Washington's Generals and the Decision to Quarter at Valley Forge

The Continental Army's encampment at Valley Forge in the winter and spring of 1777-78, enshrined in the popular mind as the epitome of suffering borne by dedicated Revolutionary soldiers and officers, has been thoroughly studied as a problem of supply, morale, discipline, and sacrifice. Surprisingly, explanations of how the army came to encamp there are not so thorough; historians have only briefly discussed Washington's decision. None have recounted accurately in detail what the commander-in-chief's options were, how and why an encampment in an unsettled area in midwinter was an option, and under what circumstances Washington chose that site.

Some historians believe that political considerations compelled the decision. The most recent study of Valley Forge, Wayne K. Bodle's 1987 dissertation, sees it as "a compromise between the wants and needs of the constituent elements of the American political and military establishments." John E. Ferling's 1988 biography of Washington finds him "unwilling to buck Congress" in its demands that he quarter the army near Philadelphia. John F. Reed's 1965 account of the campaigns leading up to the encampment asserts that "the Pennsylvania Council . . . chose the neighborhood of Valley Forge, if not the actual place itself." Others have rather briefly argued that military considerations ranked higher than political ones, but have not thoroughly discussed what these were or how the army commanders perceived them. Douglas Southall Freeman's 1951 account of Washington in the Revolution does not explain the alternatives thoroughly, but does note the strategic placement of the camp. Robert Middlekauff, in The Glorious Cause (1982), states that Washington chose the site because it was "well located strategically, easily defended, and out of the way of civilians." North Callaghan's biography of Henry Knox highlights its subject's military acumen by claiming that "the winter quarters which Washington selected at Valley Forge was excellent from

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a military point of view, and Knox was one of the first to recognize this." John Pancake, in *1777: The Year of the Hangman*, asserts that Washington's main concern was keeping the army "close enough to keep an eye on the redcoats in Philadelphia but safe enough from a sudden sally by Howe."1 None of these historians has explained how Washington came to see the strategic advantage of this site, nor have they carefully sorted out the role of Washington's advisors and evaluated the process of decision making by the generals.

Several historians assert that Washington placed slight reliance on his generals in selecting the encampment site. The commander-in-chief regularly consulted them in his Council of War; Congress had instructed him to solicit their advice. But in the selection of this site their counsel was of little help, according to Paul David Nelson in his recent biography of Major General William Alexander, the so-called Lord Stirling. Nelson states that Washington finally decided on Valley Forge "after listening at length to his officers' wrangling and mind-changing." North Callaghan finds Washington completely responsible for the choice. Theodore Thayer's *Nathanael Greene* briefly remarks that his subject and other generals favored other sites for the cantonment of the army, and "after considerable discussion Washington chose Valley Forge for winter quarters."2 Others find that the generals made some contribution, but describe their advice vaguely. Wayne Bodle concludes that the choice was a product of the generals jointly: "In the final analysis, the decision to winter the army at Valley Forge was probably Washington's to make, with the advice of his most trusted aides and officers." John Ferling believes that Washington relied on some of his Pennsylvania officers to pick the exact

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site. Douglas Freeman credits Washington and his officers, without identifying what each contributed. Only one of Washington's advisors, the colorful Brigadier General "Mad" Anthony Wayne, is by some historians specifically assigned responsibility for advising Washington to camp at Valley Forge, because his residence was near Paoli, about five miles from the site. Wayne's most recent biographer, however, Paul David Nelson, notes that in fact Washington made his decision against the advice of Wayne, Nathanael Greene, and others; in his view no subordinate made any positive contribution.

Washington did not record precisely how and why he made the choice. As with many military decisions, the necessity for secrecy until the operation was complete prevents full documentation. But clearly there is more to be concluded on selecting the Valley Forge encampment than the contrary views of recent writers indicate. The correspondence of Washington and his generals is more revealing of the circumstances than has heretofore been recognized. If analyzed carefully, it tells how and why some generals proposed an encampment closely resembling the one later established at Valley Forge, shows how Washington and his advisors evaluated it among the alternative cantonment sites, and indicates Washington's probable reasons for his choice of winter quarters. Wayne Bodle has concluded that "[T]he full particulars of the process by which these questions were sorted out, defined, and answered will never be satisfactorily reconstructed," but students of the event might well be more satisfied with the following reconstruction than with the current conflicting accounts.

