
Charles Royster

A Revolutionary People at War

The Continental Army and
American Character, 1775-1783



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CHAPTER I

1775: *Rage Militaire*

From the Battle of Lexington to the Declaration of Independence, all kinds of military exercises, uniforms, and threats aimed at the British enjoyed a wide vogue among Americans. A letter from Philadelphia assured the British that “the Rage Militaire, as the French call a passion for arms, has taken possession of the whole Continent.”¹ Although commitment to American independence grew during the war, this popular *rage militaire* vanished by the end of 1776 and never returned. Even in 1776 it was a weak echo of its loudest moments in 1775. Months before the Lexington and Concord skirmishes, Americans had begun militia drills to prepare for armed resistance. As mobilization progressed, they enthusiastically celebrated the citizens’ rapidly acquired skill in the manual of arms and in field maneuvers. An observer who believed what he heard would have concluded that the survival of liberty depended on widespread voluntary submission to military discipline.

After war began, the Continental Army, most of which besieged Boston until March 1776, became the focus of Americans’ announced determination to surpass the British in military prowess as in virtue. Two strengths, they claimed, ensured this superiority: Americans used only the essentials of drill without an intricate, unnecessary dumb show; and Americans possessed “natural” or “native” or “innate” courage.

The printed manuals of arms and evolutions that Americans used—especially Lewis Nicola’s *Treatise of Military Exercise*

and Timothy Pickering's "easy" plan, adapted from an English model—emphasized simplicity, not show, by using the fewest possible movements to load, fire, and maneuver. General Charles Lee assured Americans that they could dispense with "the tinsel and show of war" and learn the essentials—to load and fire, to form, to retreat, to advance, to change front, to rally by the colors, to reduce from a line of fire (two deep) to a line of impression (four, six, or eight deep)—all in three months.² The Massachusetts Council adopted Pickering's plan because it was not "cloged with many superfluous motions, which only serve to burthen the memory and perplex the Learner."³ Americans, unlike the British, would aim their muskets. In all standard commands, the Continental Army and the state militias would show that intelligent purposefulness could overcome elaborate mechanical dexterity and the superstitious awe that made such techniques formidable. "Away then," Pickering wrote, "with the trappings (as well as tricks) of the parade: *Americans* need them not: *their* eyes are not to be dazzled, nor their hearts awed into servility, by the splendour of equipage and dress: *their* minds are too much enlightened to be duped by a glittering outside."⁴

The revolutionaries could not equal the complexity of British parade and decided they did not want to, but they greatly enjoyed what they had left. Judging from a few loyalist witnesses and from the long time it took the Continental Army to learn to drill, the countless town-square parades and maneuvers of 1775 must have looked pretty poor. In the *Virginia Gazette*, Robert Washington, who wanted a job training soldiers, acknowledged that Americans' early use of firearms, knowledge of the country, and "native Courage" made them superior in the woods. But he warned, "Let us not plume ourselves with this Conceit, that we shall always have the Bush to fight behind." He went to a muster to see "the *Prussian Exercise*, as they call it" but only saw men forming six deep, turning about-face, marching eighteen paces to the rear, opening ranks, and going through slow parade motions of prime and load—"you may call it *Prussian Exercise* if you please; but . . . to lead a Body of brave men, with such counterfeit Discipline, to face a disci-

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plined Enemy, would, in my Opinion, be downright Murder."⁵ After a North Carolina muster and review, a loyalist woman at a dinner party got Robert Howe—soon to be a Continental general—to read aloud to the guests a passage of Shakespeare that she had chosen. As he began to read, he saw that it was the description of Falstaff's farcical recruits. He turned red, but, like a gentleman and a soldier, he finished the passage.⁶

Reviews and drill attracted many spectators; Congress watched parade-ground evolutions on June 8, 1775. Companies drilled by moonlight. Boys between the ages of thirteen and sixteen volunteered. They were commended but turned away. Younger boys played soldier and organized their own companies for drill. One militiaman remembered 1775, the year of his thirteenth birthday: "I obtained a pamphlet in which this exercise was fully explained, according to the best system of the day, which was the Prussian. . . . I made myself so much a master, that I had the honour of standing before the company as *fugleman*."⁷ Everywhere revolutionaries reported rapid progress in discipline. Not many men had uniforms, but those who had them wore them proudly and could read descriptions of themselves in the newspapers. One diarist noted, "Numbers who a few Days ago were plain Countrymen have now clothed themselves in martial Forms—Powdered Hair[—] Sharp pinched Beavers—Uniform in Dress with their Battalion—Swords on their Thighs—and stern in the Art of War."⁸ Some people who saw reviews wrote that Americans were or soon would be equal to any troops in the world.

People could believe this, despite the shortcomings in drill that they must have seen, because they thought that American soldiers were courageous by nature. The Americans' claim to have native courage later became grounds for questioning the importance of the Continental Army, but in 1775 it made the army, with its growing discipline, the main representative of American resistance. The revolutionaries' courage was bolstered by their conviction that God had given them the ability to choose and the zeal to defend liberty for themselves and for mankind. Before "a large Audience" in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, Robert Cooper praised men who were "learning

Yet Americans called themselves innately courageous. Even if we discount much of the talk as rhetoric designed to inspire resistance and to influence the British, most evidence suggests that a great majority of Americans wanted to believe it. On July 17, 1775, Reverend Philip Vickers Fithian walked into Martin's tavern in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, to read the newspapers. He found "Dr. Plunket and three other Gentlemen" talking about two recent sermons—John Carmichael's *A Self-Defensive War Lawful*, preached on June 4, and William Smith's *Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs*, preached on June 23. One of the men said, "D——n the Sermons, Smith's and all. . . . Gunpowder and Lead shall be our Text and Sermon both." According to Fithian, "The Dr . . . gave him a severe Reproof."¹² People urgently wanted to believe that they had the strength to secure freedom, no matter what the threat. The wartime emphasis on a test of military prowess took Americans beyond the strict formulations of their religious and political ideas—they claimed an innate ability to meet that test. Their anxiety exceeded their intellectual consistency. The man who heard the call to arms with secret fear need not wonder whether he could meet it if he could confidently rely on an inborn courage. However, in seeking to spare him doubt, this claim of national bravery could heighten his isolation if his doubts persisted. Americans' religious and political ideas of duty emphasized the need for conscious choice to overcome constant threats to virtue. Revolutionaries knew that the choice was demanding and its success precarious. But if Americans were promised an innate strength that spared them the tension of conscious, fallible choice, how could the man who faltered, short of dying on the battlefield, reconcile his fallible conduct with his claim to patriotic courage?

