

We are here tonight in a room where we usually celebrate endings. The Old Senate Chamber is where Congress ratified the Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Revolutionary War. It is where George Washington resigned his commission, ending his time as commander in chief of the Continental Army, a moment which seemed to be the end of the general's public career.

Tonight, however, I want to focus on a beginning – the beginning of George Washington's command of the Continental Army, eight and a half years before the moment we commemorate in this room – and to reflect on Washington as a military leader whose place in world history was anything but guaranteed.

Washington was appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army on June 15, 1775, two months after the battles of Lexington and Concord, and more than a year before the Declaration of Independence was signed. He was nominated by Maryland's own Thomas Johnson, who would become our first elected governor, and he was confirmed by a unanimous vote.

That unanimous vote obscures the complexity of the moment. At the time, Washington was not widely known as a military leader.

He served in the French and Indian War. Commissioned as a major in the militia at the age of 21, he was sent to the frontier – what is now southwestern Pennsylvania – to discourage the French from building forts along the Monongahela River. He was chosen for this not because of his military reputation, but because he had worked along the frontier as a surveyor.

He was subsequently sent back to the frontier with instructions to build roads and establish a fort. He and his men ambushed a French scouting party, and built a small wooden stockade known to history as Fort Necessity. In early July 1754, French soldiers and Iroquois warriors surrounded the fort. After a battle, Washington surrendered but was released on parole.

The following year, the British sent General Edward Braddock to lead the war effort. General Braddock led regular troops – and the most junior regular army officer outranked the most senior colonial militia officer. Washington was offered an unpaid, volunteer position as an aide to General Braddock. Washington wrote to the General's chief aide: "I wish for nothing more earnestly, than to attain a small degree of knowledge in the Military Art." Washington went on to lead a regiment of colonial militia, and he resigned his commission in 1758.

In 1775, Washington's major competitors to lead the Continental Army were more experienced soldiers. Horatio Gates served in the British regular army for nearly 25 years. He fought in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War. Charles Lee served in the British regular army for nearly two decades. During the Seven Years War, he served in North America, Portugal and Poland. Both were certainly qualified to lead the Continental Army.

Yet the Continental Congress turned to Washington. He was well-connected politically, well-liked personally, and – perhaps most importantly – he was a southern officer that northern leaders could support. It probably didn't hurt that he looked the part.

He had designed his uniform – Buff Blue and wore it to Philadelphia. “Dress for Success”! Silas Deane, a delegate from Connecticut, thought Washington had an “easy and soldier-like air” about him.

While Washington may have looked every inch a general—and he was fully six-foot two, he did little to prove that he could successfully *be* a general, especially in the war’s first years. In 1776, his poor strategic decisions let the British push the Americans out of New York City. At the Battle of Brooklyn that August, the Continental Army was nearly destroyed, saved only by the bravery of the Maryland 400, who sacrificed themselves to cover the American retreat. Three months later, nearly 3,000 Americans were killed or captured at Fort Washington, from which many of Washington’s advisers urged him to withdraw, arguing correctly that they couldn’t defend it.

As the defeats built up in 1776, Washington wrote to a cousin:

In short, such is my situation that if I were to wish the bitterest curse to an enemy on this side of the grave, I should put him in my stead with my feelings; and yet I do not know what plan of conduct to pursue. I see the impossibility of serving with reputation, or doing any essential service to the cause by continuing in command, and yet I am told that if I quit the command inevitable ruin will follow from the distraction that will ensue. In confidence I tell you that I never was in such an unhappy, divided state since I was born.I am bereft of every peaceful moment.

The next year, Washington's plans again ended in defeat, at Brandywine and Germantown, and Philadelphia fell to the British. That year came to a close amid the wretched conditions of Valley Forge. 1777's lone bright spot was the victory over the British at Saratoga, which was masterminded not by Washington, but by Gates.

Against this backdrop, Washington's rivals began to circle. Charles Lee had been making comments like this one for some time: "*Entre nous* a certain great man"—Washington—"is most damnably deficient..unless something I do not expect turns up, we are lost!" Two delegates to Congress warned that there was "a general murmur in the people..against the weak conduct of General Washington. His slackness and remissness in the army are so conspicuous that a general languor must ensue, except that some heroic action take place speedily." A popular song celebrating the victory at Saratoga ended "Our cause is just, in God we trust, therefore my boy ne'er fear/Brave Gates will clear America before another year." It was said that Washington had surrounded himself with advisors who gave him nothing but flattery, especially a young lieutenant colonel named Alexander Hamilton.