The commander-in-chief first posed to his generals the question of when and where to quarter the troops for the winter at a Council of War on October 29, 1777. In part, the question arose because it was time to

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3 Bodle, "Valley Forge," 104 Ferling, The First of Men, 220 Freeman, Washington, 4 562, 565
5 Bodle, "Valley Forge," 96, further notes that "the specific steps which brought the army from Whitemarsh to Valley Forge are tangled in a web of partial documentation, multiple and often conflicting perception and reportage, as well as the customary reliance which complex decision-making networks place on verbal persuasion when making difficult choices"
make that decision; within a few weeks cold, raw weather would be upon eastern Pennsylvania. In part, it arose because this council had voted not to attack the British in Philadelphia. With that decision made, Washington turned to the matter of a winter cantonment. He, his generals, Congress, and the Pennsylvania state government seem to have viewed quarters and a campaign as alternatives; all assumed that once the army went into winter quarters, it would not come out until spring. Minutes of the council record that the matter of quarters was deferred, probably because the British army was still active and the generals were uncertain where the army could encamp to its best advantage. The council at that time may have discussed locations, but not extensively. Washington then asked his generals to address the related question of what “measures can be adopted to cover the Country near the enemy and prevent their drawing supplies from it during the Winter?” Evidently he was quite concerned that, no matter what quartering arrangements were made, the army must maintain some capability of denying the British food, animals, and other supplies, which they would attempt to purchase or seize from the inhabitants of eastern Pennsylvania. There seems to have been no agreement on how to provide coverage, and this matter was also held in abeyance.6

Shortly after this council, at the beginning of November, the army took up a strong defensive position at Whitemarsh, a naturally protected hilly spot a few miles northwest of Germantown. Whitemarsh was excellently situated to serve as a base for covering the country against British foraging, for a possible offensive, and for reinforcing the Delaware forts. Here Washington waited to see what the British were planning, and left the question of quarters for later deliberation. During November Howe's forces secured their hold on Philadelphia by capturing the Delaware River forts and by constructing strong works north of the city. Washington, meanwhile, raised the question of attacking Philadelphia three times in November and early December, and each time the generals in the Council of War voted it down.7 What seems to have clinched Washington's

6 At a Council of War Held at Head Quarters at Whitpain, 29 October 1777, George Washington Papers, series 4, Library of Congress (hereafter, LC), microfilm reel 45 Reed, Campaign to Valley Forge, 314-15
7 Successive polls of the generals on Nov 8, 24-25, and Dec 3-4 opposed any attack At a Council of War, 8 November, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 The generals' written responses to the question of attacking are in ibid , reels 45, 46
determination not to attack was his reconnoitering of the British works on November 25. As he informed his officers, from the west bank of the Schuylkill "I had a full view of their left and found their works much stronger than I had reason to expect from the Accounts I had received." Because of his observations, Washington now was ready to settle the army in quarters. He probably calculated that it would remain quartered, undertaking no further offensive operations, until spring.8

A few days after Washington's observations of the British lines, on November 30, he summoned a Council of War to discuss winter quarters again. The question was not whether or when the army should take up quarters—all but Brigadier General Count Casimir Pulaski agreed it should, and quickly.9 The debate was over where the army should be quartered. On one point the generals were completely united: the army could not stay where it was. Whitemarsh had two serious disadvantages. First, as the deputy quartermaster, Colonel Henry Lutterloh, pointed out, wood and comforts were scarce. It could not provide warmth and shelter. Joseph Reed also noted that supplies were lacking on the east side of the Schuylkill near Philadelphia. Second, while Washington probably could not be surprised at Whitemarsh, he would have to react with full alert to every move of Howe's forces. As Major General the Marquis de Lafayette put it, in advocating a withdrawal to interior towns, "there we schall be quiete, there we can discipline and instruct our troops, we can be able to begin a early campaign, and we shall not fear to be carried into a winter campaign if it pleases General Howe." Seven other generals also noted the need to have quiet, not constant alarms.10

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8 Washington to General Nathanael Greene, Nov 25, 1777, ibid, reel 45 Reed, Campaign to Valley Forge, 367-68 The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799, ed John C Fitzpatrick, (39 vols , Washington, 1931-44), 10 202-5, contains a plan, dated Dec 25, 1777, for a surprise attack on Philadelphia while over half of Howe's force was out foraging Bodle, "Valley Forge," 169-76, has a thorough discussion of the seriousness of this plan
9 Pulaski to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45
10 Colonel Henry Lutterloh to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Joseph Reed to Washington, Dec 4, 1777, ibid, reel 46 Lafayette to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid , reel 45 Generals John Sullivan, Kalb, William Smallwood, William Woodford, George Weedon, Peter Muhlenberg, and James Irvine had much the same view as Lafayette John B B Trussell, Jr., Birthplace of an Army A Study of Valley Forge (Harnsburg, 1976), 12, states "Whitemarsh was too close to Philadelphia to be secure against sudden raids " Reed, Campaign to Valley Forge, 382, also believes it was too exposed to attack But Washington was alerted to Howe's advance on Dec 4, and the British attack was unsuccessful
Other than a tacit agreement to go elsewhere, this council came to no conclusion, and indeed the discussion seems to have confused some of the participants. They considered a welter of proposals. Washington did not overawe the discussion. He probably did not speak for any plan; if he had it seems likely that at least one general would have noted the commander’s proposal. No vote was taken, for Washington wanted, and probably needed, clarification. He ordered the generals to put their views on winter quarters in writing for his further study. After reading their replies, the commander summarized the results of his poll as identifying two possible sites: that “from Reading to Lancaster, inclusively, is the general sentiment, whilst Wilmington and its vicinity has powerful advocates.” Most other generals understood these two alternatives as Washington stated them. Some were unclear about what was suggested. Major Generals Greene and Lafayette stated the results somewhat differently than did Washington. Multiplicity of plans and misunderstanding of details made it difficult for the council—and Washington—to reach a conclusion. More significant is that Washington, Greene, and Lafayette omitted mention of the alternative that most closely resembled the site that was finally selected. It was overlooked because Washington thought he should consider those proposals that had the most support from the generals, and because he at first conceived of winter quarters as permanently constructed, relatively comfortable accommodations for the troops.\footnote{Washington to Joseph Reed, Dec 2, 1777, \textit{Writings}, 10 133 Greene to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, \textit{Washington Papers, series 4}, L.C, reel 45 Lafayette to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, \textit{ibid} Unfortunately for later historians, editor John C Fitzpatrick, in his edition of \textit{The Writings of George Washington}, 10 133 n, accepted Lafayette’s summary as accurately representing the totality of what was discussed in the council This has led many scholars to miss the arguments for a third alternative}