Americans pressed their claim to native courage extravagantly because they went to war reluctantly. Resistance to British rule became widespread years before the war and grew stronger after hostilities began, and logic said that this meant war. But logic could not make Americans want to fight full-time. By 1776 they were not reluctant rebels, but they were reluctant warriors. For militia who were facing regulars, they

showed great willingness and respectable competence in 1775. They certainly surprised the British. But the revolutionaries sought more: they sought a much-needed confidence to pursue war, which was alien to their vision of the country's future and to the daily life they preferred. To gain this confidence, they united a national conceit of born courage in combat with a sudden acclaim for a superior form of military discipline, easily acquired.

One of the earliest and most common public expressions of readiness for combat portrayed mothers, wives, sisters, and belles eagerly sending the men they loved to defeat the British or to die trying. Addresses to soldiers and appeals for recruits stressed the importance of protecting women from the invader. Newspapers gave special notice to groups of single women and mothers of four or more sons. The former supposedly announced that they would avoid men who shirked service: "Go act the hero, every danger face, / *Love hates a coward's impotent embrace.*"¹³ The latter sent all their sons to the Continental Army at once, asking not to hear of any deaths but by facing the enemy. Better that all should die than that one should return a coward.¹⁴ People repeated these stories privately and liked to hear them. On October 2, 1775, the *New-York Gazette* told of girls at a Kinderhook quilting frolic who stripped a young tory man to his waist and tarred and feathered him with molasses and weeds. Ten days later outside Boston, Daniel McCurtin, a Maryland rifleman, copied the story into his journal.¹⁵ A soldiers' song ran:

A Soldier is a Gentleman his honour is his life
And he that wont Stand by his post will Ne[']er
Stand by his Wife . . .
In Shady Tents and Cooling Streams with hearts all firm and Free
We'll Chase Away the Cares of Life in Songs of Liberty . . .
So Fare you Well you Sweethearts you Smileing girls Adieu
For when the war is Over We'll Kiss it out with you. . . .¹⁶

Revolutionaries were proud that women showed support for the war as spectators at drills and parades. They even liked to say that women demanded resistance more vigorously and

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unitedly than men did. After the Battle of Trenton, a corporal among the Hessian prisoners described their arrival in Philadelphia: "The old women howled dreadfully, and wanted to throttle us all, because we had come to America to rob them of their freedom."¹⁷ Popular accounts told of women who formed military-style companies to display their patriotism or who put on the uniform or who showed the valor of a soldier in a critical moment. Women's willingness to sacrifice would match the native courage of men in the field. Selfishness, worry, and reluctance would vanish amid spontaneous dedication. Not only would women's inspiration encourage men's valor, but women's valor would threaten the weak man with an ignominious contrast.

The war rhetoric of 1775 might look like only a mixture of typical exaggeration and unavoidable ignorance of coming difficulties. After the surrender of Burgoyne in 1777 and of Cornwallis in 1781, Americans recalled how unprepared they had been and how undisciplined the army was in the first year of the war. Yet throughout the war they called for a revival of the spirit of 1775. Even as they failed at, then overcame, difficulties of recruitment, supply, and discipline, they tested their feeble steps and small, gradual successes by the standard of 1775, when, according to the rhetoric of the *rage militaire*, every breast had felt military ardor and every lip had spoken words of self-sacrifice.

Instead of understanding the exaggerations of 1775 as one of the difficulties they had overcome, the revolutionaries kept saying, in effect, If we can accomplish this much despite the weakened public spirit of 1777 or 1778 or 1779, imagine how much more we could do if we had the universal patriotism of 1775. The early discussion of the conduct and the motives of the Continental Army and its relations with the public formed a set of guiding ideas and emotions to which most Americans recurred long after the army itself had altered or abandoned them in practice.

One group of these ideas and emotions defined death. As everyone heard, the choice was liberty or death. Revolutionaries talked much more vividly about the nature and conse-

quences of British enslavement than about the details of death by resistance. The one brought perpetual base submission to the tyrant and his lackeys, enervating the individual's will. The other brought a perpetual afterlife glorified, variously, by the beauties of songs, flowers, and angels, the company of classical deities and geniuses, heroes of antiquity, and saints and martyrs, and the sound of grateful praise by generations of free Americans. A funeral orator in Massachusetts said of a soldier's corpse, "There sleeps (he seems even now to smile in death) a friend of America, a friend to his mother country, the world's friend as far as his charity could reach. . . . Who, that hath worth and merit, would not quit a present uncertain life to live eternally in the memory of present and future ages?"¹⁸ Liberty or death was not a rhetorical exaggeration when the choice referred to the revolutionaries' minds. British slavery would end the earthly ability to imagine the future and choose the way toward it as much as a British musket ball would. Slavery meant an infinite, hereditary misery, while death in resistance meant bliss.

Early in the war, Americans, especially revolutionary leaders, talked freely about large numbers of casualties. The revolutionaries argued not only that death in a glorious cause was rewarding and that risking death was imperative, but also that they did not fear death. They would, according to the spirit of 1775, rush to the field of combat, eager to conquer or to die: "A spirit of enthusiasm for war is gone forth, that has driven away the fear of death."¹⁹ When the deaths came—usually by disease amid filth—the revolutionaries proved as good as their word. The first anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was celebrated with the toast, "May only those Americans enjoy freedom who are ready to die for its defence."²⁰ To be free required a man to risk death. What proved hard was living in the presence of death—that is, not only serving but surviving to serve further. Americans offered the Continental Army a dual immortality: heaven and posthumous fame. They were far less eloquent about, and often seemed less interested in, the intervening period of service. Revolutionaries enjoyed personal freedom and the liberty of immediate self-government. In their

mind's eye, the happy future—whether he was their vision of an insufficient Patrick Henry—the death to a choice could mean the loss of the choice alternatives: triumph or cause of liberty of 1775 and strength best of them.

