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THE AMERICAN BOARD OF WAR, 1776-1781

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THE AMERICAN BOARD OF WAR, 1776-1781

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KENNETH SCHAFFEL

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in History in partial fulfillment of the require-
ments for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years historians of the American Revolution have begun to search out previously unexplored aspects of the period, realizing that political and military events are largely the product of economic and social circumstances that, for various reasons, had been ignored or misunderstood.

In the area of military studies, researchers have also found it necessary to broaden their studies beyond the field of battle and examine the military conflict in an expanded context. Notable practitioners of this new wave include Don Higginbotham and John Shy. Their work has awakened military historians to the realization that the outcome of the war may have been due less to the abilities and faults of the tacticians and strategists on both sides, than to underlying economic, social, psychological, and socio-political conditions.

This new approach to answering the still puzzling question of how the Americans finally won the war, has branched out into examinations of administration and logistics. Groundbreaking work has been accomplished by Piers Macksey, Arthur Bowler and David Syrett in studying the

British side, and Erna Risch in examining the American example.

This study of the American Board of War is intended to make a small contribution toward a better understanding of the neglected administrative aspect of the American war effort.

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Ch. I

The First American Board of War

The Second Continental Congress, aware of a need to efficiently perform its various functions, assigned delegates to different permanent boards to deal with administrative matters shortly before and after declaring independence from Britain in July 1776. Previously, Congress had resorted to an ad hoc committee system to attend to particular problems as they arose. There was, for example, a musket and firearm committee, a prisoner of war committee, and committees concerned with saltpetre production, hospitals, clothing, and the health and discipline of the armies. These committees were invested with responsibility for making investigations, devising solutions to the various concerns they were studying, and reporting to Congress as a body.¹

Administration was not an important priority of the First Continental Congress. That Congress had been far more concerned with wide-ranging principles and the formulation of general policies. However, the system whereby different committees would examine problems then offer recommendations to Congress proved inefficient on the outbreak of war. Committees, selected at random to deal with special problems, would remain an integral mode of the congressional-decision making process throughout the war. But the delegates became aware in the summer of

1776 that a more competent administrative mechanism would have to be constructed to handle day-to-day military matters. This became apparent as streams of requests began to pour into Congress from the armies, requesting money and supplies. Official and private correspondence of a military nature multiplied rapidly reflecting problems that demanded immediate attention. Besides considering general policies, the inexperienced delegates were now involved recruiting, supplying, staffing, and approving expenditures for the forces in the field.² The need was obvious for administrative departments that could devote themselves to specific, army-related matters. Congress was thus motivated to establish Boards of War, Marines and Treasury, to name the most prominent.

Congress did not found the Board of War without much soul-searching. In order to prosecute hostilities and promote efficient administration of the military effort, some delegates believed Congress could move to the theater of military action to directly oversee defense measures. More practically, it was suggested that a committee be sent to the front invested with wide powers. Clearly, Congress dreaded allowing general officers leeway in carrying out operations without close supervision from

the civilian authorities. Congress finally bowed to expediency, however, and created the Board of War and Ordnance, an agency that would operate in close contact with, but physically removed from the armies in the field.³

After lengthy committee investigations, Congress finally decided to institute the Board on June 12, 1776.⁴ The Board would consist of five members, all delegates, along with a secretary and one or more clerks. The duties of the Board as decided at this time were to remain in force, for the most part, until the Board was dissolved in November 1781. The Board was responsible for obtaining and keeping an accurate register of the names of all officers in the service of the United Colonies (shortly to become the United States) and the dates of their respective commissions. The Board would also keep regular accounts of the condition and disposition of the soldiers in the respective armies. To accomplish this the Board was to receive regular reports from the generals and other officers commanding the different departments and posts. In addition, Congress assigned the Board the duty of keeping track of all the arms, ammunition, artillery and other military stores scattered throughout the colonies. Further, the Board of War was given the care of forwarding

all dispatches from Congress to the armies as well as all monies transmitted for the public service by order of Congress, and providing escorts for the conveyance of such dispatches and monies. Also, the Board would superintend the raising, fitting out, and dispatching of all land forces required to promote the war. Finally, the Board was charged with undertaking the care and direction of all prisoners and keeping and preserving records and correspondence forwarded to the War Office.⁵ These were awesome responsibilities indeed but they represented, in fact, only the initially defined duties of the Board of War. During the course of the war the Board would take on even more duties. Some would be especially delegated to the Board by Congress; others, by their intrinsic nature, fell under the jurisdiction of the War Office.

