NEWBURGH CONSPIRACY

Was the Newburgh conspiracy in early 1783 a serious threat to Congressional authority?

**Viewpoint:** Yes. Nationalist leaders in Congress and a clique of military officers sought to use Army discontent over back pay and pensions to replace the existing central government with a stronger one.

**Viewpoint:** No. The situation at Newburgh, although potentially dangerous, did not become a serious threat to the government because the nationalists and Army dissidents had no unified plan of action.

Historians are in general agreement about the events surrounding the so-called Newburgh Conspiracy. They acknowledge that officers, while encamped at Newburgh, New York, in the winter of 1782–1783, feared that Congress would soon demobilize them without back pay and promised pensions. Their fears were given legitimacy when Congress's impost plan for raising much-needed revenue failed approval in Rhode Island. In response, a delegation of officers sent Congress a "memorial" in December 1782 pointing out that their pay was seriously in arrears and that Congress had failed to make provisions for the life pension of half pay promised to them in October 1780. The "nationalists," who supported a stronger central government with the power to raise a national revenue, used the embittered officers' memorial (and the specter of military force implied in it) to strong-arm the states into supporting a plan giving Congress new powers to raise revenue and to fund the national debt. When the officers at Newburgh learned that Congress had rejected their petitions—over the objections of the nationalists—they circulated two anonymous papers (the infamous Newburgh Addresses) purportedly written by an aide-de-camp to General Horatio Gates. The first address called for a meeting of field officers, and the other appealed to their grievances and suggested that if they did not want to "grow old in poverty, wretchedness and contempt," then they should "awake" and redress themselves.

George Washington, recognizing the potential danger within these addresses, issued an order forbidding the unauthorized meeting and, instead, proposed a regular meeting of the officers on 15 March for a discussion of their complaints. At the gathering, Washington made a dramatic appearance in which he strongly condemned any military action against civilian authority and passionately appealed to the officers' duty, honor, and patriotism. The commander's emotional speech had a powerful impact on the officers, who drafted resolutions affirming their patriotism, their faith that Congress would judiciously resolve their grievances, and their disdain of the Newburgh Addresses. Congress, in turn, agreed to the officers' proposals to commute the authorized pension of half pay for life into a promise of full salaries for five years.

Although historians agree on this basic series of events and admit that the situation at Newburgh was potentially dangerous, they differ on the motives of those involved in the alleged conspiracy. Were the officers really...
determined to take action? Was there really a conspiracy? Some historians argue that General Gates led a plot by officers openly advocating mutiny in order to seek redress from Congress. According to their interpretation, the Newburgh Addresses provide strong hints that the officers talked of replacing Congress and ruling themselves. However, Gates’s biographer argues that the general was not part of a mutinous cabal. More-skeptical historians claim that these assertions of a conspiracy to change or overthrow the government are based upon circumstantial evidence and a misinterpretation of the affair.

Still, given the anger of the officers at Newburgh and the faction-ridden, impotent condition of the national government in the winter of 1782–1783, a military coup was not implausible. Indeed, the crisis that Washington recognized at the time provides much grist for the cerebral grindstones. For example, it forces one to confront the idea (some say myth) of a Continental Army composed of and led by virtuous and civic-minded men. At the same time, Washington’s intervention during the crisis can reveal much about his leadership abilities (or lack thereof). The role of some congressmen in the affair, on the other hand, graphically reveals the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, and the bitter factionalism within the Congress, and the many significant problems these conditions caused. Finally, the crisis at Newburgh underscores the importance of civilian control of the military.
A NATURAL, UNAFFECTED APPEAL

Samuel Shaw, an aide-de-camp to General Henry Knox, made the following observations of the meeting between General George Washington and his officers at Newburgh, New York, in March 1783:

The meeting of the officers was in itself exceedingly respectable, the matters they were called to deliberate upon were of the most serious nature, and the unexpected attendance of the Commander-in-chief heightened the solemnity of the scene. Every eye was fixed upon the illustrious man, and attention to their beloved General held the assembly mute. He opened the meeting by apologizing for his appearance there, which was by no means his intention when he published the order which directed them to assemble. But the diligence used in circulating the anonymous pieces rendered it necessary that he should give his sentiments to the army on the nature and tendency of them, and determined him to avail himself of the present opportunity; and, in order to do it with greater perspicuity, he had committed his thoughts to writing, which, with the indulgence of his brother officers, he would take the liberty of reading to them. It is needless for me to say any thing of this production; it speaks for itself. After he had concluded his address, he said, that, as a corroborating testimony of the good disposition in Congress towards the army, he would write to a letter received from a worthy member of that body, and one who on all occasions had ever approved himself their fast friend. This was an exceedingly sensible letter; and, while it pointed out the difficulties and embarrassments of Congress, it held up very forcibly the idea that the army should, at all events, be generously dealt with. One circumstance in reading this letter must not be omitted. His Excellency, after reading the first paragraph, made a short pause, took out his spectacles, and begged the indulgence of his audience while he put them on, observing at the same time, that he had grown gray in their service, and now found himself growing blind. There was something so natural, so unaffected, in this appeal, as rendered it superior to the most studied oratory; it forced its way to the heart, and you might see sensibility moisten every eye. The General, having finished, took leave of the assembly, and the business of the day was conducted in the manner which is related in the account of the proceedings.

I cannot dismiss this subject without observing, that it is happy for America that she has a patriot army, and equally so that a Washington is its leader. I rejoice in the opportunities I have had of seeing this great man in a variety of situation;—calm and intrepid where the battle raged, patient and persevering under the pressure of misfortune, moderate and possessing himself in the full career of victory. Great as these qualifications deservedly render him, he never appeared to me more truly so, than at the assembly we have been speaking of. On other occasions he has been supported by the exertions of an army and the countenance of his friends; but in this he stood single and alone. There was no saying where the passions of an army, which were not a little inflamed, might lead; but it was generally allowed that longer forbearance was dangerous, and moderation had ceased to be a virtue. Under these circumstances he appeared, not at the head of his troops, but as it were in opposition to them; and for a dreadful moment the interests of the army and its General seemed to be in competition! He spoke,—every doubt was dispelled, and the tide of patriotism rolled again in its wonted course. Illustrious man! What he says of the army may with equal justice be applied to his own character. "Had this day been wanting, the world had never seen the last stage of perfection to which human nature is capable of attaining."


gress to create a new funding system. James Madison acknowledged that Hamilton had let out the secret of the nationalists' scheme. On 4 February, Congress defeated the commutation bill for a second time.

Four days later the second stage of the nationalists' plot began when Brooks left Philadelphia to get Knox to initiate a new movement that would create stronger support in the officer corps for the nationalist program. After another four days, McDougall, using a prearranged pseudonym, sent an explicit and conspiratorial letter to Knox that said the Continental Army might have to mutiny to gain commutation. The nationalist leaders, however, were not maneuvering for a real coup d'état against Congress.
Instead, they hoped that Knox, a friend of the most significant officers, would get them to place more pressure on Congress by having the officers issue a declaration stating that they would not disband until Congress had passed commutation. If that threat of a "passive" mutiny failed, the nationalists, as a last resort, could try to foment rebelliousness only among a small extremist wing of the army composed of twelve to fourteen officers who disliked Washington's moderate leadership. These officers supported General Horatio Gates, the hero of Saratoga, who had a long-standing feud with Washington. This plan called for Washington to end immediately the Gates cabal. In short, the nationalist leaders only wanted the threat of military action to frighten Congress into passing commutation and therefore necessitate the creation of a national funding system. Both plans, however, involved considerable risk because either attempt could create chaos and civil war and thus work against the type of strong national government that the nationalists wanted.

On 13 February news arrived in Philadelphia that the United States and Great Britain had signed preliminary articles of peace. Since peace might now be imminent, the nationalists needed to act before the war ended and Congress disbanded the army. Hamilton wrote to Washington that he should prepare for the worst from a suffering army that might reject his leadership. Hamilton's letter was a warning to Washington that a mutiny might be developing. In this way the nationalists wanted to guarantee that Washington would be prepared to stop an insurrection by some of the officers. On 27 February Washington received a second warning, from Congressman Joseph Jones, who informed the commander that "reports are freely circulated here, that there are dangerous combinations in the army; and within a few days past it has been said, that they are about to declare they will not disband until their demands are complied with."