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mind's eye, they lived vicariously for centuries in their country's happy future. But while living in the presence of the enemy, whether he was slavery or death, the revolutionaries found that their vision of a clear choice between liberty and death was an insufficient guide to conduct. We should recall that when Patrick Henry declaimed, "Give me liberty or give me death," the death to which he referred was suicide.²¹ Dramatizing the choice could encourage men to fight, because the loss of liberty meant the loss of life as surely as in combat. But dramatizing the choice might also oversimplify the revolutionary's alternatives: triumph or despair. Neither living nor dying in the cause of liberty proved so uncomplicated and easy as the ideals of 1775 announced. A revolutionary would need sources of strength besides native courage or would suffer for the lack of them.

Captain Joseph Jewett found it so as he took thirty-six hours to die of bayonet wounds in his chest and stomach after the Battle of Long Island. On the last morning, he "was sensible of being near his End, often Repeating that it was hard work to Die."²² In one of the battles of Saratoga, Captain John Henry, Patrick Henry's son, distinguished himself in combat. Afterward he walked among the American dead, pausing to recognize men he had known. Then he drew his sword, broke it, threw it on the ground, and raved, mad. Nine months later, his "ill state of Health," according to Washington, caused him to resign his commission.²³

We can see part of the revolutionaries' attitude toward killing in their celebration of the rifle and their special fondness for riflemen. Out of the west came tall men dressed in rifle shirts—also known as hunting shirts—and armed with long, grooved barrels on their weapons. Their bullets hit targets the size of playing cards, oranges, noses, and faces at 60 or 100 or 150 or 200 yards, without fail. According to John Adams, "They have Sworn certain death to the ministerial officers."²⁴ The British were said to fear them so much that every Continental soldier might wear a rifle shirt with good effect. Captain Thomas Pinckney heard that "they apprehend a Rifleman grows naturally behind each Tree and Bush on the Continent."²⁵ A letter

sent from Philadelphia to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in London warned, "Their guns are rifled barrels, and they fight in ambush, five hundred provincials would stop the march of five thousand regulars. And a whole army might be cut off, without knowing where the fire came from."²⁶ American sentries let privates wearing rifle shirts pass but stopped general officers.

Although riflemen remained useful auxiliaries throughout the war, especially as snipers, they enjoyed in the publicity of 1775 a fascination far out of proportion to their role. When the officers of the militia Associators of Philadelphia adopted a uniform for the privates, many Associators protested that it was too expensive; they advocated "the cheapest uniform, such as that of a HUNTING SHIRT, as it will level all distinctions."²⁷ Better than most Continental soldiers, riflemen seemed to unite formidable appearance, awesome reputation, unerring skill, and personal independence. Richard Henry Lee looked at the six western counties of Virginia and saw six thousand men with "their amazing hardihood, their method of living so long in the woods without carrying provisions with them, the exceeding quickness with which they can march to distant parts, and above all, the dexterity . . . in the use of the Rifle Gun. . . . Every shot is fatal."²⁸ Lewis Nicola's treatise recommended that riflemen be exempt from drill because they had a special purpose different from ordinary battlefield maneuvers.²⁹ At Williamsburg, riflemen sneered at the drilling of musketeers. A Virginian's description of riflemen later in the war also held true for 1775: "They are such a boastful, bragging set of people, and think none are men or can fight but themselves."³⁰

The riflemen quickly learned, however, that fighting the British took up little or none of their time, day after day. So they fought each other. Some fought army discipline and wound up in irons. Some deserted to the enemy. The rifle shirt remained popular even after it turned out to be an especially dirty shelter for lice, the carriers of typhus. Moreover, the rifle was a fragile weapon, soon fouled, slow to load, and of little use at close quarters against a bayonet, which it lacked. The British could hardly have asked for a better war than facing an army made up solely of riflemen.³¹

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As the British quickly learned, they did not face such an army. With much less public attention, Americans put the smoothbore musket to a variety of uses. The standard musketball mold left a rib around the ball that gave it an effect like that of a soft-nosed bullet, expanding and ripping what it hit. To enhance this effect, some men split their bullets before loading, causing them to break into four pieces when fired. Americans also fired angular bits of iron, rusty spikes, and balls with nails in them. These did not have the approval of the commander in chief. But on the advice of General Alexander McDougall, Washington did revive an old trick known by Massachusetts farmers before the battle of Lexington—buckshot.

In addition to telling their army how to face death and how to inflict it, the revolutionaries defined the place of the army as an institution. This definition began with suspicion of a standing army. The political ideology that Americans adapted from the English Commonwealth writers warned that a standing army in time of peace was an engine of oppression. In the eighteenth century the favorite example of this truism had become Oliver Cromwell's rule in the 1650s. Yet these English writers worried less about military dictatorship than about the corruption of parliamentary politics by dependents, pensioners, placemen, and others with financial connections. The army meant patronage, and patronage meant power—corrupt power, which eroded liberty by threatening to smash those whom it could not make supine. As J.G.A. Pocock's analysis of republican ideology has explained, the rise of a standing army implicated the people in the corruption of the government. Employment of military professionals meant that citizens were too selfish to sacrifice property, time, or lives by personal military service. Acquiescence in the creation of a permanent army and in the taxation to support it showed that a people were fit for the tyranny that would inevitably follow.³² By the time war came, revolutionaries hardly needed to seek new converts to this thinking. They referred to familiar truths that few people doubted.³³ Americans could never tolerate "this *armed monster*," because "freedom at sufferance is a solecism in politics."³⁴ Freedom

could not last wherever "the powers of hell" introduced "that infernal engine."³⁵