Congress did not consider appointing military officers to the Board of War upon its establishment.⁶ By failing to do so, Congress was expressing a deeply ingrained, traditional American distrust of the ambitions of military officers. By keeping the military administrative decision-making process solely in civilian hands, Congress

placed an unproven trust in delegates ability to grasp quickly the essentials of wartime administration. Congress was eventually forced to admit the inadequacy of this approach and permit officers on the Board. But before the Board's first realignment, late in 1777, it was staffed by congressional delegates. Therefore, at its inception, the Board was an ancillary function of Congress and the daily business of the War Office was structured around that of Congress as a whole.

The business of the Board of War was conducted in the War Office on Markett Street in Philadelphia.⁷ Since Board members were expected to attend the daily congressional sessions, the Board's schedule was largely determined by the length and frequency of the meetings of Congress. Generally, the Board scheduled meetings between 6 and 10 A.M. At that time, if Congress was able to muster a quorum of nine states' representatives, the Board members joined with the rest of the delegates. After prayers were heard and important correspondence read and discussed, Congress considered reports from the Boards of Treasury and War. Sessions frequently did not adjourn until late in the evening. While Congress only numbered between 24 to 36 delegates in the summer of 1776,

procedural processes were lengthy. Also hampering business were long-winded orators and frequent turnovers in membership. When Congress finally broke for the day, Board members usually enjoyed a short respite before resuming their duties at the War Office. There they often remained into the late hours, only to repeat the same routine the following day.⁸

The first delegates chosen to sit on the Board of War were John Adams, Roger Sherman, Benjamin Harrison, James Wilson, and Edward Rutledge. All five were conspicuous for their lack of knowledge in military affairs. Adams was selected as the first president of the Board of War and Richard Peters of Pennsylvania its first secretary.⁹ Many distinguished members of Congress and other illustrious figures in the history of the American War for Independence would serve, at one time or another, on the Board of War. Most served for only a short period and never returned to the Board. Others, such as Sherman, Wilson and Rutledge, participated for limited periods at various intervals in the war. Only Richard Peters would serve consecutively on the Board of War from its inception to disestablishment, first as secretary and later as a full commissioner.

Richard Peters, who was born in Philadelphia, was only thirty two years old when he was appointed secretary to the Board. His uncle, the Reverend Richard Peters, had been active in Pennsylvania politics earlier in the century. The Reverend Peters played a leading role in influencing his nephew's course in life, introducing him to the classics and political theory and instilling within him a sense of duty for public service.¹⁰ The young Peters studied law and was admitted to the Bar. As a lawyer he became well thought of among Philadelphia patriots and was chosen a captain of militia in May 1775. Peters was considered witty, genial, and a brilliant conversationalist. More important, he was a hard working patriot, completely devoted to the cause and, as his record on the Board makes clear, was "punctual, painstaking, and patient."¹¹

During the period John Adams served as president of the Board of War, from June 1776 to November 1777, the War Office performed a number of important services for the new nation. The Board's accomplishments are all the more praiseworthy because as Congress was subject to frequent changes in membership at this time, it followed that the Board suffered from the same handicap. For example, on July 18, 1776, Charles Carrol of Maryland was

was added to the Board.¹² On September 11, F.L. Lee replaced Benjamin Harrison, one of the Board's original members.¹³ On November 5, Harrison returned to the Board.¹⁴ On September 3, William Hooper and Samuel Huntington took their places on the Board.¹⁵ On January 13, 1777, Samuel Adams joined his cousin John at the War Office.¹⁶ George Clymer was selected for the Board on March 26, 1777,¹⁷ and Carrol rejoined the Board of War on May 8, 1777.¹⁸ We can speculate that this dizzy round of comings and goings did little to insure a sense of routine and stability at the War Office.