The alternative that Washington at first ignored was suggested in two forms, by Lord Stirling and by Brigadier General James Irvine. Stirling, among the most loyal and dependable of Washington’s generals, was its strongest proponent and stated it most clearly. He termed it “the Plan of putting the Army into Huts in the Township of Tryduffrin in the Great Valley.” What location did Stirling mean? His most recent biographer, Paul David Nelson, simply styles it the “Great Valley,” and does not explain the significance of what Stirling actually favored. The valley
is in present day Tredyffrin Township, adjacent to Valley Forge on the south and southwest. Irvine, a general in the Pennsylvania militia, suggested a very similar alternative, although placing it less precisely. He advocated hutting the army twenty to thirty miles from Philadelphia on the west side of the Schuylkill. He apparently meant some rural area close to the river, like the Great Valley or Valley Forge, which is eighteen miles from Philadelphia, though about twenty-four by road. More than likely he did not mean a more distant town, such as Downingtown, which was suggested by another general.  

Stirling and Irvine did not explain in detail how they formulated their proposals. There is no indication that Stirling had knowledge of the area before the American army marched into it, but his reports to Washington

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indicate that he had an eye for location. Since October, he had been advocating that the army take a defensive position west of the Schuylkill. Regardless of whether the British captured the Delaware river forts, or marched toward American supply bases in central Pennsylvania, or stayed in Philadelphia, across the river was the best defensive location. As he wrote to Washington in late October,

I would therefore be for passing the whole Army (except 1000 men) over the Schuylkill and taking post somewhere near Radnor Meeting House [about six miles southeast of Valley Forge], where we should be equally distant from all the fords on Schuylkill below the Valley forge, and by Vigilantly watching them on both sides of that River we might be sure of having such timely Notice of their Motions as would put it in our Power to attack them on their March with the greatest Advantages.

Stirling later advocated Tredyffrin because of its resources and because it was west of the river. Unlike New Jersey proprietor Stirling, Irvine was a native Philadelphia artisan who may have been familiar with the country in a general way, but his proposal was indefinite enough to suggest that it was not founded on knowledge of particular sites.13

Another possible source of information about encampment locations west of the Schuylkill was Brigadier General Peter Muhlenberg. General Knox, whose second choice was hutting thirty miles west of Philadelphia, attributed mention of a position in that area to him. Although Muhlenberg now resided in Virginia and commanded Virginia troops, he grew up in Trappe, about seven miles north of Valley Forge. Muhlenberg may have been pumped for information, but he did not recommend an encampment in that vicinity when Washington called for written responses.14 As noted above, General Wayne also lived in that region. At first he gave no thought to his home territory as possible quarters; in his report of December 1, 1777, he favored quartering in Wilmington. In his second, of December 4, he altered his view to suggest either Wilmington or hutting twenty miles west of Philadelphia. Unlike Stirling, Wayne mentioned no particular locality, such as Radnor or Tredyffrin. He did not specify the criterion

13 Stirling to Washington, Oct 29, 1777, ibid. For Irvine's background, Dictionary of American Biography (hereafter, DAB), s.v. Irvine, James
14 Knox to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45. Muhlenberg to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid. For Muhlenberg's background, DAB, s.v. Muhlenberg, John Peter Gabriel
that was so important to Stirling and to Irvine—that the encampment be west of the Schuylkill.\textsuperscript{15}

Stirling and Irvine were primarily concerned with strategic and logistic considerations in recommending the hutting alternative. Irvine does not appear very anxious for the eastern part of his native state to be vigorously defended by major operations. He did not share the view of several other Pennsylvania generals and many of the state’s civilian leaders: that the army should remain in position for offensive action. In November he had voted against an attack on Philadelphia, and in his letter to Washington (responding to the commanding general’s December 3 request for opinions on a winter campaign) he explained further that

> when I proposed hutting the army it was not so much with a view of annoying the enemy in their present possessions as to prevent them from ravaging the country: and to give our officers a better opportunity of attending to the discipline of the troops than they could possibly have were they dispersed in extensive cantonments.

