"Learning to Think Nationally:

The Realities and Challenges of Washington's World"

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The three lectures that I'll be giving as part of this series are all geared at giving a better understanding of Washington as a political leader. Tonight's lecture sets the scene by showing the shared mentality of Washington's world. The next lecture addresses Washington's presidency and the difficulties of being America's first president. And the third lecture looks at an often-overlooked aspect of Washington's life and career: Washington the politician in his retirement years, when he revealed himself to be a real Republican-hating, Jefferson-distrusting, angry, threatened Federalist. It's an image of Washington that we rarely see. So, in a way, these three lectures will be discussing the crafting of a new nation and Washington's role within that project.

Tonight's lecture sets the scene. Tonight I'm going to discuss how Americans thought about their nation during the 1770s and 1780s, and look at some of the challenges that different types of Americans faced as a new nation slowly began to take shape. I'll do this in two parts. First, I'll discuss the ways in which the realities of fighting the war gave people a new "national" outlook in the army, in civilian life, and in the Continental Congress alike. Involvement in a shared Revolution taught people a lot about conceiving of the emerging United States as some kind of nation; people were learning about national boundaries. Second, I'll discuss how the meaning of the American Revolution

changed people's understandings of their personal boundaries; in other words, I'll discuss how people of all ranks had new expectations for their lives as a result of participating in the war.

Let's begin with the first "lesson," the ways in which the realities of fighting the war gave people a new "national" outlook. Perhaps on the most obvious level, what soldiers, citizens, and statesmen alike learned from the American Revolution was that there was some sort of emergent American nation; people were learning to think nationally. Obvious as this may appear, the fact is that this population of colonists living in individual colony nation-states made something of an intellectual leap when they began to conceive of an American nation.

It's difficult to conceive of the localized nature of the eighteenth-century colonial world. Many people were born, lived, and died in one small, defined area – their town and maybe one or two neighboring towns – never traveling more than a few miles distance. Many lived and died without ever seeing someone from a distant region of the country. For some northerners, a "Southerner" was something quite exotic, and vice versa.

Although we tend to lump people of this period under titles like "Americans" or "colonists," in fact, they were far from a unified block. In many ways, people envisioned their colonies as their "country." Jefferson called Virginia "my country" well into the 1790s. There was certainly no reason to assume that a union between thirteen separate

nation-states would be natural or even logical. The colonies were founded as individual ventures by different peoples for different purposes, and they had very different cultures, dialects, habits, and lifestyles.

Because the political elite left behind a lot of documentation, their papers offer some striking evidence of this mindset, particularly when men from different geographical regions came together in places like the First Continental Congress. It's almost comical to read the letters and diaries of delegates to the Continental Congress, where people were often meeting people from distant regions for the first time. Southerners laughed at the formality and the stiff awkwardness of the New Englanders. Or . . . they did less than laugh. For example, listen to George Washington's reaction when he was first given command of the Continental Army, which – at the time – was largely composed of New Englanders. He summed up his thoughts in one pithy sentence: New Englanders are "an exceeding dirty and nasty people."

Northerners, in turn, often thought of Southerners as ostentatious, loud, and obnoxious. They wore brightly colored (i.e. "obnoxious" clothes), and seemed to have an inflated sense of their own importance; as John Adams famously said about Virginians: "All of their geese are swans."

In essence, in many ways, colonists from different regions were like foreigners. Viewed in this context, you can begin to see why the idea of any sort of real union was both radical, and to many, patently impossible to achieve. You can also begin to get a

sense of the radical nature of the Declaration of Independence, which formally joined the American colonists in a shared cause.

There were a number of ways in which people learned to see beyond their town and colony (and eventually, state). Certainly, participating in the Continental Congress (or any such "national" political effort) helped to nationalize their thoughts. Even as they complained about "foreigners" from distant regions, they were learning to interact, to see one another as part of a national whole.