Board President John Adams was usually present to provide some sense of continuity and organization to Board proceedings. But even Adams had to be absent for considerable periods when Congress assumed it necessary to send him on what were considered more urgent assignments. While being called away from the War Office did not leave Adams dispirited since the administrative tasks did not appeal to him, he handled his assignment with determination and authority nevertheless and his absence deprived the Board of his many abilities.¹⁹ Richard Peters, the Board's secretary and the man most familiar with

the general organization and daily business of the War Office proved indispensable during the frequent changes in membership. Sometimes, however, Peters too had to attend to other duties as directed by Congress.²⁰

Under the circumstances, the Board of War found itself encumbered with more responsibility than it reasonably could handle. As we have noted, personnel changes at the War Office were never-ending. Those members who were available to attend War Office sessions were burdened with other responsibilities as well. A typical example of a harried Board member was Roger Sherman of Connecticut. Besides attending all Board of War meetings, Sherman toiled diligently on a committee devised to write a declaration of independence, and a committee to prepare a plan of confederation. On top of all this, Sherman was expected to attend the regular assemblies of Congress.²¹

John Adams was, if possible, even busier than Sherman. But it seems that his Board of War responsibilities were more tiring for Adams than anything else he was involved with at the time. He complained to his wife, Abigail, that the business of the War Office was placing an intolerable strain on his health. Although he was willing to endure the drugery, Adams was greatly concerned that

his background and past experiences hardly qualified him to head a War Office. However, since Congress had chosen him for the position he would do his utmost to succeed. But Abigail was warned that with the Board sitting every morning and evening, along with daily committee conferences and congressional sessions, Adams might have to curtail his letters to home.²²

In a letter to Joseph Ward, Adams expressed a fear that the members of the Board of War lacked the prerequisite knowledge of military affairs needed to qualify as competent wartime administrators. Adams continued to argue that he did not find the work suitable to his abilities and inclinations. Nevertheless, as he informed his wife, Adams was determined to persevere. He asked Ward to spread the word that the Board would be grateful to any military officers good enough to offer recommendations and lend assistance.²³

Adams himself wrote to several officers. To Brigadier General Nathaniel Greene, Adams again pleaded his inexperience in military affairs. "It is a great mortification to me I confess, and I fear it will too often be a misfortune to our country, that I am called to the discharge of trusts to which I feel myself so unequal, and in the

execution of which I can derive no assistance from my education or former course of life." Despite this redundant self-pity, Adams devoted much hard thinking to his new assignment and in the same note to Greene offered sensible thoughts on the military art:

We ought ... to study to bring everything in the military department into the best order. Fighting is not the greatest branch of the science of war ... Men must be furnished with good and wholesome provisions in sufficient plenty. They must be well paid. They must be well clothed and well covered with blankets and tents. They must be kept warm with suitable fuel.²⁴

Unfortunately, few officers could offer the Board any worthwhile advice on how to go about its business. The truth is that most of the American officers were also as uncertain about the requirements of military administration as John Adams claimed to be. One experienced officer who had previously served in the British Army, Major General Horatio Gates, advised the Board to "be very exactly and minutely acquainted with the state of every Regiment." But the impracticality of this suggestion was to become apparent to the Board all too soon. Since few if any experts were available to advise the Board how to deal with the intricacies of military administration, Adams and his staff were forced to undergo a regimen of self-education. In this regard, Adams decided that a

careful understanding of geography was essential. He convinced his colleagues to make a collection of all available maps, to be mounted on the walls of the War Office and studied carefully.²⁶

In attempting to discover just what military administration was about, Board members could, if they wished, examine the British model. However, there is no evidence that the Board ever attempted an historical investigation of British military administration.²⁷ This is hardly surprising as there was so little time available. In any case, Americans had tended to follow an independent approach toward military administration during the eighteenth century colonial wars. Defense was usually based on the separate militia systems of the individual colonies. Each colony outfitted and supplied its own troops, though on occasion, Britain sent over money, arms and ammunition. A colony remote from the scene of hostilities was often expected to contribute supplies and military stores as a substitute for soldiers. Little sense of unity existed among the colonies and each was most concerned with local matters. The proximity of a threat in relation to an individual colony usually determined the amounts of men and supplies a colony would furnish.²⁸