American experience before the war had shown the threat of a standing army in the prolonged presence of British troops in Boston, in Quartering Acts, in the British ministry's pretense of taxation for imperial defense. Even before the conflicts with Parliament in the 1760s and 1770s, Americans had seen generations of military men in British imperial administration and had suffered the high-handed contempt that the British army held for provincials.³⁶ Americans did not intend to corrupt themselves with their own army, which had been created to prevent military subjection. The revolutionaries did not allow their support for the war to overcome their vigilance against the tendency of all people, including Americans, to yield to corruption. A few revolutionaries seem to have disapproved of a standing army in wartime. At least, they used the danger of a standing army to argue against any arrangements for the Continental Army that they opposed. A new tyranny might creep in at once, masked by resistance to an old one. But most revolutionaries did not question the need for a regular army during the war. The most prevalent wartime legacy of the ingrained suspicion of a standing army was not ideological but emotional. The revolutionaries felt a strong distaste for an army in repose, an army as an institution, an army as an organ of the state. Nothing surpassed their admiration for soldiers in combat, and no degree of admiration could allay their intuitive conviction that an officer corps must tend to subvert self-government. We scarcely overstate the revolutionaries' concern by saying that they felt that when the army was not attacking the British, it must be doing some mischief to the revolutionaries.

For national defense in peacetime, the American version of Commonwealth theory preferred the militia. Except for certain exempt groups, the militia ostensibly included all adult males, aged sixteen to sixty. In ordinary times these citizens did their own work—usually farming—without military office or public expense. They would mobilize to face a threat and become the first defenders, fighting for home and family. Their readiness to serve gave a double guarantee for the survival of liberty:

freemen's sacrifice precluded reliance on dangerous mercenaries, and the virtue that citizens proved in the field could sustain self-government.³⁷ Early in the war some revolutionaries argued that the militia, which had proven its competence at Lexington and Bunker Hill, could sustain a large part of the resistance to the British. By late 1776 little attachment to this idea remained. The states continued to send militia instead of recruits to augment the Continental Army for brief periods. Some declarations about citizens defending their homes accompanied these detachments, but the use of militia during the war came more from necessity than from libertarian or egalitarian theory. People in every state preferred and urgently requested the presence of the Continental Army when they felt threatened. But the states never managed to recruit a regular army as large as their delegates in Congress had legislated; so they continued to call out the militia for regular fighting as well as sudden defense.

Samuel Adams was proud of the New England militia and suspicious of a regular army in war as in peace, but in 1780 he wrote to James Warren, a former militia general, "Would any Man in his Senses, who wishes the War may be carried on with Vigor, prefer the temporary and expensive Drafts of Militia, to a permanent and well appointed Army!"³⁸ If revolutionaries preferred a stronger Continental Army, why did they not have one? Almost all revolutionaries agreed that a standing army—no matter how suspect and unwelcome—was necessary. Every state supported the idea that a Continental Army should bear the main fighting; every state tried to recruit and supply it; every state preferred to be defended by it. The states with the most effective militias, such as Massachusetts or New Jersey after 1777, also contributed most to the army. Early in the war revolutionaries agreed that, in theory, the standing-army-versus-militia debate could not be allowed to define the wartime need for a permanent army. Congress did not resist the idea of a large standing army and soon gave up the preference for annual enlistments. Revolutionary leaders who, like Adams, had first relied on the militia then turned more emphatically to the Continental Army and tempered their early distaste for the

soldier. During the war, differences in people's understanding of this term created important divisions among Americans, especially between officers and civilians, but all could agree that the American soldier would return to civil society after defeating the British. They could also agree that while in the service he would become a soldier yet would not serve the army before all others by issuing or obeying orders that violated civil authority. In addition to these unquestioned truths, most revolutionaries expected the citizen-soldier to surpass his mercenary, brutalized enemies. Since he fought to preserve his standing as a citizen against those who would make him a slave, his pride in civil society would help to make him stronger than his opponents in combat. However, when choosing what to do at any given time, the citizen-soldier, unless he chose to do what his superiors told him to do, could not have as much independent choice as the citizen. Nor could the soldiers together choose leaders and courses of action for the group, as citizens could. Thus, although the American soldier had once been only a citizen, would again be only a citizen, and fought to remain a citizen, he could not, while he was a soldier, always conduct himself as civilian citizens might.

The ambiguity in the definition of the status of Continental Army soldiers appeared at once and reappeared throughout the war. Few people analyzed the dilemma it posed. Whether revolutionaries demanded a stronger army or feared a stronger army, they based their demands and fears on the certainty that much of an army's strength lay in its unquestioning obedience to hierarchical command. They celebrated soldiers as freemen but recruited them as subordinates. Most revolutionaries cherished their earliest expectation, strongest in 1775, that the citizen-soldier's love of liberty would accept yet withstand yet animate the discipline of an army. And they harbored their earliest fears that such a feat was impossible—that citizens must fear veterans.

"We must all be soldiers," John Adams wrote to a Boston minister in May of 1776. Seven weeks later, when a student in Adams's law office wanted to enlist, Adams advised him, "We cannot all be soldiers."³⁹ Perhaps in the first instance Adams

spoke figuratively and in the second literally. Similarly, the citizen-soldier remained both a fact and a figure of speech. The revolutionaries' ideal of citizens in arms and the call to all citizens to take up arms conflicted with their experience, which showed that the American who turned soldier had to become a kind of citizen different from his civilian countrymen.

The historian John Shy has called General Charles Lee a "radical" who wanted "a popular war of mass resistance . . . based on military service as an obligation of citizenship." In Lee's praise of American soldiers and militia, Shy sees the general's confidence in zealous citizenship as an alternative to "Prussian" discipline.⁴⁰ Lee, like his fellow Briton William Gordon, cherished a vision of a world redeemed by liberty. America, each hoped, would restore to the world ancient Roman virtue or apostolic Christian love, respectively. Lee, a former lieutenant colonel in the British army, accepted a Continental Army command. Gordon, a minister in Massachusetts who had immigrated in 1770, began at once in 1775 to prepare a history of the revolution. But when Americans' conduct fell short of these dreams, both men grew embittered toward their protégés.

