Republican Ideology and Wartime Reality: Thomas Mifflin's Struggle as the First Quartermaster General of the Continental Army, 1775–1778

On August 14, 1775, George Washington appointed Thomas Mifflin to the post of quartermaster general of the Continental army. At the time of his appointment Mifflin was perceived to be a man of ability and republican virtue. Ironically, when he left office in early March of 1778, in the wake of the supply debacle at Valley Forge the preceding winter, he faced a congressional inquiry and stood accused of negligence, incompetence, and corruption. Perhaps the words of Mifflin’s successor as quartermaster general, Nathanael Greene, may be employed to evaluate the former’s competence and honesty while in office: “I cannot help

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but think agents employed [in the quartermaster department] are nearly in
the same predicament that Lord Chesterfield says ministers of the state are.
They are not so good as they should be, and by no means as bad as they are
thought to be. A charge against the quartermaster-general is most like the
cry of a mad dog in England. Every one joins in the cry, and lends their
assistance to pelt him to death. Mifflin’s conduct as quartermaster general,
although not always exemplary, did not deserve censure. The public
accusations and the congressional inquiry resulted from the conduct of his
unsupervised agents, a generalized paranoia of corruption, and a widespread
sense of frustration with the faltering war effort. They did not result from
credible evidence of misconduct.

Mifflin’s unhappy tenure in the office of quartermaster general yields an
intriguing example of the conflict between the republican beliefs held by
many Americans when they took up arms in 1775 and the reality of
American society, which fell far short of its ideological goals. Unlike most
of those employed in supplying the Continental army, Mifflin saw himself
as a republican and he attempted to act on his beliefs. Working within a
largely unregulated and inherently unRepublican system that allowed for, if
not expected, merchants in the employ of the government to mix private and
public trade, Mifflin failed his ideology. Despite his shortcomings, he was
able to discipline his activities while quartermaster general by continuing to
strive for republican ideals. Consequently, this essay argues that Mifflin’s
attempt to reconcile the necessities of supplying the army while maintaining
his republican ideology was an all but impossible task. In the midst of the
widespread profiteering and common corruption that permeated the
Continental army’s supply echelon, Mifflin rarely engaged in profiteering
and never in outright corruption. Thomas Mifflin’s conduct while

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2 Nathanael Greene to Henry Merchant, Oct 15, 1788 [1778] The Papers of Nathanael Greene (10
was responding to a notice of corruption in his department, not defending Mifflin of whom Greene was
extremely critical. The quotation, however, summarizes Mifflin’s career as quartermaster general more
so than it does Greene’s.

3 The degree of corruption among supply officers is a point of contention among historians.
Traditionally, scholars have emphasized the corruption within the supply departments of the Continental
army. This argument is perhaps best presented by E. James Ferguson’s Power of the Purse A History of
American Public Finance, 1776-1790 (Chapel Hill, N C, 1961). Ferguson argues that the unregulated
nature of the supply departments resulted in a large amount of self-interest and corruption. Ferguson’s
argument underwent fundamental revision with the publication of E. Wayne Carp’s To Starve the Army
quartermaster general was "by no means as bad as [it was] thought to be."

Mifflin was born into a wealthy Quaker merchant family in January 1744. He received the benefits of a practical education in his home city, and at the age of sixteen graduated from the College of Philadelphia. While pursuing his intended mercantile career, Mifflin's talents and social prominence drew him to city politics. Aided by a pleasant disposition, intense passion, and a talent for oration, Mifflin quickly became a prominent local politician. From 1772 through 1775 he served as the city's representative in the provincial assembly. Prior to his election to the assembly, and throughout his tenure in that body, Mifflin gained the reputation of a patriotic radical. He opposed the Stamp Act, advocated nonimportation agreements, renounced the Tea Act, and proved instrumental in stirring Pennsylvania's opposition to the Intolerable Acts. While serving as president of the Continental Congress and a member of the Constitutional Convention, Mifflin played a prominent role in national politics during the formative closing decades of the eighteenth century. In addition to his contributions to the development of the federal government, Mifflin remained an enduring feature of Pennsylvania politics. Instrumental in the 1790 revision of the 1776 constitution, Mifflin served as the commonwealth's first governor for three consecutive terms. Upon the conclusion of his final term as governor, Mifflin again won a seat in the assembly. But mismanagement of the governor's

at Pleasure Continental Administration and American Political Culture, 1775–1783 (Chapel Hill, N C , 1984) Carp, utilizing a revised understanding of political culture and republicanism largely influenced by Gordon Wood's Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787 (New York, 1969), argues that the majority of the supply officers were altruistic public servants. Unfortunately scapegoats of a political culture that feared corruption and explained its failures in the terms of conspiracy theories, the supply officers bore the brunt of the failings of a rigorous public doctrine of accountability, self-interested farmers, unprincipled speculators, and an inexperienced Congress. Although Carp's interpretation has received mixed reviews, Thomas Doerflinger's A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia (Chapel Hill, N C , 1986) adopts Carp's argument verbatim, see "Staff Officers," 223–36. In pursuing his thesis, Carp does well in detailing the difficulties resulting from the corruption and self-interest of farmers, private merchants, and speculators. His argument is less solid, however, in proving the "altruism" of the supply officers. Of course it is extremely difficult to determine which officers were corrupt, which were self-interested, and which were honest republican public servants. To generalize from the sparse evidence of individual corruption and/or altruism is a daunting task and certainly not the purpose of this essay. However, evidence uncovered while investigating Mifflin's conduct reveals an image significantly different than Carp's portrayal. Of the supply officers associated with Thomas Mifflin (and for whom there is evidence of their activities) most were driven by self-interest, not republican disinterest, and a significant proportion were outright corrupt. For specific examples of self-interest and corruption among Mifflin's fellow staff officers see below, note 26.
personal affairs depleted his financial resources in his last years of life. Thomas Mifflin died in 1800, still a member of the assembly, but penniless and pursued by creditors.  

Mifflin’s political career was highly successful and in that realm he deserves to be remembered as one of America’s prominent revolutionary republicans. However, in his military career as a high-ranking staff officer, which spanned only the first half of the Revolutionary War, he was far less successful and today more often remembered as a failure. In addition to the undeserved accusations stemming from his conduct as quartermaster general, Mifflin also engaged in a dialogue that, when brought to the public view in 1778, was misconstrued as a plot to replace General Washington as commander in chief of the Continental army. His involvement in the so-called “Conway Cabal,” remains Mifflin’s most dubious historical claim. It is, however, the difficulties stemming from his tenure as quartermaster general of the Continental army, a post he held from August 1775 through March 1778 and the focus of this study, that yields insight into revolutionary America’s political culture and the reality of its republican ideology in practice.

Republican ideology and eighteenth-century concepts of honor, character, and concern for reputation dictated Mifflin’s conduct while he was quartermaster general. Republicanism, “a political vision that had traveled from its invention in ancient Rome to Renaissance Italy and then into the political language of the eighteenth-century English Whig opposition” revolved around three related concepts: benevolence, disinterest, and civic

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5 Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, 116–39
virtue. According to Charles Royster's simplified explanation of revolutionary-era benevolence, "we should think of unselfish love, of active concern for others, [and] of eager work for the welfare of others." Closely related to benevolence, the concept of disinterest maintained that a person gain nothing from an act undertaken for the public good. Civic virtue, although an increasingly vague term due to overuse, combined benevolence and disinterest. To be virtuous meant to display restraint, to sacrifice private advantage for the public good, and to undertake all public acts for the betterment of the whole community. Additionally, a paranoid fear of corruption, conspiracy, and a resulting insistence on holding public officials strictly accountable for their actions complicated republican political culture.  