Many common soldiers learned a similar lesson from their experiences on the battlefield during the Revolution. For many, joining the Continental Army gave them their first exposure to men from different regions, and – equally important – took them bodily to distant regions in the normal course of traveling to encampments and battlefields. Many gained a sense of a national "something" for the first time.

Newspapers spread this growing sense of nationalism by reporting events from throughout the colonies, both battlefield reports and reports of public demonstrations (parades and protests). By reading about war efforts in distant regions and experiencing similar efforts in their own, people came to fully appreciate the war as a national event. People who boycotted British manufactured goods and then read about similar efforts in other colonies – men and women alike – felt that they were part of a shared cause, a larger "American" whole. In essence, the Revolution forged bonds of communication

and sentiment between the different parts of the Union, helped along by the connecting web of the press.

George Washington's top officers and aides during the Revolution also learned to think nationally. Of course, on one level, they could hardly avoid thinking this way; they were literally planning a national campaign using troops from throughout the different states. But they were learning about the bounds of the emerging nation on a deeper level as well. In many ways, Washington's military headquarters was a sort of training ground for nationalists, teaching lessons of what Washington's aide Alexander Hamilton called the political "imbecility" of the Continental Congress – as I'll discuss in a moment. It's not accidental that many of the men who surrounded Washington during the war – Washington's aides and generals – went on to become strong proponents of a stronger national government.

What happened at Washington's headquarters that taught such powerful nationalist lessons? In large part, the main problem was contending with a Congress – the Continental Congress – that had almost no ability to force the states to support the war effort with supplies or money. Of course, it wasn't that Congress – or the states – didn't support the war effort. Rather, there seemed to be no way to get the states to jointly organize their efforts towards a shared cause. There seemed to be no source of strength at the center of this collection of states. Congress under the Articles of Confederation was an administrative center of a league of independent states, its members more like appointed diplomats from separate nations than representatives of one

unified whole. The frustrations of dealing with this decentralized government during the war led many of Washington's officers to push for a stronger national government even before the war ended; Hamilton was calling for this as early as 1778.

Washington certainly learned this lesson about the problems inherent in America's weak national government during the Revolution.   As he wrote in 1783:

> No man in the United States is, or can be more deeply impressed with the necessity of a reform in our present Confederation than myself. No man perhaps has felt the bad effects of it more sensibly; for to the defects thereof, & want of Powers in Congress may justly be ascribed the prolongation of the War, & consequently the Expences occasioned by it. More than half the perplexities I have experienced in the course of my command, and almost the whole of the difficulties & distress of the Army, have there origin here.

That's quite a charge against Congress – that it prolonged the war and tormented the army. In fact, judging from several of Washington's letters, he was engaged in an ongoing nationalization campaign. As he explained to Alexander Hamilton in another letter, "All my private letters have teemed with these Sentiments [stressing the importance of strengthening the government], & whenever this topic has been the subject of conversation, I have endeavoured to diffuse & enforce them."

Washington, Hamilton, and others were compelled to make such efforts because, much as it might not make sense to us in hindsight, there were many people who were extremely opposed to the idea of strengthening the central government, fearful that doing

so would somehow reduce the importance or power of their home state. I'll mention a sub-point here that I'll come back to in my next lecture: it's important to remember, when looking back at the founding period, that <u>nothing</u> was inevitable. Nothing was foreordained. Things that seem obvious to us – of course they needed to strengthen the national government – of course they needed to ratify the Constitution – were by no means obvious at the time. To really understand this period, it is vitally important to look through eighteenth-century eyes and see how frightening, unsure, unexpected, and experimental the period's politics seemed to people at the time. To understand history, you have to allow for contingency.