In 1775 Gordon wanted God "to make the Chronicles of the American united Colonies the favourite reading of the godly in this new world till the elect shall be gathered in." But by 1778, Gordon found, the behavior of "the sons of liberty," like that of all mankind, had shown "their depravity." He decided "to have less and less to do with the bulk of them. . . . I mean soon to withdraw myself, and, the ministry excepted, to apply myself solely to the business of a faithful and honest historian." In 1782 Gordon assured Horatio Gates that "the credit of the country and of individuals who now occupy eminencies will be most horridly affected by an *impartial* history." In fact, "Should G Britain mend its constitution . . . life liberty property and character will be safer there than on this side the Atlantic; and an Historian may use the impartial pen there with less danger than here." In 1786, two years before his four-volume work was published in London, Gordon wrote from England, "Several on this side the water have the protection of the law against

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libels; and as they will be likely to suffer by the truth, I must give it in that artful guarded way . . . or they may hoist me into the pillory . . . besides plundering me of all the profits I wish to gain from the History."⁴¹

We may find it hard to discern whose conduct lapsed more rapidly, the Americans' or Gordon's. Similarly, the rhetorical manifestos in which Charles Lee proclaimed political and military radicalism reflected only one side of a revolutionary character even less steadfast than Gordon's. A rhetorical, unanalytical confidence in the virtuous success of the citizen-soldier set Lee up for a more bitter disillusionment than Gordon experienced—a disillusionment in which Lee's radicalism was much less visible than his instability.

In 1774 and 1775 Charles Lee won great favor with Americans by telling them what they wanted to hear: that they need not fear the British army's prowess, because a militia, animated by determination to preserve liberty, could become a formidable infantry. Lee's letter to Burgoyne—reprinted in colonial newspapers—and his private letters in 1775 denied that Americans lacked courage. He praised the enlisted men and "the zeal and alacrity of the militia."⁴² At New York in 1776 Lee's letters took on a new tone: "As to the Minute Men, no account ought to be made of them. Had I been as much acquainted with them when they were summoned as I am at present, I should have exerted myself to prevent their coming."⁴³ He hoped "that Congress will find means of establishing one great Continental regular army, adequate to all the purposes of defence."⁴⁴ Lee heard that the New England delegates favored enlistments of less than one year and commented to Washington, "They say by means of a shorter engagement the whole country would be soldiers. A curious whim, this! Who the devil can fill their heads with such nonsense?"⁴⁵ For the defense of New York City, he wanted "eight thousand, at least, regular troops"; in command at Charleston, Lee reprimanded Colonel William Moultrie for being "too relaxed in Discipline. . . . There cannot be a greater vice."⁴⁶ Although in the autumn months of 1776, before his negligence enabled twenty-five British dragoons to capture him, Lee was still praising the bravery and valor of Continental

soldiers, his tone changed when he was in British hands. He wrote to a British officer, "The fortune of war, the activity of Colonel Harcourt, and the rascality of my own troops, have made me your prisoner. . . . To Colonel Harcourt's activity every commendation is due; had I commanded such men, I had this day been free."⁴⁷

In fact, Lee was a cynic who ultimately felt contempt for almost every person he knew.⁴⁸ When people failed to live up to his image of "the glorious third or fourth century of the Romans"—as everyone eventually did fail—he turned his witty sarcasm against them all: King George III, Burgoyne, Washington, Congress, state officials, officers, soldiers, and militia. When soldiers crossed him, he hit them in the head.⁴⁹ He often said that he liked dogs better than people. According to an anecdote told after his death, a woman once asked him whether he was fond of dogs; "he instantly replied, 'Yes, madam; I love dogs; but I detest *bitches*.'"⁵⁰ He also detested Irishmen, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Lee explained, "If you will examine history you will find all or almost all the Enthusiasts for general liberty had the reputation of being cynically dispos'd."⁵¹ Late in 1775 some Connecticut soldiers whom Lee tried to shame into re-enlisting put graffiti on his door at night. We have little cause to dispute their judgment: "General Lee was a fool and if he had not come here we should not know it."⁵²

In Gordon's and Lee's brief enthusiasm for the virtue of the American revolutionary we see one of the problems engendered by the ideals of 1775: how does one react when one's people fail to attain demanding goals? Gordon and Lee, being Britons, could give up on the faltering Americans. American revolutionaries, however, depended on the establishment of independence to sustain hope even for the future realization of their ideals. If independence could not be won solely by the republican citizen-soldier, it still had to be won. Unlike Gordon and Lee, American revolutionaries would have to find reinforcements for an inadequate enthusiasm. To that end, Americans maintained the ideal of the citizen-soldier while they relegated regular army service to long-term professional soldiers. Revolutionaries wanted to believe that they were all

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combatants and that being freemen gave them military prowess. But they quickly lost enthusiasm for sustained military training or for universal military service in a regular army. The short-lived *rage militaire*, on which Charles Lee's reputation as an experienced and learned officer rode high in 1775, lasted only as long as the quick mastery of arms seemed easy. When rigor, even simplified rigor, and prolonged duty seemed necessary, Americans feared that the citizen would be lost in the soldier. They preferred to retain their original figurative ideal; they could not be won over to a more literal definition of the citizen-soldier, either by Lee's call for rotating universal conscription or by other officers' arguments that long-term Continental soldiers were the most patriotic citizens.