If, as countless historians have argued, republicanism provided the driving theoretical force behind the American Revolution, it dominated the actions of eighteenth-century Americans far less than it did the rhetoric of America's political leaders. The republican notion of disinterest became a case in point for Mifflin and others who involved themselves in supplying the Continental army. Among this group, a more practical understanding of what constituted legitimate economic relationships between private and public interest emerged and coexisted with republicanism. Many Americans, and perhaps most merchants, came to believe that private interest could be advanced while concurrently serving the public good. Indeed, men such as John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and Robert Morris acknowledged that the activity of self-interested "patriot-merchants" was perhaps necessary and legitimate in advancing the cause. Congress, however, never accepted self-interest as a legitimate motive. The republican concept of disinterest and the reality of economic-based self-interest collided as the military conflict forced revolutionary America to confront the fundamental difference between theory and reality. Thomas Mifflin found himself in the middle of the ensuing controversy.  

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Nowhere can this conflict be better studied than in the haphazard development of the Continental army's supply departments and Congress's attempted regulation of its employed agents. Supply agents, with few exceptions, embraced the patriot-merchant code of proper conduct which accepted advancing one's private fortune while in the government's employ. Many staff officers sold private goods from the same locations from which they conducted government business, bought from companies in which they held interests, and employed their own vessels and wagons to transport government supplies. Perhaps the most infamous example of this unrepublican behavior is illustrated in the private activities of Nathanael Greene, Mifflin's replacement as quartermaster general. Greene purchased goods for the army directly from his own company, masked his private mercantile correspondence in code to keep his activities concealed, and invested heavily in privateering missions.8

Clearly, Congress did not see the agents' activities as legitimate. Not only were these activities unrepublican, they provided the perfect circumstances for corruption to flourish, circumstances of which many in the employ of the government took advantage. Consequently, Congress consistently attempted to curtail the activities of its agents. In January 1778 it sent a committee to Valley Forge to investigate allegations of wrongdoing in the supply departments. The following February it recommended that state executives investigate the conduct of agents operating in their districts. Then in the summer of 1779, with only a single dissenting vote, Congress passed its most encompassing resolve regarding the proper relationship between the private and public interests of its servants. On July 9, 1779, Congress resolved that state executives should begin investigating agents and dismiss any found guilty of misconduct. It also ordered agents employed in the supply departments to keep clear and concise records. More importantly Congress declared: "That no Quarter Master, Assistant or Deputy quarter Master, or Commissary, shall keep, own or be in any manner whatever interested in any boat, shallop, vessel, waggon or cart, or in any waggon horse or Cart horse engaged in any manner in the transportation of public supplies of any kind under the pain of being immediately on discovery, discharged with infamy and of forfeiting all his pay during the whole time of his being in

employment." Further, Congress required that all supply agents subscribe to an oath requiring them to report any known or suspected abuse or fraud and that agents "will not . . . engage in or carry on any kind of trade or traffic whatever, nor make or endeavor to make directly or indirectly any other or greater emolument profit or advantage whatever by the said Office, or by virtue or under cover of the powers vested in him for discharge of it, or of the opportunities thereby afforded him, than are or shall be allowed to him by the United States, or by the State, in which he is employed." Although not clearly articulated until over a year after Mifflin had left the quartermaster department, Congress spelled out in concise language that it did not accept the activities of self-interested supply agents. Years before, Thomas Mifflin came to the same conclusion. He rejected the self-interest argument and attempted to uphold a more strictly republican dichotomy: private interest or public good.

Just as important as republicanism were Mifflin's concepts of honor, character, reputation, and fame. Eighteenth-century men of Mifflin's status guarded their reputations above all else. Indeed, maintaining honor, high character, and a sound reputation influenced every action taken by members of the gentry. This concern for honor was part of a social structure that the results of the American Revolution surely challenged, but for Mifflin and his contemporaries it remained central to their existence. Furthermore, the emergence of a military conflict offered men of Mifflin's status a grand opportunity to enhance their reputations by achieving military prominence. War presented a situation that allowed for the realization of perhaps the most coveted status of all: perpetual fame through military glory. As a member of the gentry active in politics and trade, Mifflin felt the need for a good reputation more than most. Challenges to his reputation and character would not only hurt his influence in the political arena, but also severely undermine his mercantile concerns in a world of commerce that revolved around personal dealings and the integrity of its participants.


10 Carp, To Starve the Army, 102, 113, 117, 127, 131–32

To be sure, Mifflin's concern for reputation often lay at odds with his desire to live up to his republican ideology and placed him in a paradoxical position regarding his military career. His role as quartermaster general elicited severe criticism of his conduct, led to questions regarding his honesty, and severely injured his reputation, yet his untimely resignation not only would further injure his reputation, but would also hurt the war effort—an effort that, as a good republican, Mifflin should put above his own interest. On the other hand, by remaining in the service of the quartermaster department, Mifflin would forego the opportunity for a line command and the chance to win the military glory and fame that would enhance his reputation. For, as Nathanael Greene complained, "nobody ever heard of a quartermaster in history." Clearly, Mifflin sacrificed much during his tenure as quartermaster general. The realities of war seemed to polarize further the conflict between Mifflin's republican ideology and his concern for honor. This wartime polarization defined the first quartermaster general's struggle from August 1775 through March 1778.

In April of 1775, as news of the outbreak of hostilities reached Philadelphia, Mifflin quickly accepted an appointment as major in a newly formed regiment of Pennsylvania militia. His position in the militia, however, proved short-lived. On June 23, Mifflin and fellow Philadelphian Joseph Reed joined George Washington who was en route to Cambridge to take charge of the Continental army. Mifflin and Reed became Washington's first appointees. On July 4, 1775, Washington appointed Mifflin his aide-de-camp and Reed his personal secretary. In his role as aide-de-camp, Mifflin quickly distinguished himself as capable, honest, and energetic. Mifflin found excitement in the opportunities offered by the seemingly unavoidable conflict with Great Britain. With visions of personal glory and perpetual military fame, he looked forward to distinguishing himself in combat and honoring his country. In a letter to his cousin dated July 20, 1775, Mifflin wrote "Every day preparing & expecting an Engagement. I am oblig'd to ride from Morning to Night—I never had better Health or Spirits." He continued, "My whole soul is ardently engaged" in this "righteous cause." Clearly, Mifflin hoped for an active role in the conflict.

12 Greene quoted in Carp, *To Starve the Army*, 164.
military role if a general war broke out.¹³

To Washington, however, Mifflin's unusual combination of skill and experience could be most effectively utilized in the support echelon of the army. Mifflin represented an anomaly. His activity in politics, not to mention his radical patriotism, was uncommon in a man with his mercantile connections. Most Philadelphia merchants were less than enthusiastic about the developing rift and the possibility of general war with Great Britain. As a result, men with the ability and connections in trade that would be helpful in coordinating supply of the army were hard to come by. Previously, in May of 1775, Congress had appointed Mifflin and Washington to a committee conceived "to consider ways and means to supply these colonies with ammunition and military stores."¹⁴ While on this committee Washington witnessed Mifflin's impressive mercantile abilities. For all these reasons, Mifflin stood out as a clear choice for quartermaster general, and on August 14, 1775, Washington appointed the Pennsylvanian to the post of quartermaster general of the Continental army.¹⁵

Republican rhetoric saturated the correspondence surrounding Mifflin's appointment. Indeed, republican values played an important part in Washington's selection of Mifflin, Congress's approval of the appointment, and Mifflin's acceptance. Washington confidently expressed his faith in Mifflin to the Continental Congress and to his other colleagues. Mifflin's appointment met with unanimous approval. In late August 1775, Washington informed Richard Henry Lee that his selection of Mifflin for the post resulted "from a thorough perswation of his Integrety—my own experience of his activity—and finally, because he stands unconnected with either of these Governments; or with this, that, or t'other Man; for between


