiatives.\textsuperscript{59}

The Nationalists likewise never spelled out exactly how any of these reforms would alleviate the army's logistical problems. The impost is a good example of the Nationalists' administrative myopia. Because the impost passed Congress in the form of an amendment to the unratified Articles of Confederation, it needed the unanimous consent of the states. No one in Congress, least of all the Nationalists, should have placed much faith in prompt action by the states. Moreover, even if the tax were quickly approved by the states, it would yield only about $500,000 to $700,000: "A trifle when compared with our wants," observed John Mathews.\textsuperscript{60} Thus there was a curious split between the ideological importance of vesting Congress with the power to tax the states, which was great, and the actual effect such a measure would have on reducing the army's distress, which was small.

The disjunction between broad objectives and specific means was especially noticeable in the new position of Superintendent of Finance, a post which would figure prominently in facilitating the army's march to Yorktown. In the congressional instructions outlining the office's responsibilities, the only mention made of logistical matters was the general statement that the Superintendent of Finance would "direct and control all persons employed in procuring supplies for the public service." But the bulk of the Financier's duties, like those of the Board

\textsuperscript{58} Ward, \textit{Department of War}, 13.
\textsuperscript{59} Dangerfield, \textit{Livingston}, 144.
\textsuperscript{60} Quoted in Burnett, \textit{Continental Congress}, 481.
of Treasury, consisted of monetary matters involving revenues, expenditures, the public debt, and the settlement of accounts. These were important issues, but restoring the nation's fiscal integrity was a long-term project, and it is difficult to see how the Nationalists thought the Superintendent would immediately help the army. Thus, in practice, the Nationalists' prescription for winning the war was just as ineffective and visionary as their adversaries' program of relying on the states. The only difference between them was the Nationalists' powerful faith in the capacity of individual genius to surmount administrative difficulties and provide the leadership necessary to win the war. Necessity, Robert Morris, and the passage of time would prove their faith well founded.

When Robert Morris, the most prominent and influential merchant in America, accepted the position of Superintendent of Finance on May 14, 1781, he had no intention of assisting the army with its logistical problems. Nor did his plans for reviving the nation's financial health promise any immediate relief for Washington's troops. Aside from proposing the establishment of a national bank three days after accepting office, Morris had no specific blueprint for rescuing the country from bankruptcy. Rather, at the outset, he saw his task as Superintendent of Finance in terms of two basic objectives: first, to raise revenues—which he acknowledged was Congress's responsibility—and second, to expend the funds in the most frugal and honest manner. This last goal he believed to be "the most Essential part of the duty of the Superintendent of Finance. He must ever have it in View to reduce the Expenditures as nearly as possible to what in Reason and Justice they ought to be."
This point cannot be overemphasized. For at the heart of every financial measure Morris would eventually propose was the belief that the country had been brought to financial ruin by waste, extravagance, and the lack of systematic administration. These practices, he believed, had prolonged the war in two ways. They had destroyed public credit and undermined widespread support for the revolution. Thus, all of Morris's subsequent actions were designated to restore public credit and revive popular support for the war. "If I can regain for the United States the Confidence of Individuals so as they will trust their property and exertions in the hands of Government," Morris wrote the Governor of Virginia, "our Independence and Success are certain but without that Confidence we are nothing." Morris understood that within the weak framework of the Articles of Confederation, "the people must be wooed and won to do their duty." By slashing expenditures, eliminating wasteful practices, and introducing order and regularity into the army's administrative procedures, Morris hoped to convince the people that America's government merited their support.

The same ends—the attraction of new sources of revenue, the restoration of the public credit, and the revival of the people's confidence in the revolution—were behind Morris's plans to establish a national bank and a mint, to reorganize the Treasury, to issue "Morris notes," and most importantly, to fund the Confederation's debts. But above all

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65 Morris Papers, IV, 46-47, I, 97.
66 RM to Benjamin Franklin, Sept. 27, 1782, in The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution ed., Francis Wharton (Washington, D.C., 1889), V, 774. See also RM to the President of Congress, Sept. 21, 1781, Morris Papers, II, 323; RM to Greene, Apr. 24, 1782, ibid., V, 50.
67 Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, chaps. IV-V; Ferguson, Power of the Purse, chap. VII. The role of merchants and public creditors in the origins of the Nationalist movement has been vastly overemphasized. What is most striking about this earlier period is the lack of support the Nationalist financial program received from the very economic interests it was purportedly designed to serve. Thus, for example, the mercantile community demonstrated a remarkable lack of interest in subscribing to the Bank of North America. On this point, see Morris Papers, I, 315 n. 3, II, 69, III, 121 n. 1; Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, 84. In addition, rather than pleasing public creditors, Morris's financial program was initially denounced by them. Public creditors' hostility was directed at Morris's recommendation to halt the practice of giving loan office certificates in lieu of the interest due them and at his proposal in June-1782 to stop further payment of interest on loan office certificates in bills of exchange on France. For the adverse reaction of public creditors to Morris's program, see Morris Papers, III, 460; 482; V, 398n. For the order stopping interest payments in loan office certificates, see III, 50-51, V, 397 n.-99n.
else, Morris's financial program was designed to win the war. A financially revitalized America would have the effect on England of a psychological Yorktown. In Morris's vision of winning the war, there was no need for planning military strategy, for fighting battles, or for paying soldiers. Once Great Britain perceived America's fiscal resolve, the tangible sign of a people determined to fight for their liberty, it would quickly sue for peace.