So, here, with resistance to a stronger national government, we have a sub-lesson of the American Revolution: people began to think nationally, but there was no common agreement about precisely how national or centralized this new government should be. In essence, during the 1780s, Americans were learning about the difficulties inherent in meshing idealistic possibilities with ugly realities and complications. As Benjamin Franklin put it, "Everyone cries, a union is necessary, but when they come to the manner and form of the union, their weak noodles are perfectly distracted." The 1780s reinforced this clash between realities and possibilities, revealing that in the absence of a war, the states had little to no interest in contributing money or energies to a shared cause. This was the ugly little surprise of the 1780s; in the absence of a war, the states didn't seem to care much about things that happened outside of their state. By 1787, such concerns led to the Constitutional Convention and a new, more centralized government.

We've seen how the Revolution taught several different lessons about nationalism. Let's turn now to the second category of lessons involving personal boundaries and people's understandings of their lives. Once again, thanks to the happy existence of lots of documentary evidence, I'll start with the political elite. Certainly, for men in positions of power, the Revolution broadened their horizons remarkably. We tend to think of the founding generation as men "destined for greatness," but in reality, before the Revolution, they were simply colonists going about their daily lives. Many of them were leading men in their communities with local political power. But they were not "founders destined for greatness." They did have much in common. Many leading men in that generation had law degrees. They owned land or were successful merchants. Many shouldered arms during the Revolution. During the 1770s and 1780s, most were legislators, either in their state assemblies, or in the Continental or Confederation congresses.

Of course, there was a lot of variety in rank and prosperity within this cohort of men. Just look at Roger Sherman from my home state of Connecticut. On the one hand, Sherman was an unquestioned founder. He is the only man who signed all four of America's founding documents: the Articles of Association of 1774, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution. But he was also – as someone at the Constitutional Convention put it, "the oddest shaped character I ever remember to have met with." Sherman was a quirky New Englander, who was at one time or another, a cobbler, an almanac-maker, and a lawyer, and he apparently spoke very plainly with an odd accent, or as one contemporary put it, a "strange New England cant."

Clearly, you did not have to be a large plantation owner or a wealthy merchant to be among the nation's ruling elite.

Before the Revolution, these men were living lives with predictable boundaries. In many ways, de Tocqueville's comment about Americans in the nineteenth century applies to the founding generation before the start of the Revolution:

> No Americans are devoid of a yearning desire to rise; but hardly any appear to entertain hopes of great magnitude, or to pursue very lofty aims. All are constantly seeking to acquire property, power, reputation; few contemplate these things on a great scale . . . Ambitious men in democracies are [little] . . . engrossed . . . with the interests and judgments of posterity; the present moment alone engages and absorbs them.

This was certainly true of many of the "founders" before the Revolution. George Washington lusted after land and was ambitious for honor and reputation in a very immediate sense; he wanted to obtain a Colonel's commission in the British regular army. John Adams was on his way to becoming a lawyer, as was Thomas Jefferson. Listen to Adams describe how limited his horizons appeared before the Revolution opened them. Writing to Jefferson when they were both in old age, Adams wrote:

> When I was young, the Summum Bonum [ultimate height] in Massachusetts was to be worth ten thousand pounds Sterling, ride in a Chariot [a carriage], be a Colonel of a Regiment of Militia and hold a seat in his Majesty's Council. No Man's Imagination aspired to anything higher beneath the skies.

As Adams's comment suggests, the Revolution and its aftermath expanded the horizons of an entire generation, certainly among the elite. These were men who would ultimately help to write constitutions and organize a new nation. In the wake of the Revolution, the departure of the British empire in America left a vacuum of power, politics, and leadership, and the colonial elite rushed to fill this vacuum. David Ramsay, who wrote a very early history of the American Revolution in the 1780s, echoed this idea: "before 1776, American legislators made laws 'about yoking hogs, branding cattle, or marking rice.' After 1776 these same men were 'called upon to determine on the issues of peace and war, treaties and negotiations with foreign states, and other subjects interesting to the . . . liberty, sovereignty and independence of a wide extended empire." To Ramsay, the Revolution led to what he called an "expansion of the human mind."