¹⁴ JCC, 2 67

¹⁵ For an analysis of the political sentiments of Philadelphia merchants, see Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 182, 194–95. In addition to Mifflin, Doerflinger argues that Charles Thomson and George Clymer were also unique in their enthusiastic promotion of the revolutionary cause. See also Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (New Brunswick, 1987), 42–45, 83–85, for the importance of trading skills in supplying the army, see E. James Ferguson, "Business, Government, and Congressional Investigation in the Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter, *W&MQ*) 16 (1959), 294
you and I, there is more in this than you can easily imagine." Lee, in response to Washington's letter, approved the appointment: "I Think you could not possibly have appointed a better man to this present office than Mr Mifflin. He is a singular man, and you certainly will meet with the applause and support of all good men by promoting and countenancing real merit and public virtue, in opposition to all private interests, and partial affections." Echoing Lee's sentiments, Samuel Adams wrote that Mifflin's "character stood so high that no gentlemen could hesitate" to appoint him. Mifflin already possessed abilities that were necessary for the post, and his republican values would protect the public from abuse of his powers. Washington, Adams, and Lee all realized the pivotal role the quartermaster department played between the army and American society, and in that role the need for republican virtue was paramount.

Like Washington and those who applauded Mifflin's appointment, Mifflin saw himself as a republican; he held dear the values of benevolence, disinterest, and virtue. As Mifflin's correspondence of late July 1775 reveals, he looked forward to a line command and the honor and distinction that went with it. Only with much regret and only in fulfillment of a patriotic sense of duty, did Mifflin accept his appointment as quartermaster general on August 14, 1775. Clearly, in the words of a nineteenth-century biographer, Mifflin's "acceptance of the office was somewhat of an act of self-denial." Like many eighteenth-century aristocrats, Mifflin wanted to enhance his reputation by proving himself worthy in battle. But as a good republican, he sacrificed this opportunity and accepted a difficult post which offered no opportunity for honor, glory, or fame. The rewards only bestowed upon successful line commanders had slipped from Mifflin's grasp, but the choice had been made by him on behalf of the public good.

The eighteenth-century quartermaster general served as the commander's chief of staff and worked closely with him in planning and conducting army movements. Maintaining roads, constructing bridges, devising lines of retreat and advance, transporting men and supplies, laying out camp, assigning quarters, and procuring material for the army (including camp


17 Rawle, "Sketch of the Life of Thomas Mifflin," 112.
equipment, tents, lumber, entrenching tools, wagons, boats, etc.) all fell under Mifflin's charge. As Erna Risch states, the quartermaster general "took all measures to enable the army to march with ease and to encamp with convenience and safety." Although moving the army and transporting goods perhaps gave Mifflin the most difficulty, the procurement of material and the assigning of government contracts became the true test of Mifflin's ideology.\(^{18}\)

In the early years of the war Congress failed to define clearly the quartermaster's duties. Although Congress created the Board of War in the summer of 1776, the quartermaster department did not officially come under the board's authority until November 1779. Throughout the entirety of Mifflin's tenure as quartermaster general, Congress never clearly defined or enforced his department's responsibilities or limitations. This lack of regulation and direction allowed Mifflin to engage in many activities that Congress did not officially designate to his charge. Furthermore, the quartermaster general worked closely with the commissary general, Joseph Trumbull, not only because the latter transported the commissary's foodstuff, but also because Mifflin established an unofficial influence in that department.\(^{19}\) In his official role of supplying the army with all material save clothing, firearms, and food, Mifflin's duties required that he allocate a substantial number of large government contracts. Furthermore, the duties that fell officially outside of the quartermaster department, but which Mifflin undertook due to the absence of Congressional regulation, also increased the flow of contracts under his discretion. Clearly, his new appointment had made Mifflin a very influential person.

Due in part to the lack of coordinating supervision, the purchasing of supplies for the army emerged as a complex, changing, and confusing process. In addition to sending military staff personnel to various port cities to purchase supplies, both Mifflin and Trumbull employed private merchants as purchasing agents. Very often these merchants invested their


\(^{19}\) Risch, *Quartermaster Support of the Army, 4–5, 15, Carp, To Starve the Army, 17–32* Mifflin used his connections in Congress and with Washington to assist Joseph Trumbull in realizing the latter's ambition of becoming commissary general, thus beginning Mifflin's influence in the commissary department See Rossman, *Thomas Mifflin*, 43
own capital to procure the requested goods and submitted a bill, via the supply department, to Congress. Congress allotted the merchants a commission, customarily about 2–2¼ percent, on all goods sold to the army. State governments also maintained supply agents to purchase supplies for their militias and state-affiliated Continental troops. To further confuse the process over which Mifflin presided, Congress and the Board of War occasionally empowered purchasing superintendents or commissioners to acquire specific supplies. These government-sanctioned agents competed with each other and private speculators in a system that grew cumbersome and often self-defeating.  

Mifflin’s struggle between his republicanism and the exigencies of war while he served as quartermaster general cannot be characterized as a gradual movement from virtue to corruption. Rather, from the moment of his appointment, Mifflin’s actions came into conflict with his ideology. The conflict stemmed from two closely related sources. First, Mifflin’s trade connections (the connections that made him attractive as a quartermaster appointee) caused difficulty in his transition from private merchant to public servant. At the outset Mifflin had trouble severing his activity in private trade from his public responsibilities and later faltered in his attempts to abstain from mixing the two. Second, the army’s accepted system of supply, although in its infancy, expected its merchant-suppliers to exploit their positions. Republican revolutionaries depended on an un republic an system that included self-interested patriot-merchants to supply its army and privateers. 

Sometime between 1772 and 1775 Thomas Mifflin had formed a partnership with his cousin Jonathan Mifflin. As did most traders, the Mifflin cousins occasionally joined other merchants in larger partnerships. One such venture illustrates the difficulty this system of trade presented for Mifflin in separating private and public business. On July 15, 1775, less than two weeks after Mifflin became Washington’s aide-de-camp and only a month prior to his appointment as quartermaster general, the ship John,  

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21 Privateering was motivated largely by self-interest rather than the public good; it also drew men and supplies away from the Continental navy. For a general overview, see William James Morgan, “American Privateering in America’s War for Independence, 1775–1783,” *American Neptune* 36 (1976), 79–87.
jointly owned by Thomas Mifflin, Jonathan Mifflin, Samuel Caldwell, and James Mease, reached Philadelphia carrying 180 tons of goods from Jamaica. It took Mifflin and his partners the better part of a year to settle these accounts, which was not uncommon at the time, but the settlement overlapped with Mifflin’s new appointment. Since the Continental army represented the largest buyer in the market, it is probable that the partnership, in which Mifflin privately held an interest, sold goods to the Continental army, in which Mifflin publicly held a highly influential post.\(^\text{22}\)

More importantly, Mifflin initiated business liaisons between merchants and the army that served as a virtual blueprint for future patriot-merchants. During the summer and autumn of 1775, the Continental army lacked a clothier general and, with winter approaching, found itself in want of warm clothing. Mifflin assumed the role without applying for or receiving sanction from Congress. Furthermore, he used his influence with commissary general Joseph Trumbull to determine which firms received army provision contracts. In doing so he employed his business partners in Philadelphia with whom he remained engaged in trade. In both the above mentioned situations, Mifflin’s actions, although not corrupt, were certainly un-republican and provided the opportunities for profiteering.