Throughout the Board of War's existence, it was to be plagued by problems stemming from lack of cooperation between the states and Continental authority. From a historical perspective, this is not surprising. During the colonial wars a major obstacle to unified military action was the lack of central control of logistical resources. An excellent example is the Louisbourg expedition of 1745. In this case, the New England colonies provided some supplies for which they were later reimbursed, but the expedition was mainly supported by British storeships. The Board of Ordnance supplied the bulk of arms and ammunition while the Treasury took care of victualling and transport. Each foot soldier was required to bring his own weapon, or one provided by his home colony. New York contributed artillery, provisions, powder, clothing and bedding, while Pennsylvania donated provisions. This was insufficient, nevertheless, and the final assault on Louisbourg had to be delayed while the British made up for American supply lapses. Over half of the provincials had not been equipped with bayonets and many were without sturdy shoes. Scaling ladders, essential for the attack, proved to be ten feet too short to fit the purpose.²⁹

Similar problems occurred during the Seven Years War. When the British commander, General Edward Braddock, planned a campaign against French-held Fort Duquense, he directed Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania to provide artillery, ammunition stores, and enough food to support the expedition. But the colonies did not coordinate their resources, established no magazines, and left Braddock with poor logistical support. Commenting on the situation Braddock wrote, "The jealousy of the people and the disunion of the many colonies are such that I almost despair of succeeding."³⁰ Although the colonies were encouraged to set up their own commissary systems to assist the British services in the field, little was accomplished in this direction. British troops ended up completely in charge of the logistical operation. As historian Harry M. Ward has explained, "Intercolony cooperation on almost every instance was inspired by or directed either by the home government or by royal governors or magistrates in the colonies."³¹

Thus it is apparent that Americans were unprepared by the colonial wars to discharge a collective responsibility for administering forces in the field. Previously, the colonists had been almost totally dependent on the

British to organize, supply, and supervise large-scale campaigns. In the summer of 1776, Americans had to begin and rely on their own abilities to put their manpower and resources to the best use.

Since the patriots understood little about military administration they based their wartime bureaucracy on the model of British military institutions. From the beginning of the war Commander-in-Chief George Washington urged Congress to establish a war office following the example of the British war office in London. Washington was mainly concerned with being relieved from the detailed paper work that was overwhelming him and his staff. He stated his case to Congress on June 13, 1776.

I once mentioned to Congress that I thought a war office extremely necessary, and they seemed inclined to institute one for our army, but the affair seems to have been since dropt; give me leave again to insist on the utility and importance of such an establishment, the more I reflect upon the subject, the more I am convinced of its necessity and that affairs can never properly be conducted without it. 32

In fact, Congress had established the Board of War the day before Washington made his plea. Addressing Congress again on June 20, Washington expressed his pleasure and predicted that the Board's inception would prove to have historical significance in furthering the American

cause. However, he claimed to be somewhat skeptical about the plan upon which the Board was founded, although he did not specify what troubled him. Finally, he hoped that in the course of time, defects would be discovered and remedied.³³

John Hancock, the President of Congress, also considered the forming of a Board of War " a new and great event in the history of America."³⁴ In appointing Richard Peters as the Board's secretary, Hancock informed Peters that "The nature and importance of the office are such that the most constant attendance and unremitting application are indispensably required, in the execution of it."³⁵

Thus, expected to accomplish great things, the Board of War proceeded to business. As noted, Adams and his associates were not at all sure how to approach their "historical" assignment but they immediately found themselves fully occupied nevertheless. Peters, the secretary, kept the minutes of all Board meetings. Unfortunately, few documents have survived that pertain to War Office business from June 1776 to December 1776. Still, we are able to follow the Board's activities to some extent with the assistance of surviving minutes of Board meetings, private correspondence, and resolutions made by The Board

and recorded in the congressional records.

Between June 12 and August 27, 1776, the Board forwarded thirty eight reports to Congress on a number of diverse items ranging from proposals to invite Indian chiefs to visit Congress, to the appointment of chaplains for the armies. Only two reports, however, are extant; those of August 13 and August 22. But in the congressional minutes, reports of the Board take the form of resolutions and throw a light on the duties performed by the Board of War during this period.³⁶

One of the Board's first priorities was to assure that monthly reports from the armies were transmitted to the War Office. The Board required a full knowledge of the armies' situations in respect to men and equipment. To accomplish this, the Board requested that all commanders keep up a constant and complete correspondence with the War Office.³⁷ George Washington, for one, promised to write regularly and transmit prompt accounts of every measure taken that fell within the scope of the Board's regulation.³⁸ On the other hand, Henry Knox, the young artillery officer, did not comply with the Board's requests -- probably because he was unaware of the Board of War's existence. As late as September 27, over three months

after the Board was established, Knox recommended in a report to Congress the creation of a Board of Ordnance to regulate and organize the artillery branch of the Army and to keep up-to-date returns.³⁹