Irvine’s letter of December 1 emphasized that this quartering site was a strong defensive position, and “wood is plenty,” in contrast to the chief deficiency of Whitemarsh. He humbly noted to Washington that he was inexperienced in war, but his suggestion in this instance seems to reflect solid military thinking, based on careful appraisal of the needs of the army.\textsuperscript{16}

Stirling, although from New Jersey, did not show concern about how his plan would affect British operations there. From west of the Schuylkill, Washington could march back to northern New Jersey and New York, if necessary, but southern New Jersey could not in any case be defended. His main argument for the plan was its strategic location. In support of it he wrote

> I must acknowledge it is a situation well Calculated for Covering Chester & Lancaster Counties, and for Checking any Attempts the Enemy may design against Maryland & the Lower Counties on the one side and a Great part of the Country between the Schuylkill and Delaware on the other, the Communication with Jersey and the Northern States will be preserved, the

\textsuperscript{15} Wayne to Washington, Dec. 1, 4, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reels 45, 46.

\textsuperscript{16} Irvine to Washington, Dec. 4, Dec. 1, Nov. 25, 1777, ibid., reels 46, 45.
Encampment will be easily guarded as there is but one way to approach it from Philadelphia.

As well, the area was reputed to be a “fine and rich country,” thus affording supplies. Stirling and Irvine showed that the Valley Forge-Tredyffrin-Radnor area was defensible; it was positioned so that the army could not be cut off; it commanded the approaches to central and southeast Pennsylvania; it enabled the American army to cover the country against British foragers; it possessed needed resources, particularly wood for hutting and warmth; it allowed for a concentrated encampment that would afford the opportunity for disciplining the troops; and, consequently, it had important military advantages not better found in such combination in the cantonments proposed by the other generals.

Despite the substantial arguments for this alternative, the other generals were lukewarm or cool toward it. Brigadier General William Maxwell, from New Jersey, repeated Irvine’s suggestion as his second choice, perhaps because he shared Stirling’s view that the west-of-Schuykill encampment would retain communication with the northern part of his home state. Generals Wayne and Knox, who each suggested hutting west of Philadelphia but not specifically west of the Schuylkill, showed no appreciation of the defensive and logistic advantages of Stirling’s and Irvine’s proposals.

Only two other generals noted their agreement with Irvine’s point that one major aim of winter quarters should be to drill and discipline the soldiers. Greene feared that if the army quartered too far from the field, “Officers of all ranks will be desirous of visiting their friends—the men will be left without order, without government—and ten to one but the men will be more unhealthy in the spring than they now are, and much worse disciplined.” Brigadier General William Smallwood saw maintaining discipline as the only advantage of “the valley in Hutts.” Historians have argued that improved military discipline was one of the major outcomes of quartering at Valley Forge, but most generals ignored this benefit when hutting the army in one large encampment was under discussion.

17 Stirling to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid, reel 45
18 Maxwell to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Knox to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid, reel 46 Wayne to Washington, Dec 4, 1777, ibid, reel 46
19 Greene to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid, reel 45 Smallwood to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid
It is possible that Washington, the two major generals who also ignored these proposals, and several others of the Council of War did not fully comprehend what was being suggested. Four generals—Major General John Sullivan, and Brigadier Generals Smallwood, Maxwell, and Muhlenberg—gave indication that they understood this alternative, but several others apparently did not. Stirling was an impetuous general, often too eager to attack, so his colleagues may have believed that this third alternative meant not going into winter quarters at all, but essentially remaining ready for combat. Even though Stirling and Irvine clearly stated that the army should retire a safe distance from the field of conflict, Brigadier General George Weedon thought the proposal was for hutting ten to fifteen miles from the city for offensive purposes, and Brigadier General John Cadwalader understood it to be for hutting in the field of operations. With all this confusion and misstatement, it is understandable how Washington neglected to mention the alternative of hutting west of the Schuylkill.

Whatever the generals comprehended about the plan, they undoubtedly understood its principal and most controversial feature: hutting in the wilderness. Washington, and the large majority of generals who favored the other two proposals, anticipated quartering the men, at least in some large proportion, in permanent structures that provided good shelter. The Stirling and Irvine proposals called for the men to live entirely in huts made of logs, branches, and thatch. Washington never declared himself on using huts, but his concern about the lack of good housing in an unsettled area can be deduced from his statements. He wrote only of the town cantonments, at Wilmington or Lancaster-Reading, as alternatives. On announcing the move to winter quarters, December 17, he made special effort to reassure the troops that they would be warm and dry in huts at the encampment, and that he would share their suffering (though not in a hut, it turned out). Generals Sullivan and Smallwood claimed that huts were unhealthy. Lafayette objected to any location other than a settled area. The only sites eligible for consideration by the commander and most of his advisors were those offering a substantial number of permanent shelters.