Revolutionaries believed that the citizen-soldiers required a special kind of commander. The selection and evaluation of general officers filled much of Congress's time and attracted wide attention. The Americans' expectations of their military leaders manifested once more their early hope to fight a voluntary, virtuous, enthusiastic war. In June 1775, Congress made generals of George Washington, Artemas Ward, Charles Lee, Philip Schuyler, Israel Putnam, Richard Montgomery, Horatio Gates, William Heath, Joseph Spencer, John Sullivan, John Thomas, Nathanael Greene, and David Wooster. Possibly excepting Lee's rank in Europe, none of these men had been regular army generals before. A *Royal Gazette* verse about Sullivan could describe them all: "Make him a Gen'ral—Gen'ral strait he grows."⁵³ The loyalists sneered at the pretense of an unlawful legislature's fiat commissions—unsanctioned by wide experience, by professional evaluation, or, in some cases, by social position. Loyalist newspapers and verse never tired of parodying the American generals' former occupations, battlefield bumbling, and inelegant public writings. Even a delegate in Congress was reminded of paper dollars when he voted for "a new emission of Brigadier-Generals."⁵⁴ Yet these officers received immediate, widespread respect as generals. Like the revolutionary civil governments, Continental Army commissions acquired an instant legitimacy. The widespread support

for resistance to Britain helped secure respect for those charged with leading it.

Continental generals enjoyed two other sanctions for their overnight professional status. First, Congress had selected them through an intentionally political process of state and sectional balancing. Experience and alleged expertise, as with the former British army officers Lee and Gates, recommended some of them as well, but delegates in Congress dickered over quotas and seniority based on political connections. Revolutionaries were not used to an American army, but they were used to American politics, an art in which they consistently outclassed the loyalists. The endorsements of Congress carried immediate conviction partly because they came out of a familiar process of reconciling varied interests and opinions.⁵⁵ Second, Americans thought that they knew what being a general meant, and these ideas encouraged the quick acceptance of the Continental Army commanders. The revolutionaries' assumptions about generals emerged more clearly in 1776 and 1777, when people began to find fault with the ones they had. We can better understand this disappointment if we know what they expected.

Apart from Washington, the American general most discussed in 1775 was not a Continental officer but a major general in the Massachusetts militia—Joseph Warren, who had been killed in the Battle of Bunker Hill before Congress had appointed generals. He was also a doctor and a revolutionary political leader in Massachusetts. Because Warren's commission as a general was not yet in force, he had declined a command and had fought in the ranks, but the poetic, dramatic, and rhetorical accounts of his service nevertheless portrayed a general leading "an inspired yeomanry, all sinew and soul":⁵⁶

From rank to rank the daring warrior flies,
And bids the thunder of the battle rise.
Sudden arrangements of his troops are made,
And sudden movements round the plain display'd . . .
With agile speed he hastes to ev'ry post,
And animates Columbia's warring host.
Chear'd by his voice, they burn with martial fire,
From their rude shock the fiercest bands retire. . . .⁵⁷

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In the battle, many nearby soldiers never fought; many, including officers, left the fighting as soon as they could get away—for example, in squads of twenty, carrying one wounded man—and some, like Warren, stayed until the end. Throughout the action, according to accounts of the battle, breathed the spirit of the general, whose personal example and influence sustained the Americans. A eulogy credited him with “the highest act of benevolence to mankind, by dying in defence of the liberties of his country. . . . He partakes of the nature and happiness of God.”⁵⁸

On April 8, 1776, “a vast Concourse” attended the military and Masonic services at King’s Chapel in Boston for the reinterment of Warren’s remains.⁵⁹ Perez Morton told the mourners that Warren had “determined, that what he could not effect by his Eloquence or his Pen, he would bring to Purpose by his Sword. And on the memorable 19th of April, he appeared in the Field, under the united Characters of the General, the Soldier and the Physician.”⁶⁰ In correspondence a week after Lexington, Warren had said, “We are determined at all events, to act our parts with firmness and intrepidity, knowing that slavery is far worse than death.”⁶¹ In a dramatization, his dying words were, “Fight on, my countrymen, be FREE, be FREE.”⁶²

Like the accounts of Warren, the other rhetoric of 1775—for example, the praise of Washington and Charles Lee—as well as the later criticisms of generals, assumed that a good general almost at once could control men’s actions and their will to fight by his force of character and his expertise. Victory of course required discipline, which also depended not so much on experience under arms, or even on training, as on the general’s immediate supervision and inspiration. Since American soldiers came freely to defend their liberty, their homes, and their future by fighting lackeys, it followed that a general who could command could lead them to victory. In the words of Benjamin Rush, “Good general officers would make an army of six months men an army of heroes.”⁶³ If God, in the war with Satan, had given preachers not only the ability to awaken assurance of His grace in the soul but also the power to end sin by preaching, He would have created good generals on the Ameri-

can plan. American generals, in effect, were expected to perform miracles by force of personality alone. This expectation secured prompt respect for the commanders in 1775. It also promised them trouble if they failed.

As Americans tried to define their army, they clung to the conviction that a professional soldier was dangerous, vicious, and damned. He killed for money. He made war a trade and preferred long, easygoing wars that yielded him the largest gains for the smallest inconvenience. These gains came at the expense of both taxpayers and civil government, which a professional soldier necessarily corrupted or defied. General Henry Knox, who began his military studies in his bookstore before the war, said that such a man "will meet with his proper demerits in another world."⁶⁴ To confirm this judgment, Americans had the example not only of the British, who would kill people of their own blood for pay, or of the Hessians, hired to kill strangers, but also of the eighteenth-century soldiers of fortune—officers who went from army to army and war to war, regardless of nationality, trying always to climb to higher rank.

While moral censure of and distaste for career soldiers increased during the war, the revolutionaries, especially in Congress, for a short time put great faith in European officers who came to fight for America. In large part, the Continental Army commissions given to these men showed Congress's desire to secure the aid of France. When the first European officers came, their credentials and their advertisement of themselves as professionals seemed to promise special military effectiveness. Richard Henry Lee, speaking of the need for engineers and artillery officers, recalled, "The first that came had sagacity enough quickly to discern our wants, and professing competency in these branches, they were too quickly believed."⁶⁵ Americans did not confine such expectations to engineers or artillery officers but gave rank freely. Claude Robin, a French army chaplain, later described the French adventurers: "By assuming titles and fictitious names, they obtained distinguished ranks in the American army. . . . The simplicity of the Ameri-

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On July 6, 1775, "a german Hussar, a veteran in the Wars in Germany," came to Congress and offered the service of fifty veterans to oppose the British Seventeenth Regiment of Light Dragoons at Boston. John Adams used almost one hundred words to describe the officer's beautiful uniform, superior weapons, and gaudy panache, concluding that the hussar was "the most warlike and formidable Figure, I ever saw."⁶⁷ Congress accepted the offer but changed its mind three weeks later. Behind the strong criticism of professionals lay the expectation that their vices would make them more effective. When European officers appeared with the well-known corrupt trappings of career soldiers—aristocratic station, arrogance, eagerness for high rank and pay—Americans took the trappings for marks of competence in war. Before long, this assumption proved groundless, and the revolutionaries despised almost all foreign adventurers—Continental officers or new applicants—who were not only mercenaries, but not even good ones.