Colonel Brooks, who was in Newburgh when Washington received Hamilton's letter, wished to establish direct contact between Knox and the nationalists. Knox, who had been a leader in the agitation against Congress for nearly a year, seemed the best choice to lead a temporary insurrection. But Knox now asserted that he considered "the reputation of the American Army as one of the most immaculate things on earth." It was clear he would not support a mutiny. When his refusal reached Philadelphia, the nationalists, who had been unable to get the impost plan passed, created a shaky coalition in favor of commutation. But news of peace could arrive at any time. Therefore, Colonel Walter Stewart, a representative of the nationalists, now told Gates that it was time for his group at Newburgh to act. Indeed, according to Gates, "Stewart was a kind of agent from our friends in congress and in the administration."

Two days later, on 10 March, an anonymously published memorial was circulated at Newburgh calling for a meeting of all field officers and company representatives for eleven o'clock the next morning to plan a new approach to get redress of their problems by Congress. This call was the first of the famous Newburgh Addresses. Penned in Gates's quarters with his approval by one of his aides, John Armstrong, the document denounced Washington and others for their moderation and advocated mutiny. The address asserted: "If the present moment be lost every future effort is in vain; and your threats then, will be as empty as your entreaties now. . . . If your determination be in any proportion to your wrongs, carry your appeal from the justice to the fears of government." If the terms of the officers' December petition were not met, the army could act in one of two ways, depending on the state of the war: if peace was declared, the army would not disband nor disarm until it was properly compensated; if the war continued, the officers would retire to their homes until Congress upheld its promises. In short, the address was advocating, at the least, insubordination that would be detrimental to the United States. Such efforts, according to the Articles of War, would be considered mutinous. Despite being forewarned by Hamilton, a shocked and exasperated Washington now declared that the officers were about to throw "themselves into a gulph of Civil horror." In response to the address, Washington issued general orders that refuted the document's ideas and objected to the address's invitation for an immediate meeting. Instead, Washington called for a meeting at noon on Saturday, 15 March. He clearly hoped that the five-day period before the meeting would lead to a reduction of the officers' anger. Moreover, Washington would attend the meeting and thus directly confront those officers instigating unrest. But Armstrong quickly countered with the second Newburgh Address, which said that a meeting on Saturday would be as good as the one that had been planned for Tuesday. Therefore, stated Armstrong, Washington obviously approved of the officers' efforts to gain redress of their grievances.

On Saturday, as tensions remained high, the officers gathered at the "Temple of Virtue," which was the recently constructed log-and-board meetinghouse that Washington had ordered built in December. When Gates opened the meeting, Washington entered the room and requested permission to speak to the officers. The commander in chief asserted that he had been "a faithful friend to the army" and "the con-
stant companion and witness of your distresses.” He then attacked the first Newburgh Address, declaring that it was “subversive of all order and discipline” with its “insidious purposes.” Washington denounced “something so shocking” as the Army contemplating action against Congress and thus “plotting the ruin of both, by sowing the seeds of discord and separation” between the civil authorities and the military. He further declared that the writer of the Newburgh Address was “an insidious foe” of the army and the country who would disgrace the military and lead the officers “like sheep, to the slaughter.” The commander in chief then concluded his speech by appealing to the officers to reject any effort that would “open the flood-gates of civil discord, and deluge our rising empire in blood.”

Washington, however, recognized that the officers remained unmoved. He therefore pulled from his pocket a letter from a Congressman that informed the commander that Congress would ultimately provide proper compensation for the officers. As he put on a pair of glasses that he recently had to obtain, Washington noticed that many officers were shocked to see him wearing spectacles. He explained to his subordinates that he had grown gray in the service of his country, and now he found himself becoming blind. This simple statement about his own service and sacrifices to the nation achieved what his speech had failed to do. The officers were now in tears as they listened to Washington finish the Congressman’s letter. He then left the Temple of Virtue, believing that he had won over the officers and put the danger of mutiny at an end. But Washington’s departure was a daring action, since Gates was still presiding at the meeting. Washington’s lieutenants, however, moved to gain control of the proceedings. Knox introduced a motion declaring the army’s “unshaken confidence” in Congress and requested that Washington again write to Congress concerning commutation. The officers voted their approval and expressed their disdain of the “infamous propositions” in the Newburgh Addresses. Only Timothy Pickering objected to this proposal, but no one supported his view. The meeting adjourned, thus ending the conspiracy.