On September 6, 1775, Thomas Mifflin wrote Jonathan to inform him that the army had received the flour Jonathan had previously sent and that it had brought a high price. The quartermaster general further informed his cousin that “your proportion [of an upcoming flour contract] at my request has been fixed at 10,000 Bbs.” He also requested that his cousin exploit Mifflin’s connections in Congress: “Call frequently on young Mr. Rutledge and Mr. Lynch in my Name & your own Behalf and request them to urge the shipping of Flour in Congress.” Surely, this action directly contradicted Washington’s stated reasons for appointing him quartermaster general; Mifflin certainly did not stand “unconnected with either of these Governments; or with this, that, or t’other Man.”\(^\text{23}\)


\(^{23}\) Mifflin to Jonathan Mifflin, Sept 6, 1775, Washington-Biddle Correspondence, HSP, for Washington quote, see above, note 16
Mifflin's September letter to his cousin revealed more striking evidence that the first quartermaster general was not as republican as Washington and others originally expected. In addition to the flour arrangements, Mifflin began to place contracts for clothing in the hands of another Philadelphia business associate, William Barrel. Mifflin informed Jonathan that he and Barrel agreed to interest the younger cousin in Barrel's dealings with the army. The new partnership, however, apparently included Thomas Mifflin as an equal partner. Mifflin informed his cousin, "I have agreed with Barrell [sic] to interest you in the Dry Goods sent here as I have consented for that and other Reasons to interest him in the flour commission; which I think should be divided into thirds." Mifflin enumerated exactly what the army needed, explaining that in his capacity as quartermaster general he would purchase any "blankets, coarse Rugs, Stockings, course hats, leather breaches, low priced duffils &c" for the army, and "put into proper Hands for sale," any fine goods intended for the civilian market. Before concluding his letter, Mifflin instructed Jonathan that in contracts with the army the quartermaster general's "name must not be mentioned in the invoice." Mifflin’s instruction to split the flour commissions in thirds instead of halves, and his request to keep his name off the invoices, strongly suggests that he held a third of the interest in a partnership that supplied the army with flour and dry goods.24

Mifflin's activities in private trade while serving as quartermaster general are surprising only when compared to the republican rhetoric which he espoused. To most merchants—who accepted private interests as legitimate while in the public service—Mifflin acted within the operating norms. The system of supplying the army emerged from this very un republican understanding. Indeed, government agents saw themselves as private merchants who happened to be in the employ of the government. As E. James Ferguson states: "Merchants [in the employ of the government] felt no obligation to give up their own affairs, nor was it expected of them." The government's policy of compensating its staff officers with commissions, not only gave rise to serious accusations of corruption, but also served to

24 Mifflin to Jonathan Mifflin, Sept 6, 1775 Perhaps because Mifflin's later letters suggest that he rejected these types of arrangements, Rossman took "my name must not be mentioned in the invoice" to mean that Mifflin was not involved in the partnership. This seems unlikely due to his inference of a third partner (apparently Mifflin) earlier in the letter, if Mifflin were not a partner there would be no need to tell Jonathan not to put his name on the invoice. See Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, 48.
reinforce this understanding of a part-time government servant. That Congress only gradually developed oversight of the military supply departments, and then in the form of ad hoc committees, fueled further opportunities for self-serving patriot-merchants. Furthermore, department heads, like Mifflin and Trumbull, failed to establish control over their agents who in turn neglected to maintain clear account books.25

This system resulted not only in a good deal of confusion; it also provided opportunities for corruption throughout the supply departments of the army. Government agents mixed private and public trade in a variety of ways. These activities began to replace the ideal of republican disinterest with the reality of capitalistic self-interest and, in many cases, outright corruption. Mifflin's purchase of goods from his partners and from concerns in which he held an interest became the unspoken rule. However, the activities of many staff officers went far beyond this rule. Men such as Joseph Trumbull, the first commissary general, and Matthew Irwin, Mifflin's relation and a deputy commissary general of issues, sought government appointments for the sole purpose of increasing their wealth. Many agents engaged in schemes to raise prices and, in doing so, to increase their commissions. Jonathan Mifflin was unable to disprove this charge and resigned his army commission to escape a congressional inquiry. More unscrupulous agents transported private goods in public wagons and vessels. Dr. William Shippen Jr., first director general of the hospital department, was court martialed for transporting wine and sugar for personal profit in impressed wagons. Similarly, Robert Lettis Hooper, one of Mifflin's high-ranking subordinates, sent public wagons filled with flour and iron on private accounts to New England as the army wintering at Valley Forge remained in desperate need. Other instances of outright corruption entailed the use of government money for private investment. Corrupt agents invested public funds in private ventures and repaid the loan after inflation had reduced the sum to a fraction of its real worth, or they wrote the loss off if the investment failed. Along these lines, James Mease, the first clothier general and Mifflin's business associate, is yet

25 Ferguson, Power of the Purse, 72.
another example of a blatantly corrupt high-ranking staff officer. 26

Not all supply officers were corrupt, but even among the honest agents self-interest proved the rule not the exception. This self-interest was further advanced by a “merchant code” among supply officers. To be sure, merchants in the employ of the government took their reputations into service with them and often incurred the public debt as a personal loss. Honest patriot-merchants avoided the most blatant infractions and always denied using public money for private gain. Although they did purchase goods from their own companies, they maintained that they did not break the public trust if the army paid a fair price for the goods or services rendered. This code, although unrepoman, was honest if strictly adhered to. Difficulty arose, however, because the public held no check on government agents and supply merchants. With the republican fear of corruption and conspiracy saturating American thought, the public found it difficult to believe that government agents were not taking advantage of their unregulated positions. During the winter of 1777–78, when the supply system began to break down beneath strains of a prolonged war, the public blamed both real and perceived staff officer corruption. Mifflin found himself in the middle of this controversy. 27

Had Mifflin continued to adhere to this merchant code, he would have become one of many patriot-merchants pursuing self-interest and the public good. That he did not do so is what makes his experience an example of the difficulty in reconciling republican ideology with public service. Comparisons with Robert Morris or Silas Deane emphasize this difference. Morris justified his patriot-merchant position by stating “I shall continue to discharge my duty faithfully to the Public and pursue my Private Fortune by all such honorable and fair means as the times will admit of.” Likewise Silas Deane argued, “though an honest merchant will never deviate from the path of honor and justice to promote his interest, yet it can never be expected of him to quit the line which interest marks out for him.” Mifflin, shortly after he mixed public and private interests, rejected this justification. On


November 2, 1775, he informed Jonathan Mifflin and William Barrel that he desired "no part or Share of your Commissions or profits." Less then two weeks later, the quartermaster general wrote his cousin Jonathan urging him to "endeavor to collect the cash due in our Books & remit as fast as you can. It gives me much pain at a time when I wish to have no other Engagement than a public one." These November letters denote a fundamental shift in Mifflin's behavior from the preceding September and clearly illustrate that he did not accept the reasoning advanced by Morris and Deane.28

The reversal of Mifflin's understanding of his role as a public servant was not as complete or as surprising as it first seems. First, he continued to show preferential treatment to his "lads in Philadelphia." Writing in early November to Matthew Irwin, a business associate and relative, Mifflin listed those goods that would yield the largest return in Cambridge and informed Irwin: "The real affection I have for you will prompt me to do everything in my power to oblige and benefit you . . . .You may depend upon every assistance in my power; which may be of service to you as I may inform you how to proceed & perhaps more . . . . keep this letter entirely to yourself as the least hint of what I have written may ruin your scheme of trade." Second, Mifflin's decision to reject profits derived from government contracts sent through his partners probably resulted from a congressional decision to grant the quartermasters 5 percent commission on all money expended in the department. Mifflin continued to give preference to his partners and he accepted commissions for his duties as quartermaster general—two practices that conflict with the theory of republican disinterest. However, his refusal to mix his own private trade with government business while in the public service—a sacrifice very few supply officers made—suggests that he at least adhered to a practical application of republican virtue. Or rather, that republicanism in practice was not an all-or-nothing commitment.29