Gates's supporters looked to him as a savior, and he had been sharing his doubts about Washington with Congress for almost a year by then. Everything came to a head in early January 1778, in an episode that I have long found fascinating, called the Conway Cabal. Thomas Conway, a low-ranking general, had been engaged in secret correspondence with Gates for some time, saying things like "What pity there is but one General Gates!" and "Heaven has been determined to save (the) country;

or a weak General and bad Counsellors would have ruined it (already)!” When Washington inevitably learned about his generals’ conduct—through a drunk officer on Gates’s staff, a Marylander, as it happens—the plan collapsed. Although Gates surely wished to supplant Washington, he wasn’t prepared to move against him in the open. Conway was pushed out of the army soon afterward, and within two years Gates was no longer the hero of Saratoga; instead he would be remembered as the commander of the disastrous loss at Camden, a battle many simply called “Gates’s defeat.”

If Washington had such limited abilities as a general on the battlefield, and was beset by ambitious rivals and a Congress which encumbered him, how did he still have the stature to repel efforts to topple him? For that matter, how did he manage to win the war?

For one thing he had tremendous abilities to see the big picture and to learn from his mistakes. Another was his unmistakable personal leadership. He kept the American army together year after wretched year by making his men believe in “the impossibility of being in a worse condition than their present one,” as one soldier put it in 1776. There are two instances that, to me, perfectly capture Washington’s greatest strengths.

The first is a small incident, from early in 1776, just after Washington had taken command of the army. A recently-arrived contingent of riflemen, wearing the “white linen frocks, ruffled and fringed” of the Virginia backcountry, found themselves subjected to the ridicule of the well-dressed, cosmopolitan New England soldiers. The confrontation quickly

escalated into a monumental brawl, and it was then one soldier, Israel Trask, “saw for the first time the Commander in Chief General Washington.” Trask recounted that

At this juncture, General Washington appeared...With the spring of a deer, he leaped from his saddle...and rushed into the thickest of the melee, with an iron grip seized two tall brawny, athletic, savage looking Riflemen by the throat, keeping them at arms length, alternatively shaking and talking to them. In this position, the (other) belligerents caught sight of the General. Its effect was an instantaneous flight at the top of their speed, in all directions from the scene of the conflict. Less than fifteen minutes had elapsed from the commencement of the row, before the General and his two criminals were the only occupants of the scene of action.

Trask thought that the incident “illustrat(ed)...the intrepidity and physical as well as mental power of the Commander in Chief.” “Bloodshed, imprisonment, trials by court martial were happily prevented, and hostile feelings between the different corps of the army extinguished, by the Physical and Mental Energies exerted by one individual.”

A story like this can seem fanciful, romanticized. And to be sure, Trask was just ten years old when he saw this fight, and he told that story for decades, polishing it carefully, to reveal the right conclusions. But consider, then, how many men recalled seeing Washington among them during the Battle of Trenton, urging the army forward with his cries of “March on, my brave fellows, after me!”

The Battle of Trenton was part of Washington's finest moment as a military commander, and as a Revolutionary leader. Pleading with his soldiers to stay, despite their expiring enlistments, crossing the ice-bound Delaware River in the dark, and marching through New Jersey in an ice storm so awful the elite Hessian troops didn't bother setting guards, since no one could possibly fight in it. Washington was everywhere at Trenton, rallying his army, and again at Princeton a week later—a moment that is depicted on the program for tonight's event. It was a brilliant campaign, well-plotted and well-executed, at a moment when a victory was badly needed to prove to the army and the country—and to Congress—that the Revolution stood a chance.

What's most important to know is that Washington came to understand what was needed for the American army—and American people—to defeat the British. Washington balanced the need to act with the need to preserve the army, since if it was lost there would be neither the men or the will to rebuild it. As eminent historian David Hackett Fischer writes,

The requirement of boldness and activity in war was tempered by another principle, which Washington called prudence. It was always important in an open society and urgently necessary in the winter of 1776. After the disasters around New York, another failure, or even a costly success, could turn the country against them. Washington was mindful of this requirement, and his example helped to establish an American rule. Even when planning bold operations, he reminded his officers about the importance of acting prudently...

Throughout the Revolution George Washington's strategic purposes were constant: to win independence by maintaining American resolve to continue the war, by preserving an American army in being, and by raising the cost of the war to the enemy.

It was something that Washington understood better than any of his rivals, few of whom ever demonstrated any awareness of these imperatives, and better than the British leaders, who never could understand why they weren't winning.

At the outset of the war, Washington had looked for victory in decisive and climactic battles, throwing his 10,000 men against the 20,000 men of the British at Brooklyn. It was the wrong choice: the stakes were too high, and the Americans struggled even to manage a battle so large. Gates favored a defensive war, keeping the Continental Army intact, even if it meant ceding territory to the British. It is an appealing strategy on its face, but could never have received the country's approval. What good is the Revolution if its army hides in the mountains while the British and Hessians capture and occupy the country?

Preserving the army was important, but it wasn't enough. What set Washington apart, even before he resigned his commission in 1783, is how well he learned this lesson, and led an American army to victory.