For many months commanders remained unaware of the establishment of a War Office and returns remained scant. Of course, confusion reigned among the American forces at this early date. Changeovers in personnel and equipment were constant and few officers were experienced enough to realize the importance of keeping accurate records and accounts. Nevertheless, the Board was determined to instill what order it could among the armies through the power of the pen, and therefore settle its own affairs. Frequently, the Board implored Washington to inform his lieutenants of the necessity of sending accurate returns to the War Office. If the numbers of men fit for duty was known to the War Office, the Board would be better prepared to anticipate the need for arms and ammunition and keep up the supply, so far as it had the power. Washington sympathized with the Board's concerns and was completely supportive. Still, as his secretary, Robert E. Harrison explained, "In respect to your requisition for an immediate return of ... stores, his excellency says

it cannot possibly be complied with in the present unsettled state of the army."⁴⁰ Uncertain as to the requirements of the armies, the Board of War, in the early stages of the war, was unsure how it could best assist Washington in this regard. John Adams arrived at the rather far-fetched conclusion that it was lack of administration and organization -- exemplified in the want of returns -- that had ruined America's prospects for conquering Canada in 1776. The Board's president demanded that inquiries be made "into the cause of the Neglects, which will not be very pleasant for the Negligent."⁴¹

At the start of the war the new nation was in short supply of arms and ammunition. A lack of gunpowder was especially glaring. From various sources, Congress had been able to obtain approximately 8,000 pounds of gunpowder to distribute to the armies. The inexperienced American soldiers, however, often squandered explosives and by the end of August 1776, Washington's supply was nearly used up and he had none to employ for his artillery. Congress and the Board of War encouraged the individual states to erect saltpetre works and powder mills, and bounties were offered to those to be the first to manufacture these items. A noticeable increase in the

domestic manufacture of gunpowder was eventually achieved, but the troops had to be supplied by way of imported powder from the West Indies in 1776.⁴²

As president of the Board of War, John Adams was determined to prove that the United States possessed the means to produce munitions to a point where imports could be reduced significantly or stopped entirely. In a note to James Warren, Adams said that his goal would be sooner achieved if the state legislatures would assume a more active part in encouraging the manufacture of munitions.⁴³ But for a wide variety of reasons that will be more thoroughly discussed "Adam's goals regarding the domestic manufacture of arms and accoutrements were not fulfilled. It was left to the Secret Committee ** to procure munitions overseas, although once received in America, the Committee was bound to deliver all arms, ammunition, and other military stores to the Board of War's supervision.⁴⁴

*See chapter IV.

** The Secret Committee should not be confused with the Committee of Secret Correspondence, primarily concerned with foreign aid and diplomatic relations. The Secret Committee became the Commerce Committee and the Committee of Secret Correspondence redesignated the Committee for Foreign Affairs in 1777. The committees often shared the same members.

The Board of War, to operate effectively, had to cooperate with the military efforts of the individual states. Reports were not only required from the Continental army but from the state militias as well. That would facilitate coordination between Congress and the states, and enable the Board to execute its role in the war effort. Unfortunately, such cooperation was seldom seen. Many states, Virginia for example, were seemingly determined to run their military affairs divorced from a central authority, establishing state boards of war on their own initiative.⁴⁵ The Continental Board was constantly troubled by intransigent states, pursuing policies different from those set up by Congress and the War Office.