Despite the fact that the merchant code upheld the self-interest of those engaged in supplying the army and that congressional leaders accepted this


29 Mifflin to Matthew Irwin, Nov 2, 1775, Society Collection, HSP, JCC, 3 260
self-interest as a necessary evil, Mifflin's early activities still raised some concern. His application for congressional payment of the clothing contract he had awarded to his business partner, William Barrel, raised serious debate. Mifflin overstepped his authority by assuming responsibility for clothing the army without informing Congress. In contracting with Barrel for clothing Mifflin "did not apply to Congress, but to his own private correspondents." Furthermore, Robert Treat Paine reminded his colleagues in Congress: "We have not agreed to clothe the soldiers, and the QuarterMaster-General has no right to keep a slop-shop, any more than anybody else. It is a private matter; very indigested applications are made here for money." Eventually, Mifflin's friends in Congress carried the day and appointed a committee to supply the army, which in turn paid the sum required in the contract made with Barrel. This debate, however, illustrated the centrality of Mifflin's role in the conflict between revolutionary ideals and the necessities of supplying the army. John Adams sadly explained this conflict while admitting that Congress, as early as 1775, began sacrificing republican virtue in order to provide for the army:

Mr. Lynch and Colonel Harrison and Colonel Nelson indulged their . . . private friendship for Mifflin and Washington, so far as to carry [the resolution].

It is almost impossible to move any thing but you instantly see private friendships and enmities . . . intermingle in consultation. These are degrees of corruption. They are deviations from the public interest and from rectitude. By the vote, however, perhaps the poor soldiers may be benefited, which was all I wished, the interests of Mr. Mifflin being nothing to me.

Clearly, Mifflin's early actions did not meet with the unanimous congressional approval his appointment had.

Even Washington, who had spoken so highly of Mifflin in August, began to question his quartermaster general's conduct in the autumn of 1775. Although publicly defending Mifflin and Trumbull against accusations of mismanagement, Washington privately expressed concern to Joseph Reed over Mifflin's connections in private trade. Perhaps Matthew Irwin's autumn trip to Cambridge to consult with Mifflin prompted Washington's

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30 JCC, 3:260

uneasiness. If Washington confronted Mifflin at this point (and there is nothing to indicate that he did), the confrontation may have influenced Mifflin’s November decision to refuse private profits from government contracts. At any rate, nothing came of Washington’s early concerns and he left Mifflin to conduct the business of supplying the army.32

The accusations against Mifflin’s conduct continued the following spring. In early March of 1776, Joseph Reed wrote to Washington from Philadelphia regarding the “continuance of one of your principal Officers in a Private Trade.” Reed, no doubt referring to Mifflin, continued: “It is no secret in this Town that persons are constantly employed in purchasing Goods here which do not all go to the publick stores as the Parties concerned have boosted of their great Profits amounting in some cases to 200 %. Persons who come from the Camp seem to be well acquainted with the Mode in which it is carried on & are not sparing of their Remarks.” Washington immediately confronted Mifflin regarding “app[rehensio]ns of his being concerned in trade.” Mifflin protested “solemnly that he is not, directly nor indirectly; & derives no other profit than the Congress allows him for defraying the expenses, to wit 5 p. ct on the Goods purchased [for the army].” By January of 1776 the accounts of Mifflin’s last private venture had been concluded, and although Mifflin’s agents in Philadelphia may have been engaged in profiteering, it appears that Mifflin himself was not involved.33

Meanwhile, Mifflin continued to execute successfully his duties as quartermaster general. He housed and provided for the Continental troops laying siege to Boston during the winter of 1775–76. In early March of 1776, Mifflin played an instrumental role in the occupation of Dorchester Heights by coordinating logistical supply. Shortly afterward, Mifflin again performed impressively, coordinating the movement of troops from Boston to New York. Washington repeatedly praised Mifflin’s abilities in his general orders and private correspondence in late March 1776. On May 16, 1776, Congress

12 Joseph Reed to Washington, Mar. 7, 1776, PGW-RWS, 3:428. Reed stated that Washington “was much dissatisfied [with Mifflin’s conduct] last Fall.” For Washington’s continued public defense of both Mifflin and Trumbull, see Washington to John Hancock, Jan. 24, 1776, PGW-RWS, 3:178–79.

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echoed Washington’s appraisal of Mifflin’s abilities by promoting the quartermaster general to the rank of brigadier general.34

As preparations for the defense of New York progressed, Mifflin again hoped for an active line command in the upcoming confrontation. Consequently, he resigned his position as quartermaster general on June 5, 1776, and Congress replaced him with Stephen Moylan. As Mifflin commanded troops in the New York retreat, Congress became dissatisfied with Moylan’s handling of the evacuation. During the retreat Moylan failed to provide adequate wagon transport, and the army lost large quantities of supplies. Acting upon Washington’s prompting, Congress urged Mifflin to assume the office of quartermaster general once again. On October 1, 1776, Mifflin accepted the reappointment with great reluctance. If he acted out of selfishness in submitting his resignation in June, he acted out of selflessness in reassuming the post in October.35

The correspondence concerning Mifflin’s reappointment speaks favorably of his abilities, with most correspondents expressing a sense of relief that he had reassumed the post. In one respect, however, the tenor of the remarks differs markedly from the correspondence surrounding his original 1775 appointment. Then correspondents equally praised Mifflin’s ability and his republican virtue. In October 1776, correspondents cited only Mifflin’s abilities as reason to applaud his appointment. Washington’s letter informing Congress of Mifflin’s reappointment praised the reinstated quartermaster general but contained no republican rhetoric. Washington explained he was “confident that not another man in the army . . . could carry on the business [of the quartermaster department] upon the present large plan.” Likewise, William Ellery, congressman from Rhode Island, wrote, “This appointment will give great satisfaction to the army, for General Mifflin is not only well acquainted with the business of the office, but he hath spirit and activity to execute it in a proper manner.” This change in rhetoric doubtless reflected the reality of the growing difficulty in prosecuting the war. Washington and congressional leaders became more concerned with ability than virtue, especially after the costly mistakes


35 *JCC*, 5:419; For an account of Mifflin’s role in the failed defense of New York, see Rossman, *Thomas Mifflin*, 55–68. For an explanation of Moylan’s conduct and reasons for his dismissal, see Risch, *Quartermaster Support of the Army*, 8; *JCC*, 5:838.
attributed to Moylan. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest, particularly in Washington's case, that knowledge of Mifflin's prior conduct may explain the absence of republican rhetoric in letters relating to his reappointment.  

When Mifflin accepted his reappointment he found himself again embroiled in private trade. While engaged in the failed defense of New York, several of Mifflin's business associates—John Bayard, Alexander Henderson, and Matthew Irwin among them—invested on his behalf in four vessels. Mifflin later denied that he solicited this investment, explaining: "In the autumn of 1776, during my absence from Philadelphia, several of my friends there, believing the sacrifice I was making of my time to the public, and the great expense I was obliged to incur in the army as Quarter-Master General, would in the end greatly injure my private estate, very generously and without solicitation interested me, by small shares, in four vessels then prepared for sea." Although it is probable that Mifflin's associates involved him without his immediate knowledge, clearly he could have refused the "generous" gesture later. Furthermore, if Mifflin's associates entered into the enterprise without his knowledge, Mifflin would have first learned of the scheme in early October when he returned to Philadelphia. At this point he had already accepted his reappointment as quartermaster general. Judging from Mifflin's justification of the venture's origin, he clearly saw a conflict of interest. Here again the conflict of ideology and reality emerged as Mifflin compromised his ideology.