21 Washington, General Orders, Dec 17, 1777, Writings, 10 167-68 Sullivan to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45, Smallwood to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Lafayette to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid
Hutting was, however, by no means out of the question for a number of subordinate generals. Besides the four—Stirling, Irvine, Major General John Armstrong, and Cadwalader—who favored a hutting encampment, Major General Kalb and Brigadier Generals Wayne, Knox, Varnum, William Woodford, and James Potter acknowledged that some number of huts would be necessary in either the Wilmington or the Lancaster-Reading cantonments to quarter all the 11,000 troops. The reasons were that Wilmington was a small town—of 1,200-2,000 inhabitants—and the towns in the Pennsylvania backcountry were crowded with refugees from Philadelphia and other eastern districts. These included Congress, now having taken refuge in York, and the Pennsylvania state government, ensconced in Lancaster. The plan for cantonment at Lancaster and Reading was always spoken of as quartering the army in and between the two towns in available buildings or, if necessary, in huts.\(^{22}\)

In debating the relative merits of quartering in Wilmington versus cantonment at Lancaster and Reading, the generals emphasized the disadvantage of having to build huts to supplement permanent shelter in both of these locations. They did not agree on which of the two would require the most hutting. General Wayne warned that the Lancaster-Reading position had cover for only one-third of the army. Even though he thought Wilmington afforded more permanent shelters, Wayne acknowledged that some hutting would be necessary there as well. Advocates of the Lancaster-Reading cantonment could not claim that Wilmington would require more hutting than their choice. Stirling, defending hutting at Tredyffrin, argued that Wilmington would require hutting to the same extent as claimed by Wayne the backcountry would: "the buildings in & about that place are not Capable of receiving above one third part of the Army."\(^{23}\)

That numerous generals were willing to accept at least some hutting meant that none of the alternatives was completely unacceptable on principle. There was no absolute difference in quality of shelter among the alternatives; none possessed ideal housing conditions. The availability

\(^{22}\) Armstrong to Washington, Dec 4, 1777, ibid, reel 46, Cadwalader to Washington, Dec 3, 1777, ibid For population figures for Wilmington, John A Munroe, *Colonial Delaware A History* (Millwood, N Y , 1978), 160 For housing the army in huts in Lancaster-Reading, Kalb to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45, Brigadier General William Woodford to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid

\(^{23}\) Wayne to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Stirling to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid
of permanent structures was one of several imperfect circumstances to be considered in picking winter quarters, not a sine qua non.

Washington, in selecting the location for cantonment, could easily have decided, as he had numerous times before, that the view receiving the largest number of votes from his generals should prevail. The lack of consensus in this instance probably surprised and certainly disturbed the commander-in-chief. After studying the written replies, he realized that the choice was extremely difficult, finding, as he wrote to Joseph Reed on December 2, “so many and such capital objections to each mode proposed, that I am exceedingly embarrassed, not only by the advice given me, but in my own judgment.” Washington did not reveal in his letters his own judgment at this point, but it very likely corresponded with the “general sentiment.” He overstated the strength of support for the Lancaster-Reading alternative, probably because it was his preference. This proposal received a plurality of nine votes, two more than did Wilmington. Three of the six major generals favored it. Possibly Washington was influenced by three of the four Virginia generals who voted for it. It appeared at first to offer more comfort for the troops, which for Washington, by all indications, was a major concern. Of the nine generals who favored the alternative most remote from Philadelphia, four stated that the army needed a lengthy rest and a resupply interval away from the British. General Kalb asserted that the army needed the “tranquility & safety” of Lancaster and Reading, and General Muhlenberg opposed quartering anywhere near the British lines. They did not believe that Howe would let them be quiet if they were some twenty to thirty miles away, nor that the army would be completely secure from a strong offensive; at sixty or so miles away they would be much safer. Yet the “capital objections,” coming from trusted subordinates Greene and Stirling, could not be ignored. The commander-in-chief was in a difficult quandary.

Washington hoped that Reed, his former secretary and adjutant, and now Pennsylvania delegate to Congress, could advise him more sagaciously than had his generals about where to canton the troops. He must

24 Washington to Joseph Reed, Dec 2, 1777, Writings, 10 133
25 Reed, Campaign to Valley Forge, 369, believes that Washington disliked the Lancaster-Reading alternative. Kalb to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 Muhlenberg to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid
have been disappointed when Reed turned out to be of little assistance directly. His former aide advocated scattering troops throughout southeastern Pennsylvania—from Wilmington to Downingtown, with a few west of the Schuylkill and the militia east to the Delaware. Reed’s proposal probably appeared to Washington at the time as a plan that would mainly serve to answer the political demands of Pennsylvanians for extensive defense of the region immediately surrounding Philadelphia.\footnote{Reed to Washington, Dec 4, 1777, ibid., reel 46 Pennsylvania militia general John Armstrong had made almost the same suggestion Armstrong to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid., reel 45.}