The Board found it particularly difficult to appraise the numbers and types of arms stored in state arsenals. This was because the state legislatures or boards of war were lax or incompetent about sending accurate inventories. In January 1777, for example, the Board was aware that the Pennsylvania Council of Safety had distributed great numbers of arms and other military stores among different locations for security purposes. But despite pleas to the Council, the Board remained ignorant of what

the stores consisted and just where they were sent.⁴⁶

The Board was usually perplexed to know the types and numbers of arms the Continental authorities passed out to various militia regiments. The men were supposed to return the arms when their terms of service expired. However, militiamen often carried away arms handed out them when they first arrived in camp. The Board strongly advocated that the militiamen be forced to turn over their arms to the regular troops before leaving for home.⁴⁷ The Board resolved that all arms belonging to the United States be marked as such on the barrels of guns and that the states make laws to punish those taking arms unlawfully. Further, the War Office resolved that Congress suggest that the councils of safety, governors, or legislatures of the respective states take steps to confiscate from the inhabitants not in actual service all Continental arms and to send an account of all arms received to Washington.⁴⁸

Besides being scarce, it proved difficult to have those arms that were in the possession of the Continental authorities repaired rapidly and correctly. The Board of War had reasons to suspect that the gunsmiths employed to repair the public arms were not diligently applying

themselves to their tasks, or, in some cases, were completely incompetent. On January 21, 1777 the Board offered to appoint a public armorer who would make certain that all arms under Continental care were in good order and that the gunsmiths were able and prepared to do their jobs.⁴⁹ Two days later the Board suggested to Congress that one Thomas Butler be appointed as the public armorer, and the Board's proposal was accepted. In a report to Congress made on January 23 the Board recommended that one of the best ways to assure that arms were properly repaired would be to pay a decent wage to the workmen.⁵⁰ This was certainly sensible advice, but owing to the rapidly depreciating state of the Continental currency, Congress was unable to follow through on the Board's suggestion.

Another problem was that Washington did not consider Thomas Butler a competent armorer. The Commander-in-Chief complained that, for the smallest defects, soldiers turned in arms and requisitioned new ones. It was not uncommon, according to Washington, to find arms returned as being defective that, upon close inspection, "wanted only rubbing and cleaning."⁵¹ Washington's complaints against Butler rapidly multiplied and the Board's choice for public

armorer soon had to be dismissed. But Butler's dismissal did not end armament problems. A related difficulty was Washington's need for cartridges. Loaded into muskets, cartridges consisted of a musketball and powder wrapped in paper. Despite Washington's pleas for their procurement, the Board found cartridges exceedingly difficult to obtain.⁵²

The Board soon found itself in the middle of a debate over the practicability and availability of various firearms. There were wide varieties to choose from including muskets, carbines, rifles, fusils, and pistols. Unfortunately, most arms were not available in sufficient quantities when needed. Individual states provided arms in the regiments they supplied for the Continental line. Congress generally armed the Continental troops, and both the states and Congress purchased arms from American gunsmiths and dealers. We have noted that guns were also purchased from abroad, captured from the enemy, and confiscated from loyalists. Some soldiers brought their own guns to camp from home -- while others took government supplied arms home with them after their terms of duty expired.⁵³

Generally, the most widely used weapons were the musket and rifle.

Studies were made in the War Office comparing the advantages and liabilities of each. The Board was concerned with whether it could recommend the manufacture of the musket or rifle, or both, and in what quantities.

The musket used by the American troops was a single-shot, smoothbore weapon, four and one half to five feet long, and was fired by a flintlock. The flintlock produced a spark by striking a piece of flint against steel. While the musket possessed the advantage of easy loading, it was inaccurate. The musketball fit loosely into the bore and had a tendency to wobble from side to side as it went down the barrel. The nature of the last wobble affected the direction of the missile's flight.⁵⁴

The rifle, on the other hand, was a more accurate weapon than the musket and easier to carry. But unlike the musket, the rifle could not use coarse powder and the process of cleaning fouled powder out of a grooved barrel was extremely difficult. Perhaps most important, considering the manner of eighteenth century warfare, the rifle could not be fitted with a bayonet. Washington, impressed with the marksmanship of Colonel Daniel Morgan and his riflemen, suggested that the War Office procure five hundred pikes that might be used as substitutes for bayonets by riflemen. Washington believed that the pikes could be carried in a

sling with a spike attached to the but end of the pike so it could be fixed in the ground and serve as a rest for the rifle.⁵⁵ There is no evidence that the Board ever acted on this suggestion.