Mifflin invested over £2400 in the brigs Delaware, General Lee, Colonel Parry, and the schooner Rattlesnake. The partnership immediately outfitted the General Lee and Colonel Parry as privateers and the two remaining ships as trading vessels. Although the investors lost the Colonel Parry on its initial voyage, the other three vessels yielded considerable financial success. By the close of 1777 Mifflin had recovered his investment and realized a profit, after adjusting for inflation, of approximately 50 percent. After three successful trading voyages, in March of 1778 the brig Delaware was outfitted as a privateer and promptly fell into British hands. In May of that same year, Mifflin sold his shares in the Rattlesnake and General Lee to Blair McClenachan. Mifflin's involvement in privateering ventures, which


procured supplies for the army from captured British vessels, directly tied his private affairs to the supply system of the military. It is also conceivable that the partnership supplied the army with goods from its trading ventures.\(^\text{38}\)

Mifflin's practice of sending contracts to his associates' private firms at the same time that he employed these associates as staff officers also drew criticism. Although this became a common practice among all supply officers, it also became a source of corruption and a target for public complaint. Mifflin exposed himself to much criticism on this account. Both Jonathan Mifflin and Matthew Irwin received appointments as supply officers owing to Mifflin's influence, but neither of them showed the quartermaster general's restraint or discipline. Irwin maintained extensive private enterprises tied directly to supplying the army while serving as deputy commissary general of issues. Jonathan Mifflin engaged in several practices while in the employ of the government that eventually forced him to resign his post under severe congressional scrutiny. After Jonathan secured an appointment as a commissioner to purchase goods for the army, Congress recalled him for allegedly: "making contracts for executing the business entrusted . . . contrary to the intentions of Congress . . . [acting] without any authority, in direct violation of the laws of Pennsylvania, and contrary to the instructions given by the Board of War, have presumed to fix and ascertain the prices of several other articles wanted in the army, much higher than fixed by law in the State, directing the quarter masters to govern themselves by such illegal rates." It remains unclear if Jonathan Mifflin purposely engaged in this practice to increase his commissions or was unknowingly competing against state supply officers. Before Congress could investigate his conduct, he resigned his commission in the army (which suggests that he may not have been completely innocent).\(^\text{39}\)


\(^{39}\) For prevalence of these practices, see Ferguson, "Business, Government and Congressional Investigation," 296 Regarding Irwin and Jonathan Mifflin, see \textit{JCC}, 8 477, and 10 176–77, and Wayne K Bodle and Jacqueline Thibaut, \textit{Valley Forge Historical Research Report} (3 vols, Valley Forge, Pa, 1980), 2 162–91 Perhaps motivated by politics, the Pennsylvania Council of Safety forwarded additional allegations against Mifflin's department, see Pennsylvania Council of Safety to Board of War, Oct 18, 1777, \textit{Pennsylvania Archives, see}, 1 5 684, for Mifflin's reactions, see Mifflin to Elbridge Gerry, Oct 5, 6, 1777, Dreer Collection, HSP
Thomas Mifflin's connections with James Mease, the first clothier general, and Robert Hooper, a deputy quartermaster, further hurt his reputation. After the October 1776 death of William Barrel, Mifflin transferred army tent and clothing contracts to Mease. At this time Mease was still engaged with the Mifflins in private trade resulting from their joint ownership of the trading vessel John. Mease, most likely through Mifflin's assistance, then received an appointment as the first clothier general in December 1776. Mease proved unequal to the task and the clothier department "stumbled along under inept leadership." Following the horrible shortages caused by Mease's department during the encampment at Valley Forge, Washington demanded that Congress remove Mease and investigate him and his agents. Upon investigation, Mease proved an embarrassment to Mifflin. Indeed, Carp has characterized Mease as "conspiratorially engaged in premeditated criminal behavior for personal gain." Mifflin's fondness for Robert Hooper, a corrupt deputy quartermaster, became equally damaging. Despite the fact that Congress singled out Hooper for corrupt activity, one embittered opponent of Mifflin complained that Hooper's "great friend [Mifflin] is Determined to support him let him be just or [not?]." The actions of Mifflin's associates and subordinates directly affected his reputation and brought numerous accusations against him.40

Between October 1776 and January 1777, Mifflin split his time between Washington's camp and Philadelphia. After Washington's defeat at White Plains in late October and the loss of Fort Washington in mid-November, Washington sent Mifflin to impress upon Congress the impending crisis brought about by the rapidly dissolving Continental army. Fearing a British move on Philadelphia, Congress retained Mifflin's services and employed him in rousing the militia for the defense of the city. As Congress fled from Philadelphia in mid-December, Washington directed Mifflin to stay in the city to prepare defenses and transport the military stores to a more secure location. The attack on Philadelphia did not come that winter. Although they missed the battle of Trenton, the troops Mifflin raised did play a role under his command at Princeton in early January 1777. When Washington quartered his troops at Morristown he sent Mifflin back to Philadelphia. Mifflin remained in Philadelphia through the winter, spring, and summer.

40 JCC, 6:867; Bodle and Thibaut, Valley Forge, 2:245, 336–50, 555n; Carp, To Starve the Army, 124; Ephraim Blaine to Charles Stewart, Feb. 16, 1778, quoted in Bodle and Thibaut, Valley Forge, 2:171.
of 1777. To reward his role in assembling the militia in late 1776, Congress promoted Mifflin to major general on February 19, 1777.\textsuperscript{41}

While in Philadelphia Mifflin settled the quartermaster accounts for the previous campaign and began preparing for the upcoming one. Lack of specie and the inflation of paper money made his duties increasingly difficult. He also continued to engage in recruitment activities and line command duties outside the quartermaster department as he had done since his reappointment. Writing to Congress to accept his commission as major general, Mifflin asked to be relieved of one of the duties: "In the last campaign my time was divided between the Command of a Brigade, and the Duties of the Qr Mr Genls Department; and of Course could not be made so useful to the Public as I wishd . . . I hope that some One Line will be marked out for me . . . I will not presume to ask for any Command in particular. Whatever Department I may be annexed to that Department shall have my best Exertions." Mifflin probably hoped to detach himself from the quartermaster department and invest all his energy in a line command. Finding Mifflin too valuable in both the quartermaster department and the procurement of troops, Congress failed to respond to his hints. Consequently, Mifflin continued in both roles. He found time to reorganize the quartermaster department before the British threat to Philadelphia increasingly drew his attention away from the department.\textsuperscript{42}

The loss of Philadelphia in September 1777 marked a major turning point in Mifflin's military career. Since the preceding July, Mifflin had engaged himself completely in the defense of the city and left the quartermaster department to his subordinates at camp: Joseph Thornbury, Clement Biddle, and Henry Emanuel Lutterloh. Mifflin's subordinates ran the quartermaster department from July 1777 through March 1778, with Washington supervising as best he could. Upset with the loss of the city and Washington's handling of the military situation, Mifflin tendered his resignation. On October 8, 1777, he wrote Congress: "My Health is so much impaired and the probability of Recovery of it so distant that I

\textsuperscript{41} Rossman, \textit{Thomas Mifflin}, 69–79, \textit{JCC}, 6 1017