Although Reed did not suggest anything practical, at least he helped lead Washington toward eliminating one alternative—cantonment in the Reading-Lancaster area. Reed’s reply reinforced the criticisms of quartering in the backcountry towns that Washington had already encountered. The two objections were, first, that Lancaster and Reading were greatly overpopulated with refugees from eastern Pennsylvania, and second, that the troops would be too distant from Philadelphia and too scattered to protect the eastern part of Pennsylvania from British foragers. The Pennsylvania government and Congress called Washington’s attention to the disadvantages of quartering in the interior towns. The state’s viewpoint was represented in camp by Generals Armstrong and Cadwalader. Armstrong at first favored a Wilmington-Downingtown cantonment, as did Reed, but in a few days, on December 4, he changed his mind and advised hutting in the field, as Cadwalader also advocated. Congress appointed a committee that arrived at Whitemarsh on December 3, while Washington and his generals were discussing the site for winter quarters. The committee’s task was to confer with Washington on attacking the British and on quartering the troops. Congress and the committee agreed with the Pennsylvania government that eastern Pennsylvania should not be left uncovered.\footnote{Armstrong to Washington, Dec 1, 4, 1777, ibid., reels 45, 46 Cadwalader to Washington, Dec 3, 1777, ibid., reel 46 Committee at Headquarters to George Washington, December 10, 1777, Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789, ed Paul H Smith, (19 vols to date, Washington, 1976-), 8 400.}

Without doubt Washington was under considerable political pressure not to quarter the troops in Lancaster and Reading. Later, writing to the President of Pennsylvania’s Supreme Executive Council in early March 1778, he argued that the Pennsylvania government had influenced
the choice of the encampment site and should therefore make every effort to provide for the army:

The Army seems to have a peculiar Claim to the Exertions of the Gentlemen of this State to make its present situation as convenient as possible as it was greatly owing to their Apprehensions and Anxieties expressed in a Memorial to Congress that the present position was had.

In actuality, Washington revised the history of this Pennsylvania memorial to Congress to support his request for further material support from the state for the troops at Valley Forge. He had already decided on the site for winter quarters when the memorial reached Congress on December 17, the same day that the army set out for Valley Forge. The memorial called on the army to remain in the field to fight a winter campaign, not quarter twenty miles away; it was bluster, not strategy. Military necessity was a stronger reason to reject the Lancaster-Reading cantonment than were the demands of the governments, but the political arguments, which in part coincided with military needs, spurred Washington to review the military arguments against that alternative.

Washington's generals had already recorded their opposition to crowding in on the refugees in the backcountry. Major Generals Greene, Kalb, and Stirling, and Brigadier Generals Knox, Woodford, Varnum, Wayne, and Cadwalader, the latter two from Pennsylvania, raised that issue in replying to Washington on December 1 and December 4. Quartering soldiers in the same towns that were already overflowing with displaced Pennsylvanians would make everyone miserable. Many troops would be in crude huts, and all would compete with civilians for scarce space and resources. Stirling argued that if the troops were to be cantoned far from Philadelphia, they would be more comfortable in deserted towns in New Jersey. The generals here raised essentially a military objection, relating to the rest, recuperation, and convenient deployment of the troops in such winter quarters. Later, in his General Orders of December 17, Washington asserted that it was to spare the refugees further suffering that Lancaster and Reading were rejected as quarters, but the real reason was that the troops could be neither comfortably nor compactly housed.

in such an overcrowded locale. The value of the Lancaster-Reading encampment was primarily the shelter it supposedly offered; when the quality of shelter was cast in doubt, when it became evident upon further consideration that a large number of troops would be spread about in huts, it appeared a much less worthwhile alternative.

Another disadvantage to the Lancaster-Reading site also loomed large. It offered the least opposition to British foraging expeditions. Defensive coverage was important to Washington: he had raised the question of how to cover the country at the October 29 Council of War. General Knox, in advocating quarters at Lancaster and Reading, advised that detachments be continually posted out. The other generals who favored the Lancaster-Reading cantonment were, evidently, not greatly concerned about coverage of the area. But eight generals, including four from Pennsylvania—Greene, Stirling, Smallwood, and Louis Lebeque Duportail (Washington’s chief French engineer)—argued that the army needed to be quartered closer to Philadelphia to provide adequate defense. Although this concern responded to Pennsylvania’s political agenda—protecting citizens’ property and maintaining their allegiance—since October Washington and other generals had placed greater emphasis on the military importance of both supplying the American forces and denying supplies to the British. Political demands sparked further consideration, but military needs determined the rejection of the Lancaster-Reading cantonment. Washington concluded that the plurality of generals was wrong, that this alternative was militarily unsuitable. The army could not be accommodated uncomfortably and remote from British marauders.

Now that Washington deemed unsatisfactory the alternative that had the most support from his Council of War (and which he probably had at first favored), where then to canton the army? Other than opposing the quartering of the troops in the backcountry towns, neither the state nor the Congress commented on the alternative sites for winter quarters. The congressional committee that visited the Whitemarsh camp reported on December 10 to Congress:

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29 Saling to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 Washington, General Orders, December 17, 1777, Writings, 10 167-68
30 Knox to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 For examples of concerns about defense, Cadwalader to Washington, Dec 3, 1777, ibid, reel 46, Stirling to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid, reel 45
That until sufficient reinforcements can be obtained such a Post should be taken by the Army as will be most likely to aggrive the Enemy, afford supplies of provision, Wood, Water, and Forage, be secure from a surprize, and best calculated for covering the Country from the Ravages of the Enemy, and prevent their collecting Recruits and supplies for their Army; as well as afford comfortable Quarters for the Officers and Soldiers.