When Congress on 17 March heard from Washington about the recent developments at Newburgh, its members were so shaken by the situation that they passed commutation and an impost amendment. Limited to twenty-five years, the impost’s revenue could only be used for paying debts. This tax was not the permanent source of revenue that the nationalists wanted, but it provided the means for funding the lump-sum payments to the officers. In that sense, the plotters in the army gained what they wanted. If Washington had been unable to suppress the conspiracy, it would have undoubtedly led to bloodshed, and civil-military relations would have been severely, perhaps irreparably, damaged. The Newburgh Conspiracy is thus most important for what did not occur. A year after the collapse of the conspiracy, Thomas Jefferson asserted to Washington “that the moderation and virtue of a single character has probably prevented this revolution from being closed as most others have been by a subversion of the liberty it was intended to establish.”

—STEVEN E. SIRY,
BALDWIN-WALLACE COLLEGE

**Viewpoint:**
No. The situation at Newburgh, although potentially dangerous, did not become a serious threat to the government because the nationalists and Army dissidents had no unified plan of action.

Historians have long accepted George Washington’s view of the events at Newburgh in March 1783, that an ominous challenge to his own and Congress’s authority was present. Some historians believe that a coup d’état was in the works. An anonymous author called for an officers’ meeting in an open letter to the camp that excluded the commander. On Saturday the 15th, “the Ides of March,” General Washington held a meeting with his officers. He responded to two letters, labeled afterward as the “Newburgh Addresses,” which chided the Congress first for denying the officers their half-pay pensions, and then for its 4 February rejection of a commutation of those pensions into a lump-sum bonus. The letters called upon the officers to meet and to draft a stronger remonstrance for their grievances. As the War of Independence (1775–1783) wound down, most expected news of peace to arrive from Paris any day. The army feared that once they became obsolete Congress would forget them, their service, and their just reward.

Washington believed that some within his command, perhaps General Horatio Gates, the “Hero of Saratoga,” and his young aide-de-camp Major John Armstrong, would agitate the troops for political effect in the event Congress snubbed their entreaties. Indeed, the first Newburgh Address advised the officers:

> to come to some final opinion, upon what you can bear and what you will suffer . . . . carry your appeal from the justice to the fears of the
Cantonments. 11th March 1783

Agreed to by the General Officers of the 1st Division of the American Army, and
The Officers of the Continental Army at Newburgh, New York, March 10th, 1783.

To the Gentlemen Officers, adjutants and aides-de-camp, at the Newburgh Cantonment:

Gentlemen,

The General has been informed, in the most unequivocal manner, of your determination to resign your commissions, as officers of the American Army, and to rejoin your respective states. The General fully conveys the sentiments of the people of this nation, in viewing this event with deep regret. While he has no wish to obstruct the just claims of individuals, he cannot consent to the establishment of a precedent for resigning the commission of the General in chief. The spirit of this country has been influenced by the conduct of the General, and he hopes, in return, that his conduct may command yours.

A general council is about to take place, at 11 o'clock to-morrow morning, at this place, to consider of the measures of the General in chief, in the proper and necessary mode. The General trusts that every officer will attend to the business of the day, and that no preventable delay will occur.

The General will, as soon as possible, give his opinion on the subject of resigning his commission.

Newburgh, 11th March, 1783.
government—Change the milk-and-water style of your last memorial; assume a bolder tone—decent, but lively, spirited and determined, and suspect the man who would advise to more moderation and longer forbearance. Let two or three men . . . be appointed to draw up your last remonstrance . . . in language that will neither dishonor you by its rudeness, nor betray you by its fears. Tell them that though despair itself can never drive you into dishonor, it may drive you from the field: . . . that in any political event, the army has its alternative. If peace, that nothing shall separate you from your arms but death: if war, that courting the auspices, and inviting the direction of your illustrious leader, you will retire to some unsettled country.

Despite the referral to their “illustrious leader,” Washington perceived the address as a serious threat to his command, to the nation, and to the Revolution itself. He therefore dignified it with a stinging rebuke:

The way is plain, says the anonymous Addresser. If War continues, remove to the unsettled Country . . . If Peace takes place, never sheath your Swords says he until you have obtained full and ample justice; this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our Country in the extremest hour of her distress, or turning our arms against it, (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea. My God! what can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the Army? Can he be a friend to this Country? Rather, is he not an insidious Foe?

Many historians have extrapolated from Washington’s reaction that a conspiracy for a military coup d’état against the central government lay just beneath the surface.