Americans did not have to seek mercenary military impostors from abroad, however. The revolution spawned more proficient war-traders at home—an obscure group of men who appear during the war in reports written by others. They were scattered civilians who wore officers' uniforms. They did not do so because they were part of the large militia officer corps, or because they wished to be officers. They wished to seem to be officers because they were profiteers. The Continental Army used a wide variety of uniforms, and officers had theirs privately made. The support staff of the army—quartermasters, commissaries, sutlers, farriers, wagonmasters, and the like—bore military rank, though not seniority in the line. Consequently, no one was surprised to find captains, majors, and colonels, in varied but impressive military dress, riding around the countryside making arrangements for the army—no one, that is, except "A SUBALTERN in the Continental Army." According to his letter to a newspaper, while traveling on furlough he fell in with several uniformed men and found that he was the

only member of the group who was in the army. The rest were buying goods and provisions from the public in order to sell them at a large markup to the army or to people in other regions where prices were higher.⁶⁸ Such men could also hold the goods and wait for prices to rise everywhere. A citizen might suspect the authenticity of their uniforms because they paid higher prices than the government authorized or because they paid cash, which the army often lacked. Suspicion was strong enough to leave a fragmentary record but not strong enough to drive such men out of business, even though real purchasing officers had credentials as well as a uniform. Law, a governor's proclamation, and newspaper articles denounced this traffic. It would be interesting to know how many buyers used a Continental Army uniform to cover their crimes. It would be more interesting to know how many of the sellers were fooled by one.

At first, Americans hoped to guard against the dangers of a wartime standing army and offset reluctance to serve in it by keeping the soldiers' terms of enlistment short. A one-year enlistment assured the citizen that he need not become the army's bondsman, even if he reenlisted as often as necessary until the war was won. The first enlistments of Continental Army soldiers ended in December 1775. Reenlistments and new enlistments were for one year, except for a few men who engaged for the duration of the war.

Before 1776 was over, almost everyone except the soldiers regretted the one-year term. Short enlistments troubled the army throughout the war. Experienced soldiers gave way to recruits or went home for a few months until they felt like reenlisting. The size and composition of the army stayed in flux. The Continental Army did not try long-term enlistments until mid-1776, partly because some revolutionaries thought that annual reenlistment and even annual review of officers' commissions would protect America from some of the abuses of a standing army. Congress could alter or abolish the military as events required with less danger that the army could become an independent interest with its own long-term resources. Also,

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Congress could retain or promote able soldiers and drop the unfit routinely, without court-martial or formal proceedings. Moreover, hardly anyone thought that Americans could be induced to enlist for an indefinite term. Congress and the states used short enlistments because they hoped that the war would end soon, and they expected the soldiers to serve until it did. Joseph Warren, a week after Lexington, called for troops "enlisted for such time as is necessary."⁶⁹ But when the necessary time grew long, many Americans feared that by long or indefinite enlistments they would lose their freedom. Sarah Hodgkins wrote her husband, Captain Joseph Hodgkins, that she was afraid he would stay in the cause of liberty until he made himself a slave.⁷⁰ In Congress, Roger Sherman argued that "long enlistment is a state of slavery. There ought to be a rotation which is in favor of liberty."⁷¹

In 1775 recruitment did not seem to be a problem; people did not foresee that Americans would also refuse to reenlist for a definite term. Congress later said that short enlistments had been adopted "to ease the people."⁷² But many men eased themselves by staying out of the army or leaving it as soon as they could. For the rest of his life, Private Thomas Painter remained glad that he had enlisted for only six months in June of 1776, instead of waiting until fall and enlisting for the duration. In December he "returned to West Haven, thoroughly sick of a Soldier's life, determined, if I went into the War again, to have my furniture conveyed without its being Slung at my back."⁷³ Some revolutionaries, including many enlisted men, favored rotation in service, either to share the burden or to spread military training or to prevent the growth of a military caste. But even they expected that somebody would enlist. Public officials learned fast, as regiments disbanded at Boston in the face of the enemy and as recruits came in slowly. In 1776 enlistment for the duration became popular in Congress, in state legislatures, and in newspaper appeals for recruits, but never attracted more than a few thousand men at any one time. Nathanael Greene, who in June 1775 preferred enlistments for the duration, nevertheless recommended one-year enlistments in October because "men esteem confinement,

(of which the service partakes,) without any fixed period to its duration, a boundless gulf, where the fruitful imagination creates ten thousand nameless horrors."⁷⁴

The failure of the one-year enlistment caused revolutionaries special distress, because a central element in their definition of their army was voluntarism. An army of freemen ought to consist of volunteers. In 1775 the crux of resistance to Britain was the protection and exercise of personal, conscious responsibility for the public welfare. That is, each person used his wits and his God-given will to better himself and to serve mankind because he wanted to spend his life that way—not in unthinking ease, which led to impoverished oppression. Armed service against attackers was to flow from this state of mind without a break, just as soldiers were to appear where shortly before stood farmers. Of course, they would need training, good commanders, pay; but they served as volunteers. In this fact lay their greatest moral strength, which gave them physical strength.