The recommendations of the congressional committee supported Washington's view by advising action based on military needs, but they were otherwise unhelpful. Military needs could be interpreted to mean Wilmington, Tredyffrin, west or east of the Schuylkill, or even northeast to Easton. Members of Congress and state officials offered only vague suggestions about encampment, but they could not settle the vexing question of precisely where to quarter.  

Wilmington was the choice of almost as many generals (seven) as favored the backcountry cantonment. They saw the small city, twenty-five miles south of Philadelphia, as the best quartering site that was also a defensive post. Generals Greene, Smallwood, Cadwalader, and Duportail asserted that the American army could best defend southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland from this location, as well as harass Howe's foragers. The arguments against Wilmington, however, were fervent, strong, and telling. General Sullivan feared that at Wilmington a British force coming down the river could easily surprise the Americans. Howe could move up the Schuylkill toward the American supply stores, drawing Washington out of quarters. Stirling argued that American forces at Wilmington could find themselves under grave threat. The British could cut them off by moving into Chester county: "our Army would have no Retreat, we should be reduced to the Necessity of fighting them, with the Delaware and two Other Impassable Waters on our flanks and Rear." Another problem for the defense of an encampment at Wilmington was that the troops would be spread out, as they

31 Committee at Headquarters to George Washington, December 10, 1777, Letters of Delegates to Congress, 8 400 Journals of the Continental Congress, Dec 16, 1777, 9 1031
32 Greene to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 Smallwood to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Duportail to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Cadwalader to Washington, Dec 3, 1777, ibid , reel 46
33 Sullivan to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid , reel 45 Stirling to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Also generally agreeing with these criticisms were Kalb to Washington, Dec 3, 1777, ibid , reel 46, and Muhlenberg to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid , reel 45
would between Lancaster and Reading. General Weedon asserted that
the troops could not be accommodated compactly at Wilmington, and
"Cantoning by Detachment is a dangerous experiment."  

Washington apparently agreed that Wilmington was not safe. He had
not previously thought of Wilmington as a place for the winter canton-
ment. He appears to have believed the British would soon invest it, for
at the end of October, when the generals were first discussing the subject
of winter quarters, the commander-in-chief ordered the flour mills around
Wilmington and Chester dismantled to prevent the British from using
them. To Washington's mind Wilmington was a threatened area, not
one secure for quarters.  

His orders of December 17, to march to the
campment that turned out to be Valley Forge, explained why the
army would not go to Lancaster, but never mentioned the Wilmington
alternative. When, on December 19, nearly all the army was on the march
to Valley Forge, he reluctantly sent General Smallwood with two brigades
to Wilmington to provide defense against small-scale maneuvers down
the river. He greatly feared, as General Sullivan had warned, that the
British might surprise this detachment.  

Nor did Washington care for the plans to divide the bulk of the army
and post detachments in an arc around Philadelphia. Besides Reed,
Generals Armstrong and Varnum had suggested this alternative.  

No

other generals seemed to care for this method of cantonment, and it is
very unlikely that Washington entertained the idea at all. As he wrote
later to Henry Laurens, if the troops were cantoned "divided and distant
from each other, then there was a probability of their being cut off, and
little prospect of their giving security to any part."  

His military judgment
on this alternative seems indisputable.

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34 Weedon to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid Cadwalader to Washington, Dec 3, 1777,
ibid, reel 46, anticipated that the troops would be scattered between the town and the nearby
mills at Brandywine
35 Washington to General James Potter, Oct 31, 1777, ibid, reel 45 Potter reported, Nov
3, 1777, ibid, that he sent out 150 men to do this, but two days later further reported to
Washington, Nov 5, 1777, ibid, that the officer in charge should be court marshalled for failure
to disable the mills
36 Washington, General Orders, December 17, 1777, Writings, 10 167-68 Washington to the
President of Congress [Henry Laurens], Dec 22, 1777, ibid, 10 187
37 Armstrong to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, Washington Papers, series 4, LC, reel 45 Varnum
to Washington, Dec 1, 1777, ibid
38 Washington to the President of Congress [Henry Laurens], Dec 22, 1777, Writings, 10 187
Sometime between December 8 and December 11, when the army left Whitemarsh to cross to the west side of the Schuylkill, Washington decided not to quarter in either Lancaster-Reading or Wilmington. He had been compelled to delay his decision when Howe, on December 4, advanced on Whitemarsh. Howe failed to surprise Washington, and he could not penetrate the strong American position nor get around the flank. Four days later, after some skirmishing, the British withdrew to Philadelphia. One ironic consequence of this maneuver was the capture of General Irvine in a Chestnut Hill skirmish. He, therefore, failed to see the army march off toward the encampment area that he had advocated.39 Washington made his decision to quarter the army in a location closely resembling the one proposed by Irvine probably shortly after Howe had broken off his attack. Little is known directly about his formulation of the decision. Washington told few or none of his plans to avoid having them revealed to the British. Washington's explanations to his men and to Congress, on December 17 and 22, indicate that he had finally thought through the welter of conflicting advice, evaluated the competing arguments, and had come to see clearly what he had to do: to move west of the Schuylkill to spend the winter in a cantonment of huts in the most strategically placed location. He did not explicitly state that he was adopting the plans of Stirling and Irvine, but it seems reasonable to assume that he had come back to their suggestions, now recognizing their merit when compared to the Lancaster-Reading and Wilmington alternatives.