Yet, while Washington scorned the tone of the addresses and claimed that it was “sowing the seeds of discord & separation between the civil & military powers of the continent,” he stopped short of identifying it as an attempted coup d’état. The Mount Vernon farmer knew that the distinction between “sowing the seeds” and reaping a harvest was a significant one. The address was indeed an incendiary threat to mutiny if Congress failed to pass commutation, but there is no evidence that it represented a coup d’état. Washington knew the difference, which is precisely why he chose to extinguish the threat with words and gestures rather than actions. Speaking before his officers, he drew his eyeglasses from his pocket and apologized: “I have grown gray in your service, and now I find myself going blind.” The general understood that his candor and the example of his own sacrifice would be enough to arouse the virtue of his men. The fact that the officers immediately and unanimously renounced the Newburgh Addresses revealed that those tracts were rhetorical threats and not yet backed by firm plans. Afterward, Washington only informally sought the source of the calumny in letters to his comrades, and the Army did not file charges or pursue courts-martial.

There is no proof anyone ever planned a coup d’état at Newburgh. Even historian Richard H. Kohn, the strongest proponent of the “coup thesis,” argues inconsistently. “The exact nature of the group and its plans will probably never be known,” he writes, but “there are strong hints that they talked of replacing Congress and ruling themselves, either as individuals under a new form of government or through military dictatorship.” Those “strong hints” consisted only of conversations between Armstrong, Gates, and a few other officers during the winter of 1783, which evinced a discontented “mood” and frustration with Washington’s refusal to lobby Congress more strenuously on the Army’s behalf. None of the extant correspondence contains specific mention of anything like a coup d’état. Kohn concedes that as “anything approaching a coup d’état, however, the Newburgh Conspiracy never got off the ground. . . . Analyzing the affair as a coup, then becomes the analysis of an event that never happened, using evidence that probably never existed, or was immediately destroyed because of its seditious implications.” To present the affair as a coup, Kohn admitted his reliance on circumstantial evidence. Such an interpretation makes for an intriguing mystery and an exciting story but is bad history. Facts function as the fundamental tools for historians. They provide us with an anchor of reality in the stormy seas of surmise. Circumstantial evidence can be an appropriate tool for historians, but only as a supplement to direct evidence, not in its stead. It is one thing to offer speculation about the range of possibilities that circumstantial evidence may suggest, but it is entirely another to draw conclusions from inference and appearance. Using only circumstantial evidence, one can concoct any sort of past reality they wish to suit whatever purposes. Even if the principal suspects destroyed the “smoking gun,” one cannot convict them on motive alone, especially in this case, where the gun, if indeed there was one, was never found and never fired.

Moreover, even if there was a planned coup, it probably would not have presented a serious threat to the national government. Here again, even Kohn agrees: “A country so dispersed geographically, with so many conflicting interests and groups, so many local sources of power and authority, could never be united by the bayonet, especially in the face of the deeply rooted tradition of antimilitarism. The attempt would only
bring on chaos and civil war." A coup would bring turmoil, then, but would not be likely to succeed. Even Washington himself later admitted in a 23 February 1797 letter to Armstrong, the author of the first Newburgh Address, that he thought "that the object of the author was just, honorable, and friendly to the country, though the means suggested by him were certainly liable to much misunderstanding and abuse." This statement comes from a man who was not one to forgive and forget, as evidenced in the 1790s by his refusal to correspond with his long-time, close personal friend and former political ally, James Madison, over a partisan political dispute. The "object" that Washington believed to be "just, honorable, and friendly to the country" was the political end behind the means of the Newburgh Addresses.

The Newburgh Conspiracy had more to do with political machinations in the Confederation Congress than mutiny at Newburgh. In the time between when Congress declined on commutation and the release of the first address, Major Samuel Shaw noted in his journal from Newburgh that although the decision by Congress was "far from being satisfactory . . . the certainty that we were on the eve of a general peace, kept the army quiet." Likewise, General Washington recalled quiet in the camp in the days prior to the address. The mood did not seem mutinous, much less rebellious, and this condition no doubt concerned many nationalists in Philadelphia.