In a circular written in October, 1781, Morris laid out the logic connecting the nation's financial integrity to winning the war. Working backward from the effect to the cause, Morris told the state governors he was "thoroughly convinced that the Enemy must ask Peace, whenever we are in a Condition vigorously to prosecute the War; and that we shall be in that Condition, whenever our Affairs are reduced to order and our Credit restored; and that for these Purposes, nothing more is necessary than a proper System of Taxation." Conversely, the only thing that kept England in the war, its one hope, was for "the Derangement of our Finances" to continue. Should the states ratify the impost and put the national government in possession of an adequate revenue "that Hope must cease." Morris was convinced that England would capitulate rather than continue fighting against a united and solvent America. Although Morris's financial policies resulted in making America safe for public creditors and also laid the groundwork for America's economic expansion in the 1780s, they were not designed with those ends in mind. Their origins stemmed from the developments of the war and Morris's genuine desire to see America "independent, Really and Truly independent, Independent of our Enemies, of our Friends, of all but the Omnipotent."

Ironically, Morris spent the better part of his first four months in office intervening in and directing the Continental army's logistical operations. On August 7, 1781, in the company of Richard Peters, a member of the Board of War, Morris journeyed to army headquarters

68 Morris Papers, III, 88.
at Dobbs Ferry, New York, where for a week (August 11-18), he held high level discussions with the commander in chief. With a dedication to frugality that would have brought smiles to the faces of Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee, Morris proposed eliminating posts, cutting back soldiers’ pay, economizing on hospital expenses, reducing the number of regiments, abolishing franking privileges for officers, and curtailing the expenditures for military stores, provisions, and forage.71 These proposals were temporarily shelved, however, when on the afternoon of August 14, Washington learned that a French fleet of 29 warships carrying 3,000 men was sailing for Chesapeake Bay and would be arriving in mid-October. Washington immediately recognized the possibility of trapping the British with the aid of French sea power and countered Morris’s program of retrenchments by asking for increased logistical support.72

Morris complied with Washington’s request, and for the next month, while keeping creditors at bay and fending off insistent requests for money from staff officers, he plunged into the complexities of transporting and supplying the army on its four hundred mile march from the Hudson to the York. Morris ultimately succeeded in this last major logistical operation of the war and deserved a large portion of credit for the victory at Yorktown. Success was due largely to the fact that planning, direction, and responsibility were centralized in the person of Robert Morris.73

After Yorktown, Morris never lost sight of the means which he believed would bring an end to the war—the collection of tax revenues, the prudent expenditure of government funds, and the restoration of public credit. All else was subordinated to these goals. His commitment not to allow “any Consideration to divert me from that Line which Reason points out as my Duty to walk in,” boded ill for the troops.74 If push came to shove, the soldiers would be sacrificed for the greater

71 Morris Papers, II, 75-76. For the background of RM’s meeting with Washington, see the headnote, 73-74; Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, 74.
73 Carp, “To Starve the Army,” chap. 8. For the preparations of the Yorktown campaign, see Johnston, Yorktown Campaign, chaps, IV-V.
74 Morris Papers, IV, 119.
good: the revival of public credit. Nowhere is this better revealed than in Morris’s implementation of the contract system to feed the army.

In December, 1781, Morris began to extend to the entire army the system of contracts he had earlier used as Agent for Pennsylvania to supply that state’s military posts. Morris was attracted to the contract system because he was convinced it was “the cheapest, most certain, and consequently the best, mode of obtaining those articles, which are necessary for the subsistence, covering, cloathing, and moving of an Army.” 75 Sealed, competitive bidding would keep the price per ration down to a minimum, while also allowing Morris to eliminate transportation and personnel costs, shut down expensive military posts, and save on paying for wastage and spoilage. The contractors were sure to provide a sufficient number of good rations because if they failed to supply an adequate amount, they would deprive themselves of a portion of the profits. Likewise, if they supplied bad rations “the Contractors will suffer the loss of it when condemned, so that they are bound in Interest to take care that the Beef put up be of a good quality.” 76 As with the Bank of North America, Morris sought to harness economic self-interest to serve the public good.