There were never more riflemen serving in the army than in the summer of 1776 when Washington expected them to make up a significant part of the national army.⁵⁶ But Richard Peters, speaking for the Board of War, was aware that the musket possessed advantages over the rifle. In a letter to the Maryland Council of Safety concerning the supplying of a rifle company, Peters wrote:

If musketts were given them instead of Rifles, the Service would be more benefitted, as there is a superabundance of Riflemen in the army. Were it in the power of the Congress to supply musketts they would speedily reduce the number of Rifles and replace them with the former as they are more easily kept in ordier, can be fixed often and have the advantage of bayonetts. 57

The Board was reinforced in this opinion through correspondence with officers in the field who had an opportunity to compare muskets and rifles in action. Brigadier General Anthony Wayne wished that he could exchange rifles for muskets since "experience has taught us that they (rifles) are not fit in the field. A few only will be returned in each Regiment and those in the hands of real marksmen."⁵⁸

Later in the war, Wayne expounded further on the differences he discovered between rifles and muskets that could be fitted with bayonets in a letter to Richard Peters: "I don't like rifles -- I would almost as soon face an Enemy with a good musket and Bayonet without ammunition as with ammunition without a bayonett ... I am confident that one bayonet keeps off another and for the want of which the chief of the defects we have met might in great measure to be attributed." Wayne found that the enemy took advantage of the

defenseless state of the Riflemen which would not be the case if the Riflemen had bayonets ... but it would be better if good muskets and bayonets were put into the hands of poor marksmen and rifles entirely laid aside -- for my own part I never wish to see one (a rifle) at least without a bayonet.

Wayne explained that he was expressing not only his opinion but the thoughts of the majority of American officers on the subject. He hoped the Board would keep all this in mind when procuring arms in the future.⁵⁹

The Board adhered to Wayne's views and the musket remained the primary weapon used by the American forces throughout the war. But perhaps Neil L. York is correct when he suggests Americans took practically no inventive interest in the rifle during the course of the war.

Washington's notion of using pikes as a substitute for bayonets was certainly far-fetched. The Board of War, however, made no documented attempt to influence the gunsmiths it employed to design rifles that could be attached with bayonets. Of course, as York points out, rifles took longer to manufacture than muskets and it proved impossible to keep the troops supplied with muskets let alone rifles. In addition, Americans were not industrially advanced and possessed neither the skills or time for retooling.⁶⁰

Armaments may have constituted its most pressing concern but other matters demanded the Board of War's attention as well. For instance, numerous petitions were directed to the War Office from foreigners requesting commissions in the Continental army. Board members gave much effort to determining the merits of the petitioners; basing their judgments on personal testimonials or those written by American agents in Europe such as Silas Deane. From surviving reports of Board meetings it would appear that little if anything else was accomplished on those frequent occasions when Congress referred such petitions to the Board. Finally on March 13, 1777, the Board, hoping to decrease the flow of petitions entering the War Office, resolved that the Secret Committee should be directed to write to all their

agents and discourage them from recruiting European officers who had not mastered English. On the same day the Board decided that two German officers who had applied for service in the American forces without knowledge of the English language could not be accepted regardless of their qualifications.⁶¹ Despite the Board's protests, American agents continued to recruit Europeans who possessed little or no mastery of English. Of course, speaking English did not automatically qualify Europeans for commissions in the American army. Further, the recruitment of certain French officers promoted jealousy among the American officer corps and indirectly involved the reorganized Board of War in the Conway Cabal.

There is no evidence that Congress intended for the Board to plan military campaigns or map strategy. This is hardly surprising for during John Adams' term as President of the Board from June 1776 to November 1777 the Board was, of course, manned solely by civilians. In fact, Congress generally recognized its deficiencies in military expertise and left these matters to Washington, the Commander-in-Chief. This does not imply that delegates were completely averse to levelling harsh criticisms at Washington and his lieutenants, but these matters will be

dealt with in further detail below.

While the Board did not attempt to direct or coerce Washington or the other commanders in the field, the War Office was involved overseeing peripheral operations. In September 1776 Congress ordered the Board to prepare and present a plan of military operations for the next campaign.⁶² But this simply meant that the Board was to be involved in raising eighty four regiments to be enlisted for the duration of the war. Those who volunteered were to receive land and a money bounty. The Board was to insure an adequate response by pressuring the separate states to comply.⁶³