The closing of the war found the young Confederacy in tremendous debt. The nation was in hock to the French, Spanish, Dutch, and British merchants, its own citizens, and the army. Meanwhile, the confederated states were at odds over how and when to pay these debts. Some favored rapid payment in specie (gold coin), while others chose to extinguish their debts gradually and with paper money. Most important was the fact that each state had this choice and that the Confederation could not coerce a single method or plan. The Congress could only requisition the states to contribute their tax money to the national treasury for disbursement to creditors; it could not tax the states or the people directly for this purpose. In order to sidestep these republican limitations, some Congressmen who advocated greater power for the Confederate body devised a plan for a national impost to raise gold coin and to fund the states' debts, perhaps with the future possibility of consolidation. Such a plan would not only satisfy the creditors and thus ensure international and domestic security but would also provide the national government with a measure of independence from the states in the form of a permanent revenue. When, in December 1782, Virginia stunned the Congress by repealing its 1781 ratification of the impost, the plan for public credit seemed lost—until the Army's memorial arrived later that week.

The Army's discontent was the nationalists' windfall, and they used it immediately to leverage support for the funding system. Robert Morris, Superintendent of Finance, met with General Alexander McDougall and his officers the day following their arrival in Philadelphia and impressed upon him the Army's role in procuring the funding system, and with it, their commutation. McDougall sought first to enlist General Henry Knox to unite "the influence of Congress with that of the Army and the public creditors to obtain permanent funds for the United States" by spreading rumors of the Army's discontent. Such a plan, McDougall argued, would provide the "most ultimate Security to the Army." General Washington, they knew, would not dare mix military influence with civil matters. But Knox would have none of it either and refused to participate in the political game. He did not even respond to McDougall's letter, which made nationalists uneasy since, as of 22 January, they were still shy of the votes needed to pass commutation and funding proposals. Robert Morris then threatened that he would resign in May if "permanent provision for the public debts of every kind" were not forthcoming. Gouverneur Morris, the financier's assistant and delegate from New York, wrote to Knox to plead his assistance, and McDougall also sent him another letter suggesting that the Army would have to threaten mutiny by a public affirmation of its intention not to disband until Congress redressed its grievances. When Knox again refused to play the political game, this time in a letter to McDougall on 21 February, it is likely, though not certain, that Alexander Hamilton, the Morrises, or McDougall then approached General Gates, a longtime Washington adversary. Hamilton later admitted to Washington that he had been involved in the intrigue that led to the Newburgh Addresses, but he provided no specific details. There is no direct evidence to connect the nationalists to the Newburgh Addresses, other than correspondence between them and Gates's officers over other matters. The strongest bit of circumstantial evidence is that Armstrong penned the first address only days after McDougall's associate, Colonel Walter Stewart, arrived in Newburgh from Philadelphia. From there, Armstrong drafted the document in Gates's quarters in the presence of about a dozen other officers under Gates's command. It is not clear that Gates was present, but his writings in later years confirm his awareness of the events.

Hamilton and the Morrises wanted to use the army as a pressure group upon Congress.
More specifically, they wanted to use the threat of an unsatisfied army to prod Congress to act not only for the benefit of its soon-to-be veterans but also for the fiscal welfare and future security of the nation. It is unlikely that Hamilton, the Morrices, Gates, or Armstrong had any real intentions of exercising that threat. One cannot say that they planned to carry out their threat because there is no direct evidence whatsoever to sustain such a charge. One can say, however, that they did not carry it out. Had they intended to foment a coup, why would Hamilton have warned Washington about a challenge to his authority on 13 February 1783? Why did not the conspirators circulate a concerted plan of action or at least sour the mood of the enlisted men in the days after 4 February? Why was Washington’s simple display of self-sacrifice enough to allay the discontent? Why was there no coup d’état? The answer to all of these questions seems plain: there was apparently no plan at all. The Newburgh Address posed the political threat of a possible future mutiny, not an immediate call to mutiny or a coup d’état. Again, even if it was a planned coup, it would most likely have failed. Washington’s lieutenants stood firmly behind him, with the possible exceptions of Gates and McDougall. There is no evidence to suggest that Generals Knox, Arthur Lee, Arthur St. Clair, or Secretary of War Benjamin Lincoln were willing to follow a “Brutus,” and Gates probably knew it. Indeed, if the nationalists contacted Gates when Knox declined, Gates would have known that an important and sizable group of the officer corps would have been unavailable to him in any attempt to seize power either from Washington or from Congress. Armstrong’s address, with Gates’s approval, was an unlikely attempt at a coup d’état and more likely a political ploy, one that might have had some effect. Having rejected half-pay pensions for life, Congress eventually approved a commutation of full pay for five years.

—PAUL DOUGLAS NEWMAN, UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH AT JOHNSTOWN

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