

Address, Veterans Day 2016, Lake Louise, Weaverville, NC
by Louis D. F. Frasche

In more than four decades in the Army, on active duty and as a civilian imbedded with military units, I have known officers and men from the armed forces of other nations across Europe, the Pacific, and Asia. We had much in common, starting with the profession of arms, but the differences in our historical origins, civil-military relations, and cultural influences were striking. This morning, I want to highlight a pivotal event in our history and examine the role of a single individual in determining our unique military character and in setting us on one path into the future, a path which we take for granted today, rather than on a path quite different. That pivotal event came towards the end of the American Revolution.

The setting is Newburgh, New York, during the early spring of 1783. It has been almost a year-and-a-half since George Washington's great victory at Yorktown. Small units still fight in the two most southern states, but the bulk of British field forces have withdrawn to their enclave around New York City, protected by the Royal Navy. Major combat operations have ended. Treaty negotiations with Great Britain are dragging on interminably, and Washington has moved the Continental Army to Newburgh, north of the city, to keep an eye on the British. He suspects that they will try to reconstitute during the extended lull and resume operations. Washington trains his army hard, but the fact is that it has been inactive for more than a year. The men are growing increasingly restless and dissatisfied, and the army is coming apart under pressures beyond Washington's control.

The nation's governance lay with the Confederation Congress. It was a national government in name only, as it had no power to raise revenue or to compel the separate states to meet financial, military, or other obligations. The treasury was broke, and the national currency was worthless. Washington's soldiers had not been paid in months, they were lacking in basic clothing and equipment, and talk was leaking out of Philadelphia that the Congress might renege on its commitment to pay benefits promised to soldiers as an incentive to enlist.

These troops were regulars from the long-service Continental Line regiments. They were the "Winter Soldiers," as contrasted with the "Sunshine Patriots," in Thomas Payne's words, the ones who had gotten back up after the early defeats, who had left bloody footprints in the snow at Valley Forge and Morristown, and who finally had triumphed at Yorktown. They were hard men, and they were fed up. Factions within the Officer Corps organized to move on Philadelphia to force Congress to meet the Army's demands. Petitions circulated urging Washington to assume extra-judicial, even dictatorial, powers and seize control of government.

Here was the temptation which had seduced both Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell to use military force to seize civil power, and in doing so, to destroy their young republics. George Washington knew better than most the weakness of the Confederation Government. He also knew history. He recognized the dire threat to the revolution and to the new republic posed by the Army's actions, and he moved immediately to quash it.

In one of the most dramatic moments of the war, Washington confronted his officer corps, some 500 of them, in a meeting on March 16th. When he strode into the room, he was a powerful presence. His men revered him. To them, he was the embodiment of the revolution. Washington was the only commander most had ever known. He had suffered every privation, brought them out of every misfortune, and finally had lead them to victory. He reminded his officers of their shared experience. He reiterated strongly that the army was not his, nor theirs, but that it belonged to the nation, under the direction of Congress. Any attempt to use the Army against the civil government would betray the very principles for which they had fought and had endured such hardship and would violate their sacred honor, and his.

He paused in his address and appeared to stumble over his notes. He reached into a pocket and removed a pair of eyeglasses, which no one had ever seen him wear. He said simply, "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." There was a stunned silence. Then, a wave of emotion burst over the room; some men openly wept; someone clapped, then another; they rose to their feet in a great, roaring, standing ovation. The potential coup d'état was dead.

When King George III of England heard that Washington intended to relinquish his commission and give up power after the war, he said that if Washington does that, "he would be the greatest man in history." After the peace treaty was signed, true to his word and example, Washington appeared before Congress on 23 December 1783, resigned his commission, and rode home to Mount Vernon. We know that he would return in less than four years to help to save the nation a second time, but that's another story. That great man left us with a lasting political and military legacy. He laid down the two principles which would govern the conduct and the ethos of America's armed forces for evermore: first, that the nation's military would be apolitical; and second, that it always would be subject to civil authority. Almost unique among western democracies, the United States has never had to fear the man on horseback. As things turned out, George III was right.

So, in these fractious times, what will our men and women in uniform do for the remainder of this Veterans Day, and tomorrow, and in the days following? Why, they will do what we did, what we always have done: they will strap on their armor, go out, and do the nation's bidding, under the Constitution which they have sworn to uphold and protect against all enemies, foreign and domestic; they will bear full faith and allegiance to the same; they will obey the orders of the officers appointed over them; and they will seal their oath,

"So help me God."