Not only were personal horizons expanding, but for a population of men with classical educations, they were expanding in the best way possible. The nation's elite had all been taught in school – by reading things like Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans – that the greatest thing a man could do to achieve immortal fame was to be a great statesman and found a nation. As the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s unfolded, this is precisely the opportunity that presented itself. As John Adams wrote to Richard Henry Lee in 1777, "You and I, my dear friend, have been sent into life at a time when the greatest lawgivers of antiquity would have wished to live. How few of the human race have ever enjoyed an opportunity of making election of government . . . for themselves or their children." These men knew that they were helping to found a new nation, a

realization that shaped their lives, their actions, and their aspirations for the rest of their days.

Of course, George Washington emerged from the Revolution with the most glorious reputation of all. He had sustained the army through eight years of warfare and allowed the colonies to fulfill their metamorphosis into a confederation of states – and a new nation. Indeed, Washington emerged from the Revolution with not only a national reputation, but an international one. Ironically, perhaps the most powerful thing that Washington did to secure his reputation at home and abroad was to resign his command at the end of the war and return to his farm. Commanders of armies usually seized power and remained in command over the nation, for better or worse. By surrendering power voluntarily and returning home, Washington established himself as a man worth trusting with national power. When King George III heard about what Washington had done, he reportedly said, "If he indeed does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."

So, the Revolution certainly earned reputation – often on a national scale – for the military and eventually the political elite. But it was not only the political elite who had new, higher expectations for their lives due to their experiences during the Revolution. Average American citizens also gained a new sense of their rights as citizens due to the war. Whether they were fighting in the Continental army or sending family members off to fight, depriving themselves of British imported goods, or having their supplies requisitioned by the army, Americans of all kinds felt personally involved in the revolutionary struggle. They had a sense of personal involvement that would grow into a

sense of political entitlement — entitlement to enjoy the benefits of their newly-won liberty and to continue to take an active part in the political process of the new nation that they had helped to found. In essence, people felt that they were entitled to the benefits of <u>their</u> Revolution, including the right to have a discernable and effective political voice.

You can see this spirit on the Maine frontier, where squatters fought for what they saw as their fairly-won, just dues after fighting the Revolution. They had fought to create a new nation; now they wanted a share of it in the form of a plot of land, and they were willing to fight for it. It was their entitlement. You can see this in some of the bitter political conflicts of the 1790s, which partly centered on the question of how much mass political participation was "enough" in a republic. Federalists wanted a minimum of popular "obstruction" of the process of governance; the public should vote and then get out of the way, and if they didn't like the result, they could vote new people into office. Republicans had a more liberal view of the bounds of popular politics. And the people themselves, regardless of their political leanings, had their own, strong ideas about their ability to express their needs, desires, and concerns. They had fought a war and created a nation; now they wanted to enjoy their full rights and privileges.

It's important to note that it was not only <u>men</u> who learned lessons and gained a new sense of self from their involvement in the Revolution. In some ways, the war gave women a new sense of self as well. Some women gained a greater degree of independence. When their husbands, fathers, or brothers went away to fight, they were often left to care for their homes and their family's livelihood. For some women, this

changed their sense of ownership in their lives. Women who participated in non-importation boycotts, or marshaled supplies, or sewed clothing for soldiers may also have gained a sense of themselves as political actors. However, in the end, the lives of women did not undergo a great transformation due to the Revolution, and even their slight change in mindset was terrifying to many men. I've found a genre of newspaper satire in the early 1790s that mocked women who were too interested in politics; one ridiculed a woman who wanted to apply to be the doorkeeper of Congress, and another ridiculed a woman who actually knew the identity of the writers of anonymous political newspaper essays, and was neglecting her family as a result. Women with political sensibilities! Shocking!