\textsuperscript{42} Mifflin to John Hancock, Mar 12, 1777, \textit{PCC}, M247, roll 179, i 161, pp 8–9 (also quoted in part in Rossman, \textit{Thomas Mifflin}, 84) In Feb Mifflin drafted the reorganization of the department, meant to enhance its efficiency, submitted it to the Board of War in Mar. It received congressional approval on May 14, 1777, see \textit{JCC}, 7 191, 355–59
consider myself as a very useless Officer: & think it my duty to return to Congress their commission to me of Major General & Quarter Master General.” Mifflin retired to Reading, Pennsylvania, although it appears that the strains of the office had not broken his health. Alexander Graydon, also in Reading during the autumn of 1777, recalled “General Mifflin, at this era, was at home, a chief out of war, complaining, though not ill, considerably malcontent, and apparently, not in high favor at Head Quarters.” To be sure, Mifflin’s untimely resignation marked his most serious violation of the republican code of self-sacrifice that he still held as an ideal.43

Congress delayed acting on Mifflin’s resignation for an entire month. On November 8, 1777, Congress accepted his resignation as quartermaster general but at the same time appointed Mifflin to a newly created Board of War. Later that same day, unable to select a new quartermaster general, Congress altered its instructions. It requested that Mifflin “continue in the Execution of that office until a Quarter Master General shall be appointed.” Elated with the new appointment, because it would allow him to serve the cause outside the troublesome quartermaster department, Mifflin informed Congress that his “Health being much mended [he] shall be ready to wait on Congress for their Orders as soon as a new Appointment is made of a Qr Master General.” Shortly thereafter, in what appears to be an about-face, Mifflin became less enthusiastic about maintaining his post. In January, he informed his subordinate Lutterloh that he would not undertake any new quartermaster business, but would only settle his outstanding accounts and that the latter could “now take the whole” upon himself.44

In late January, Congress changed its instructions and ordered Mifflin to “immediately prepare and render accounts to Congress of all his public

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43 Risch, Quartermaster Support of the Army, 25, 36, JCC, 9 792 That Mifflin had little contact with the quartermaster department is clear in Washington’s correspondence from Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-78 and by Mifflin’s subsequent correspondence, see Mifflin to Henry Laurens, July 14, 1778, PCC, M247, roll 179, i 161, p 32, for Mifflin’s letter of resignation, see Mifflin to John Hancock, Oct 8, 1777, PCC, M247, roll 179, i 161, p 16 The Graydon quote is in Alexander Graydon, Memoirs of His Own Time With Reminiscences of the Men and Events of the Revolution, ed John Stockton Little (Philadelphia, 1846), 299 Mifflin’s dissatisfaction with Washington initiated his involvement in the “supposed” Conway cabal

44 Henry Laurens to Mifflin, two letters dated Nov 8, 1777, PCC, M247, roll 23, i 13, pp 11, 14 respectively; Mifflin to Henry Laurens, Nov 12, 1777, PCC M247, roll 179, i 161, p 28, JCC, 9 874, 882, Mifflin’s instructions to Lutterloh are quoted in Risch, Quartermaster Support of the Army, 37
expenditures.” Realizing that Mifflin’s absence from the Board of War would hinder its operation, Congress rescinded its January order on February 19, instructing Mifflin instead to “attend immediately the Board of War, and that he order the several deputies and agents under him in the department of the quarter master general to proceed vigorously in executing the business of that department, without attending to the settlement of accounts, until the department is properly arranged, and they can attend to the settlement of their accounts without detriment to the public cause.” Here again, necessity overrode Congress’s ideological concerns. Clearly, Mifflin’s conduct and the indecision of Congress hurt the public cause in the winter of 1777–78. Mifflin left the quartermaster department without a head and Congress failed to appoint a replacement. Consequently, the supply system broke down as the army quartered at Valley Forge in want of almost everything.45

Finally, on March 3, 1778, Congress replaced Mifflin as quartermaster general with Nathanael Greene, but Mifflin’s difficulties stemming from the department were far from over. Mifflin served on the Board of War through May 1778, at which time Congress granted him leave to rejoin the army as an officer of the line. Once again Mifflin renewed his pursuit of military glory and once again complications from his connection with the quartermaster department left his goal unrealized. On June 11, 1778, Congress again called for an inquiry into Mifflin’s conduct as quartermaster general and instructed Washington to “order an enquiry to be made into the conduct of Major General Mifflin, late quartermaster general, and the other officers who acted under him in that department; and if it shall appear that the extraordinary deficiencies hereof, and the consequent distress of the army, were chargeable to the misconduct of the said quarter master general or any of the said officers, that a court martial be forthwith held on the delinquents.” Since he no longer served on the Board of War, Mifflin could now be targeted without adversely affecting the war effort. In a desperate attempt to salvage what was left of his tarnished reputation, Mifflin immediately sought and received leave from his military commitments to put

45 *JCC*, 10:103, 182. Joseph Trumbull’s previous resignation as commissary general in July 1777 added to the confusion and worsened the situation. Although Congress created the new Board of War to alleviate the supply problems, delays in the board’s organization kept it from correcting the supply difficulties at Valley Forge.
his accounts in order for congressional inspection. The controversy surrounding the supply breakdown at Valley Forge prompted Congress to order the inquiry into Mifflin’s conduct. Prior to the spring of 1778, criticism of Mifflin had been limited to murmurs within military and congressional correspondence. After the failures at Valley Forge became public knowledge, the conduct of the quartermaster and other supply departments became the focus of widespread public scrutiny. To be sure, Valley Forge marked a turning point in the Revolution. The republican army of citizen-soldiers failed to win a quick victory, and Americans realized that not only were they in for a long struggle, but that to be victorious they required a professional army. As Congress passed resolves calling for long-term enlistments and Baron von Steuben began the process of drill and discipline that gave the Continentals a professional orientation, Americans asked why their citizen-soldiers had failed. Viewing the failures of the citizen-soldiers from a republican perspective, Americans blamed corruption and conspiracy for the army’s shortcomings. In the same fashion, the public and congressional leaders attributed the supply debacle at Valley Forge to a conspiracy of corrupt supply officers.

In line with the republican doctrine of accountability, Congress felt those responsible for the Valley Forge disaster should be held accountable. Henry Laurens illustrated this mentality best. Replying to a report on the failings of the quartermaster department that he felt was too “Courtly and mincing,” Laurens wrote: “You intimate . . . that most of the Evils which have attended our Camp flow from gross neglect and abuse in the department of the Qur. Mr general. If it be so . . . [do not] screen the man whose neglect of Duty has brought thousands to Misery and Death . . . No! Let the Officer be dragged forth, and the public told, this is the man! God awaken us.” Regardless of the confusion surrounding Mifflin’s October resignation and the indecision of Congress, Mifflin remained the official head of the quartermaster department through March of 1778. For that reason (and perhaps to shield from blame congressional indecision and delay in appointing a replacement), Laurens proposed that Mifflin be “dragged forth”

46 JCC, 11:591.

47 Carp, To Starve the Army, 124–25; for a discussion of Valley Forge as a turning point, see Royster, A Revolutionary People at War, 190–254.
The charges brought against Mifflin are hard to define. Indeed, in Mifflin's own words the "General and loose" character of the charges made them more difficult to refute. They fell into several general categories: embezzlement, use of public property for private gain, and incompetence or negligence. While attempting to defend himself several years later during a messy state political battle, Mifflin summarized the allegations of profiteering and corruption: "that in my late department I had acquired a Nabob's fortune; and that while I suffered the public to be in long and deep arrears to the industrious farmer for the supply of the army, I was expending the money committed to my management in the purchase of estates for myself . . . ." In addition to these accusations, and stemming from the belief that Mifflin lacked competence in appointing subordinates, Joseph Reed reminded Nathanael Greene "that one of the great complaints against Gen Mifflin was employing Persons under him of known disaffection to the Interests of America and openly hostile to the Authority of the State in which they were to act." The vast majority of the charges brought against Mifflin were untrue. Perhaps their vagueness reflected the fact that they derived from a sense of frustration with the difficulties associated with the military conflict and not factual evidence.