The troops moved out of Whitemarsh on December 11, camping west of the river at the Gulph (West Conshohocken) on the thirteenth. This maneuver shows that Washington had firmly decided on a hutting encampment west of the Schuylkill; he was not interested in Wilmington, and he would not cross the river at that point to go west to Reading and Lancaster. The sick went directly from Whitemarsh to the hospital in Reading.40 Washington was probably awaiting scouting reports on camp

39 Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 370-80, is the most thorough account of the attack.
40 Both John B B Trussell, Jr., *Birthplace of an Army: A Study of the Valley Forge Encampment* (Harrisburg, 1976), 12-13, and Reed, *Campaign to Valley Forge*, 384, 393-94, believe that Washington was not set on hutting west of the Schuylkill. Trussell implies that Washington was still considering the other alternatives at the Gulph, Reed thinks that political pressure kept Washington from marching elsewhere.
locations along the Schuylkill and perhaps at Tredyffrin and Radnor, all within a short march of the Gulph. General Wayne assisted in confirming the Valley Forge site as acceptable. On December 17 the commander-in-chief, now certain of his destination, announced in general orders that the troops would hut in the neighborhood of the Gulph, but to preserve secrecy the exact spot was not revealed. \(^{41}\) Two days later the troops arrived at Valley Forge to commence a new era in American military history and mythology.

Washington termed his decision a "choice of difficulties." In the sense that he could not find his army any encampment offering complete permanent shelter and comfort, all alternatives were difficult. But there were important positive and negative features to the alternatives which, when carefully assessed, show that the one chosen was less difficult than the others. Sorting through these involved a rational process of elimination. He had always been concerned with covering the country, and this became more important in his consideration as the probability of comfortable quarters for most of the men faded. Dividing the army into small parts would dangerously weaken it. \(^{42}\) Valley Forge had its disadvantages, but it turned out to have important positive features—features that Generals Stirling and Irvine had identified when they separately proposed an encampment west of the Schuylkill. It could not be readily attacked; its high ground actually made it a better location than the Tredyffrin valley or Radnor in this respect. Detachments could be sent out to drive off British foragers. Virtually the whole army could be drilled, an important feature of Irvine's encampment proposal. Washington had hoped that proximity to the river would facilitate supplying the encampment from north, south, and west. Supplies were not readily forthcoming down the Schuylkill or by any other route, but this was not peculiar to Valley Forge. No matter where Washington had quartered the army, it would have suffered from lack of supplies. The brigades that he sent to Wilmington under General Smallwood were no better fed or equipped than those at Valley Forge, and they suffered considerable desertion. \(^{43}\)

\(^{41}\) Washington, General Orders, December 17, 1777, Writings, 10 168 Nelson, Anthony Wayne, 67

\(^{42}\) Washington, General Orders, December 17, 1777, Writings, 10 167-68, Washington to the President of Congress [Henry Laurens], Dec 22, 1777, ibid, 10 187

\(^{43}\) That supplies ran short at Valley Forge was not due to geography or the proximity of the British R Arthur Bowler, "Logistics and Operations in the American Revolution," Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War Selected Essays, ed Don Higginbotham (Westport, 1978), 55, notes the general problem "What is seldom realized, however, is that the difficulties experienced
The Council of War system of decision making utilized by Washington worked as it should have in this instance. The question of winter quarters was a hard test for such a system, for there was no simple correct answer. Washington allowed his generals free voice, and from a cacophony he finally was able to select a plan for cantonment that probably was the best given the circumstances. This selection was hardly immune to the strong political pressures of governments looking out for the safety and protection of civilians, but Washington, rather than being pushed into a less satisfactory encampment, saw that political demands and military necessity largely coincided in selecting winter quarters. At the same time, he ignored the remonstrance of the Pennsylvania government that condemned his refusal to attack Philadelphia, because that remonstrance contradicted his military judgment. It is not certain that Washington recognized completely how the decision-making process had worked, since he never explained it. Had he stopped to evaluate what had happened, he would have concluded that open debate, argument, and counter-argument, with everyone encouraged to contribute, permitted proposals, which at first glance seemed unacceptable, to be reevaluated more carefully and accepted on their merits. The Stirling and Irvine proposals, at first ignored, looked far different after thorough consideration. Congress's direction to Washington to seek advice from his generals was not merely a device designed to curtail the power of the commander-in-chief. It was a sound way of making decisions.

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at Valley Forge were repeated at every winter encampment of the war except that of 1775-76 and were the result not of momentary failings but of fundamental problems arising, in part, from the immature structure of the American government, economy, and society " On supplying the army at Valley Forge, also see E Wayne Carp, To Starve the Army at Pleasure Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill, 1984), 44-45 For Wilmington, Bodle, "Valley Forge," 225, 356