

George Washington, America's first statesman

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History reveals that great and noble leaders are forged in adversity. Valley Forge was that crucible for George Washington, where the mettle of his character was tested to the limit.

During that winter of 1777-78, a German newspaper from Lancaster, Penn., perceived that formation of a statesman. It described Washington as Des Landes Vater, "Father of the Country." And we have known him thus ever since.

Valley Forge was "a place of squalid and horrendous conditions," as Bob Drury and Tom Clavin have written in their latest book "Valley Forge." "Men dying every day from famine, malnutrition, cold and disease." Like a poisonous gas, the stench of fetid air from the rotting carcasses of starved horses, nearby latrines and the daily collection of corpses hung over all.

Alexander Hamilton, never one to mince words, attributed these conditions to the government for which the Continental Army was fighting. Congress, he said, "was our greatest antagonist."

Talk about gridlock, Congress and state governments had become experts in kicking the can down the road. Solutions to crises such as feeding, supplying, recruiting, equipping and paying the army were shuffled off to 114 committees. A new Congress, noted Hamilton, of "mediocre men" had replaced the leaders of 1776. This self-destructive behavior was about to cause the first budding democracy since 500 B.C. to wither.

Yes, there was an external enemy to be driven off the continent. The British had the greatest, most skilled, experienced, disciplined and well-equipped military in the world. Just the things Washington's outnumbered forces lacked. Yet internal enemies were the greater threat.

Washington had to contend with a dysfunctional Congress and a conspiracy to replace him among some legislators and three of his top generals. Civilian control of the military was invested in Congress to appoint top officers.

Washington honored the principle of a government legitimized by the consent of the people. That's what the war was about. But democracy is different. The freedom it secures with one hand can be unwittingly used to destroy itself with the other.

The conspiracy failed. Yet the entire logistic system of military supplies, including food, clothes and arms, was driven by corruption. War profiteering was pandemic among citizens and some legislators.

Was there any unity among Americans to win the War of Independence?

Historians estimated that 20 percent of the population were Loyalists, 40 percent followed self-interests and 40 percent were committed Patriots.

Furthermore, the newly proclaimed "Free and Independent States" could barely collaborate. Some state militias worked at cross purposes to the strategies of the Continental Army. At times, they were within a hair's length of a civil war.

Antipathies and animosities brewed among regiments from the 13 Colonies.

Virginians refused to fight with New Englanders, especially with free black soldiers. Ethnic and religious divisions plagued the army: Scots, Irish, German, Quakers, Catholics and Jews.

Divisiveness and discord are the deadly pathogens of every democracy. In this case, Washington was the only antigen.

Conditions were exacerbated at Valley Forge where hunger and cold ate at every man, every minute of the day. A week of famine coincided with Washington's 46th birthday. Only 10 percent of the food necessary to feed the army was available. And several hundred officers resigned their commissions.

Washington was able to solidify and inspire his army. He lived with them with fortitude and conviction on the campground and fought with them on the battleground. He risked his life for them and they for him. He forged the only

unified body in a fragmented America. And at the end of the Revolutionary War, all Washington had to do was nod his head and his troops would have made him King.

But fame and fortune was not the vision for which Washington risked his life. His “Great American Cause” was to create a united nation of free and independent people. He touched the hearts of all and never resorted to inflaming their passions. It’s what inspired the men he led and persuaded Congress to fulfill its responsibilities.

After the war, Washington humbly submitted his resignation to Congress.

The Valley Forge lesson: Good and effective governments depend upon the virtues possessed by those who lead it. They’re called statesmen and stateswomen. But their elections depends upon the virtues of those who elect them.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of Fayette Companies/Human Service Center. He resides in Groveland. He can be reached by email at jfgilligan@hotmail.com. Sources for this article include “Valley Forge” by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin book and Gilligan’s own books, “The American Revolution 1607-1801: A Cultural History for Teachers, Parents, and Children” and “The Soul of America: Essays on the Fouth of July.”