One recurring expression of voluntarism was also one of the least effective militarily: the volunteer irregulars, civilians who formed their own auxiliary units without enlisting in the army. At various times this kind of service attracted gentlemen of independent means, who formed light-horse companies, "substantial Yeomanry," and some who argued "for no pay at all or officers, but all marching promiscuously and on equal footing as volunteers."⁷⁵ Accepting no pay and acknowledging only such authority as they might give to elected officers, volunteers seemed to combine valor, disinterestedness, and freedom. Colonel Otho Holland Williams reported of backcountry riflemen in 1781, "They say they are Volunteers and should be treated with distinction."⁷⁶

But when Governor Patrick Henry, unable to fill Virginia's Continental Line with recruits, offered to send volunteers in 1777, Washington refused them. Men "of the *Volunteer kind*," he said, "are uneasy, impatient of Command, ungovernable; and, claiming to themselves a sort of superior merit, generally assume, not only the Privilege of thinking, but to do as they please."⁷⁷ James Collins's father was willing to serve as a volun-

teer in 1777. He demanded it. He said the energies of the men he said the for, and by chance; because there should enjoy it."⁷⁷ He refused to do it. They had "for their return. When the British turned out finding the thought preferable."⁸⁰ W. their time in amazing ex Southern d plunder cit enthusiasm —all could volunteer's pre would have As volunt relations wi tions of gov authority. M always be s military rec it had no i authority. T in this way inevitable te cial, explicit expenditure try made it

teer in 1780, "though over age for the law of my country to demand it, yet I think the nature of the case requires the best energies of every man who is a friend to liberty." But when James thought of enlisting, "My father counseled me otherwise; he said the time was at hand when volunteers would be called for, and by joining them . . . if I went to battle I stood as fair a chance; besides I would be less exposed, less fatigued, and if there should be any time of resting, I could come home and enjoy it."⁷⁸ Philadelphia volunteers who had turned out in 1776 refused to do so in 1777 without a regular militia draft because they had "found their business and customers so deranged on their return, and engrossed by those who staid at home."⁷⁹ When the British invaded Virginia in 1781, "a number . . . who turned out Volunteers on the first approach of the British, finding the life of a Soldier by no means an agreeable one, thought proper to take a hasty leave of their brother Sufferers."⁸⁰ Washington complained to Patrick Henry that "half their time is taken up Marching to and from Camp at a most amazing expence," and commanders in both the Northern and Southern departments found volunteers especially inclined to plunder citizens.⁸¹ Voluntarism revealed not only Americans' enthusiasm but also their waywardness. Comfort, profit, pride—all could impede the ostensible military purpose of the volunteer's presence in the field. To succeed militarily, voluntarism would have to include the acceptance of stricter discipline.

As voluntarism was to be the central guide to the individual's relations with the army, the principal belief guiding the relations of governments and the army was the supremacy of civil authority. Military power and the officers who wielded it must always be subordinate to civil officials. This meant that the military received its orders from civil government and that it had no independent or permanent source of revenue or authority. To be subordinate, it must remain dependent. Only in this way could self-government protect itself against the inevitable tendency of power to grow. An army required special, explicit checks because its armed strength, its size and expenditures, and its importance to the survival of the country made it uniquely dangerous. The revolutionaries did not

intend to hire saviors who would rule them. This idea commanded universal assent; Congress and the states referred to it regularly in their decisions in order to make sure that no encroachments came upon them unawares.

Among the political ideas of the revolution, civil supremacy over the military achieved one of the most nearly complete successes, in practice as well as in allegiance. Of all the principles of 1775, it came nearest to full and lasting implementation. The support of the Continental Army with men and supplies, sporadic though it often was, depended primarily on the willing contributions of the public. No officers, not even Washington at the height of his popularity, could have secured these willing contributions so consistently as civil governments did. The conduct of the army in confiscating supplies suggests that it would have secured support by force much less equitably or effectively than Congress and the states did. Civil supremacy alone could have sustained the army's existence.

The idea of civil supremacy also did important service during the many times when it was violated. Throughout the war the army seized food, wagons, and livestock without legal authority. Although the states and Congress authorized various kinds of impressment, the army also acted without such approval or failed to comply with the procedures and safeguards that were supposed to guide it. This happened when lower-ranking officers exceeded their instructions and when commanders gave orders they knew to be unlawful. In 1781 Congress ordered the army in the Southern Department to supply itself by impressment long after it had been doing so anyway. The army usually violated civil supremacy by ignoring state regulation of the impressment of supplies. General Nathanael Greene explained to Governor Abner Nash of North Carolina, "It is my wish to pay the most sacred regard to the laws and Constitution of the State, but the emergencies of war are often so pressing that it becomes necessary to invade the rights of the citizen to prevent public calamities."⁸² The need to keep the army together might violate Continental authority as well. General John Sullivan seized provisions and wrote afterwards, "I know the Resolves of Congress upon this head I ever will Comply with them when

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Yet while all of this went on, everyone knew that though it might be necessary, it was wrong. Citizens resented the army's inequitable seizures and the officers' peremptory enforcement of their own estimate of the army's needs. The army resented the public's slow and inefficient supply and the preference many people showed for profit. But even when the army balanced accounts outside the law, the two groups did not become enemies for this reason. Late in the war the quartermaster general was under civil arrest in New York, but for the most part seizures met with tacit assent. The officers' acknowledgment that their conduct was illegal, that they could not make a separate law for the army, helped to sustain cooperation amid coercion. And, in turn, the citizens' respect for the officers' intentions discouraged the growth of contempt for law. In this instance, Americans maintained harmony in the act of violating their ideology because they remained confident that they agreed on its meaning and that all parties were working to preserve and to implement it.

In discussing some officers who wanted to defy Congress at the end of the war, the historian Richard Kohn uses the word "purity" to describe civil supremacy over the military. If a "corrupting element" shatters the "aura" of civilian control by violating it, military rule thereafter "lurks in the background."⁸⁴ The Newburgh crisis of 1783 did not violate civil authority, but it challenged civilian rule far more seriously than actual violations during the war because in it some American officers abandoned the idea of civil supremacy. The "purity" that America had preserved lay in the idea and in unanimous endorsement of it, not in conduct always free from taint. During the war, as long as officers called their deeds sins and regretted that their sins had been forced upon them, sin could help save America.