So, here you have a clash between women's discovery of themselves as political beings and the prevailing desire (among men) for women to stay in their proper place. One response was the growing popularity of the concept of "republican motherhood" after the Revolution, which basically proposed that women could best support the republic by training their sons for active citizenship. Women should be good republicans, and their job was to train future good republicans. Republican motherhood channeled female political consciousness into private life.

Not surprisingly, a large-scale fight for "liberty" had some resonance for America's slave population as well. Revolutionary rhetoric offered at least the idea of a broadened horizon to slaves throughout the colonies. For example, in 1777 a captain in the Continental Army noted that his slave, Prince, seemed depressed. (Prince was

actually one of the oarsmen who rowed George Washington across the Delaware River). When asked to explain his mood, Prince supposedly replied, "Master, you are going to fight for your liberty, but I have none to fight for." The captain allegedly freed Prince shortly thereafter.

Though only one individual incident, this story reveals a deep personal consciousness of the meaning and import of the period's rhetoric of liberty among those who were enslaved. And some of the enslaved did indeed fight as soldiers during the war. In 1778, roughly 700 black soldiers fought at the Battle of Monmouth within an army of 13,500. Black soldiers tended to be concentrated in a limited number of brigades, and at the war's end, many of these soldiers were freed. These men were consciously fighting for freedom on a very personal level. Apparently, among Connecticut's forces, many black soldiers who signed up to serve in the army reported their last name as "Liberty," or "Freedom," or "Freeman."

The British, of course, were only too happy to take advantage of this discontent, making broad declarations at various points of the war that any slaves who joined the British military ranks would be freed. Some slaves took advantage of this offer and tried to escape from their masters to reach the British. Some actually made it, but rather than gaining their freedom, many found themselves seized as booty and resold into other British colonies, particularly in the West Indies. At the battle of Yorktown, roughly 6000 slaves escaped to Cornwallis to assist him and gain their freedom; when the British began to run out of supplies, they simply forced many of these slaves out of their encampment,

trapping them between the American and British lines where many of them perished. The British ultimately took many slaves with them when they evacuated their former colonies.

Black soldiers, white soldiers, women, and statesmen were all well aware that they were part of something meaningful that reached far beyond their individual lives. On some level, they knew that they were "founders" – they were involved in the founding of a new nation and a new type of nation. Being a "founder" in this sense meant different things to different people, but regardless of who a person was, he or she emerged from the Revolution with a new perspective. Something had changed.

This self-conscious sense of self-creation—this awareness, on the part of Americans of all types that they were a people creating themselves as a nation and determining their national character—is one of the most distinctive aspects of this period and its intellectual mindset. Americans of all ranks and types believed that they had the ability, like no other people in times ancient or modern, to shape their politics and society as they saw fit. As Thomas Paine wrote, Could America be happy becoming independent? "As happy as she pleases; she hath a blank sheet to write upon." This nationalistic optimism was one thread in a developing national point of view.

Of course, a world of beginnings and changes is not only exciting, but terrifying as well. In addition to the period's prevailing optimism was an equally strong vein of pessimism and fear about the ultimate outcome. Anything could happen. It was an

exciting and terrifying realization. The entire political experiment might collapse into chaos at any moment. Every action, every act, every decision had to be considered and re-considered and considered again, to avoid making that one fatal move that could destroy the republic. This sense of fear, like the other qualities that I've discussed this evening, is also a vital part of the period's mindset, and vital to understanding Washington's public life and career. As we'll see in my next lecture, it had a profound shaping influence on Washington's presidency and his efforts to establish this new-fangled thing called a "president of the United States."

So perhaps, this is the broadest lesson learned from the American Revolution: the lesson that Americans were involved in a political experiment that – at least in the eyes of Americans – had potentially world-shaking consequences. Having come to a new understanding of what "nation" really meant – having grown to have some sort of national vision – and having reconsidered their personal boundaries in the process, Americans in the early republic prepared themselves to enter a brave new world.