It does appear, as detailed previously, that Mifflin's subordinates abused their offices. But in line with the importance of accountability in republican ideology, Congress held Mifflin responsible for the actions of his subordinates. To ensure a sense of accountability among department heads, Congress had made clear who was accountable for every allocation of funds. Consequently, all allocations to the quartermaster department, even when Congress placed funds directly in the hands of Mifflin's subordinates (as occurred after July 1777), became Mifflin's responsibility. To emphasize this
fact, resolutions allocating funds to Mifflin's quartermaster department all stated: "General Mifflin to be accountable." Aware of the growing criticism of his late department and that Congress held him personally responsible for the actions of his subordinates, Mifflin appealed to Congress in May 1778. He explained his "peculiar situation as quarter master general, and his objections to being held strictly to account in cases where, from the nature of the business and particular circumstances attending it, he was incapable of direct agency and the necessary superintendence." In response to the letter, a congressional committee met with Mifflin and informed him that although "the great servants of the public are generally to be accountable; that if . . . deficiencies shall appear, Congress will, in every special case, determine upon the circumstances as they arise, whether the party shall or shall not be discharged." The committee had "no doubt that such favourable allowance would be made as justice should require." In short, Congress acknowledged that strict accountability of department heads was a theoretical goal that would bear up poorly in practice. In doing so they effectively cleared Mifflin of the only charge that had any credibility—that of negligence—a full month before they called him to account.50

Mifflin prepared his accounts and waited for the inquiry. By August it appeared that a military inquiry was not forthcoming and Mifflin appealed to Congress for a ruling. Writing on August 10, Mifflin requested that Congress "appoint a committee for the purposes mentioned in their resolution on the 12 [sic] June, and that we may have an opportunity of being heard . . . without delay." Although Mifflin reissued his plea two days later, Congress, like the army, refused to act on his request. On August 17, determined to take his case to the public, Mifflin resigned his commission in the army, stating: "I wish Congress to believe that by this resignation I do not mean to fly from any Enquiry they may be pleased hereafter to make into my conduct; On the Contrary, I shall be highly gratified with a general Examination of it; and will most cheerfully appear before any Committee appointed by them for that purpose." Three days later Mifflin published his correspondence with Congress in a Philadelphia newspaper, hoping to

50 JCC, 8:812, 984, and 993; JCC, XI, 511. Greene, who left office under the same accusations brought against Mifflin, had appealed to Congress with the same argument. Congress, citing Mifflin's treatment as precedent, again "qualified the strictness this doctrine [of accountability] in favour of the Heads of Departments." See JCC, 17:656–58.
demonstrate his inability to receive a hearing and thereby display his innocence to the public. In this trying period, Mifflin vainly attempted to salvage his honor, reputation, and character—attributes required of him to reenter the mercantile and political spheres.\footnote{Pennsylvania Packet (Philadelphia), Aug. 20, 1778.}

The day Congress received Mifflin's resignation it appointed a committee to inquire into the progress of the investigation ordered on June 11. On December 24, 1778, the committee reported that "it does not appear . . . that any proceedings have been since had." The report added, however, that "it appears probable, that during the winter 1777, and the spring 1778, when the army was in the suffering state . . . sundry brigades of wagons in the publick service were sent to New Windsor, Newburgh, Hartford, and Boston with flour and Iron on private accounts and brought back private property . . . the said flour and Iron had been taken as for publick use at regulated prices then fixed by law, and that the wagons during such transportation, were subsisted . . . on publick forage." Significantly, the report cited deputy quartermaster general Robert Lettis Hooper as "the principle director of the said wagons at the time." The committee did not mention Mifflin because congressional leaders knew that he had no contact with the department during the Valley Forge winter. Acting on this report the following month, Congress again ordered Washington to proceed with the inquiry. In February of 1779, Washington informed Congress that if Mifflin had indeed resigned his commission, Washington no longer felt him "amenable to a military tribunal." Congress and the army dropped the matter; neither body held a formal inquiry. Also in February, Congress accepted Mifflin's resignation which officially concluded his military career. Consequently, when Mifflin presented the accounts of his late department to Congress in January of 1780 he did so as a civilian.\footnote{JCC, 12:1245–46, 13:106–107; Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, 158–64. On Sept. 17, 1778, Congress allocated $1 million to Mifflin for the purpose of settling the outstanding accounts of his late department.}

Throughout his tenure as quartermaster general Mifflin displayed weakness in resolve and allowed himself to become entangled in private trade while in the public service. He displayed favoritism and poor judgment of character in selecting subordinates and supporting appointments of other department heads. He also resigned his commission as quartermaster general at a very critical period, which when added to the problems already caused
by Congress's indecisiveness, resulted in severe distress of the army. In all of the above cases, Mifflin failed the lofty republican ideals of benevolence, disinterest, and virtue. But he maintained these ideals as goals which did indeed drive his actions while in the service of the public. Mifflin did not accept the quartermaster post in an attempt to amass personal profit, but rather as an act of patriotism and self-denial. The same patriotism and self-denial resulted in his maintaining the office for over two years under severe hardship and denial of a line command. He did not violate the public trust and amass personal gain through corruption or embezzlement. Finally, although not always successful, he attempted to avoid the accepted practice of mixing private interest with public duty.

When compared to others in the service of the government, who did not take the republican ideology as seriously, Mifflin fares well. Joseph Trumbull, the first commissary general, solicited his post in hopes of personal gain, used his position for financial advancement, and resigned his post after Congress disallowed him commissions. James Mease, the first clothier general, and Dr. William Shippen Jr., the first director general of the hospital department, were simply corrupt and engaged in not only unrepUBLICan but illegal activity. Nathanael Greene, Mifflin's successor as quartermaster general, created a company for the sole purpose of supplying the army and corresponded with his business associates in code to keep the arrangement from the public view. Furthermore, Mifflin's subordinates appear to have been engaging in activity that was at best unrepUBLICan and at worse illegal. When put into context Mifflin's discipline balanced his shortcomings.53

In *A Revolutionary People at War* Charles Royster argues that "the revolution had such comprehensive, demanding ideals that no one could match them, and few could pursue them unwaveringly." Despite these shortcomings, the ideals of republicanism survived the war. Indeed, the strains of military struggle forced the revolutionaries to employ "coercion, corruption, and self-interest to survive and to prosper . . . and, in part, to win" the war. But these practices did not replace the ideals of benevolence, disinterest, and virtue for which revolutionaries strove. "In the triumphs, in

the crises, even in times of neglect," revolutionaries never abandoned their ideals or forgot that "they ought to be living" them. Consequently, the endurance of republican ideals not only kept revolutionaries from falling farther from their goals, but also made possible military victory and the survival of the revolution. This same relationship between goals, failures, and results is illustrated on a personal level through Thomas Mifflin's struggle as the first quartermaster general. Although he often failed to meet the goals of his ideology, Mifflin's professed adherence to them kept him from engaging in unchecked exploitation of his office. This investigation of Mifflin's activities through the guise of republicanism sheds new light on Mifflin's conduct, but it also offers insight, on an individual level, of the impact of an ideology. Clearly, Mifflin was not a perfect republican; nevertheless, republicanism consistently influenced his actions.

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