Morris was overly optimistic in trusting to economic self-interest to solve the army’s supply problems. In the hands of grasping merchants, a contract, even with arbitration clauses written into it, was a frail reed to lean upon: the agreement’s stipulations could be shoddily complied with or simply ignored. This was the experience of Washington’s troops fed by “Mr. Comfort Sands, wrongly named so,” whose firm was awarded the contracts for West Point and the Moving Army. 77 Sands, a New York merchant, whose putative maxim in trade was “that no poor person can be honest,” did everything in his power to grow prosperous at the expense of the public. He was arrogant to army officers, punct-

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75 Ibid., 482-83. For examples of contracts, see I, 207, 299.
76 Ibid., III, 428, 179, V, 175; Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, 106-07.
77 The Moving Army consisted of fighting troops not assigned to a specific post. For the contracts, see Morris Papers, III, 342-47, IV, 525-30, 497 n. 8, 530n-31n; Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, 142-51. The quotation is from John Campbell to Hugh Hughes, Apr. 20, 1782, Hugh Hughes Letterbooks, 5, New-York Historical Society, NYC.
tilious to a fault, and mendacious in negotiations. 78 Not surprisingly, disputes between Sands and the army arose as early as March, 1782, and by May the complaints were legion, if not exactly novel. For it was the same litany heard throughout the war: spoiled flour, rotten meat, bad rum, and adulterated whiskey. Adding insult to injury, the soldiers were made to walk upwards of three miles from camp to where the food was issued, a spot chosen to suit the contractor’s convenience. 79

The army in the South fared no better, albeit for different reasons. Because Morris was adamantly opposed to deficit spending, he required the states to continue to meet congressional tax and supply requisitions. He would not bail them out, believing that their reasons—“that each had done [the] most, and that the people are not able to pay Taxes”—were pretexts for “Langour and Inexertion.” 80 As a result of Morris’s fiscal triage, the contract system was not extended to the Southern army until the middle of 1782. Consequently, throughout much of 1782, Nathanael Greene’s army suffered and almost disbanded because it was forced to rely on state supplies and impressment. When Greene complained, Morris turned aside his requests for aid and blithely consoled his friend: “You therefore my Dear Sir must continue your Exertions with, or without Men, Provisions, Cloathing or pay, in hopes that all Things will come right at last.” 81


79 Heath to Benjamin Lincoln, Mar. 27, 1782, Washington Papers, Ser. 4, Reel 83. For the complaints, see Heath to Sands, Mar. 1, 1782, ibid.; Writings of Washington, ed. Fitzpatrick, XXIV, 259; 467-68. See also the fine discussion and sources in the Morris Papers, V, 212-14 n. 6; Ver Steeg, Robert Morris, 142-43, 146. Sands denied all charges of misconduct. For his defense, see Sands and Company to Humphreys and Trumbull, Jr., May 11, 1782, Washington Papers, Ser. 4, Reel 84; Sands and Company to the Committee of Field Officers of the Army, May 14, 1782, ibid., Reel 85. For the army’s logistical problems during the war, see Carp, “To Starve the Army,” chap. 3.

80 RM to Greene, Apr. 24, 1782, Morris Papers, V, 50. Referring to the states, RM remarked, “If complaints of Difficulties were equivalent to Cash I should not complain that the [tax] quotas are unpaid.” RM to Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, June 11, 1782, 380.

81 Ibid., 50. For RM’s refusal to supply the southern troops, IV, 406-09, 410 n. 4; V, 237-38 n. 1, 492-93, 35-37. See also Theodore Thayer, Nathanael Greene: Strategist of the American Revolution (New York, 1969), 396-97; Johnson, Sketches of the Life of Nathanael Greene, II, 315-17.
In the following months, although the army grew to nearly 14,000 men by late 1782, its logistical problems disappeared, mainly as a result of the ensuing peace that brought stability and regularity to administrative affairs.82 Few soldiers now complained of a lack of supplies. On February 5, 1783, Washington wrote, “I have...the satisfaction of seeing the troops better covered, better clothed, and better fed than they have ever been in any former Winter Quarters.”83 After seven and a half years, Washington finally had an army ready to fight. Five weeks later, Congress received the provisional peace treaty from Paris.

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The Nationalist movement of 1780-1781, initiated by army officers and popularly elected state legislatures, was a reaction to economic chaos and military defeat. Both these groups had experienced firsthand the consequences of Congress’s inefficient administration of the war and the defects of relying on weak and obstructive state governments to provide men and supplies for the army. But what is surprising is not that Nationalists emerged in 1780 but that they were supported by their philosophical opponents, the localists, who had been adamantly opposed to increasing the powers of Congress. Localist participation in the Nationalist coalition is a true measure of the magnitude of the economic and military crisis. At stake was the fate of the Revolution.

Once in power, however, Nationalist administrative theory and practice had much in common with earlier congressional management of the war. In particular, the Nationalists, like the localists, distrusted the military, abhorred fraud and extravagance, and passionately believed in the need to reduce drastically public expenditures. Their commitment to these republican values insured that their direction of the war would be as ineffective as former attempts had been. Only Robert Morris’s decision to forsake republican austerity, combined with French military aid, prevented the Nationalists’ administrative principles from endangering American victory at Yorktown. Nor did

the Nationalists succeed in their effort to increase the powers of Congress. Their strongest measure, the impost, went down to defeat by the refusal of a single state, Rhode Island, to ratify it. But although they were administratively inept, the Nationalists achieved their ultimate goal: not the restoration of aristocratic rule or the enrichment of public creditors, but Independence.

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