Also, when Philadelphia appeared to be threatened by the British in the fall of 1776, the Board was ordered to coordinate measures with the Pennsylvania Council of Safety for the defense of the city.⁶⁴ After a conference with the Council, the Board reported to Washington that the state of Pennsylvania was in a defenseless position and the state militia "inactive and languid to the last degree".⁶⁵ The Board did not express confidence in the Pennsylvania Council of Safety and so on November 14, 1776, when it was thought that an enemy fleet was headed for Philadelphia, Congress gave the Board full powers to enact whatever steps

were necessary to prepare for the defense of the city. The Board insisted that General Thomas Mifflin, who was especially popular in Philadelphia, would be best suited to take command there.⁶⁶ But the danger passed and the Board was able to countermand its orders. When it appeared that Philadelphia might be threatened again in January 1777, the Board advised Congress not to remove military stores from the city for such a move might throw the people of the city into a panic. Also, if the move proved premature, it "might render us contemptable in the Eyes of our Enemies".⁶⁷ Although the threats to Philadelphia proved to be false alarms, Indian incursions on the Pennsylvania frontier did demand the Board's attention. The War Office became active in raising companies and appointing officers to protect settlers on the frontier.⁶⁸

In July of 1777 the Board sponsored a plan for a move against the British garrisons in Mobile and Pensacola in West Florida, scheduled to proceed in the autumn of that year. It was hoped that Brigadier General Benedict Arnold would lead the expedition. The purposes of the expedition as outlined by the Board were to strike a blow that would serve to enhance American honor, seize military and naval stores, secure large amounts of merchandise which was

supposedly stored in Florida, and finally, to make West Florida the fourteenth state.⁶⁹

Colonel George Morgan, who was familiar with the area, drew up a detailed memorandum for the Board explaining how the expedition would proceed. Since the plan could not succeed without the assistance of the Spanish -- New Orleans was to be utilized as a supply depot and jumping off place -- Morgan questioned whether it might be suitable to reward the Spanish with Mobile or Pensacola, if the mission came off, for services rendered. Arnold, always quick to sense a chance for personal profit, was enthusiastic, foreseeing a lucrative trade opening up with the Spanish and the Indians who inhabited the area.⁷⁰ Even though Congress proved to be sympathetic towards the goals of the expedition, it was clearly not practicable. Men and supplies were not available in sufficient numbers and the logistical difficulties involved in moving forces from Fort Pitt down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers were extraordinary. Thus the plan to make West Florida the fourteenth state had to be put aside, temporarily at least.

One of the difficult problems confronting the Board of War was disputes among officers regarding rank, money, and protocol. The Phillip Schuyler-Horatio Gates dispute

regarding overall command in the northern department proved especially vexatious to the Board and Congress. Schuyler wrote a particularly discourteous letter to Congress in the wake of the turmoil. This letter was taken as an insult to Congress by many of the delegates and the matter was turned over to the Board to decide what if any action should be implemented against Schuyler. The Board of War reprimanded Schuyler and admonished him that in the future his letters "be written in a state more Suitable to the Dignity of the Representative Body of Free and Independent States". Commenting further on the Schuyler-Gates feud, the Board hoped that the majority of disagreements among officers could be settled by court martials agreeable to the rules of the army.⁷¹ Schuyler was not the only high ranking officer whose conduct was examined by the Board. In May, 1777 Brigadier General Benedict Arnold was called to present himself in the War Office to answer imputations made against him regarding his integrity. The Board found him innocent of any offenses and was apparently impressed enough with Arnold that he became the War Office's first choice to lead the projected West Florida expedition two months later.⁷²

Congress had the Board of War examine the behavior of

some officers accused of withholding pay due the troops under their command. The Board suggested that Washington establish a "Board of Enquiry" to examine the conduct of officers, consisting of general officers only. Those men found guilty of withholding pay would be "dismissed with Infamy" and prosecuted as "Public Plunders".⁷³

Complaints concerning the proper rank of officers proved to be a continuously troublesome dilemma for the Board. Since few adequate returns existed which testified to the exact dates when individual officers were commissioned, the Board was inundated by complaints in the nature of one officer's promotion over another based on reportedly unjust claims of seniority. Examining each case individually, for they were numerous, proved to be extremely time consuming. Testimonials from various sources had to be read and considered, and the Board's decision sent to Congress for final approval. The Board tried to divert this problem to Washington, resolving in February 1777 that the Commander-in-Chief be empowered to settle all disputes in the army relating to rank. But this expedient did not prove successful for Washington was immersed with responsibilities, and the petitions kept coming in to the War Office.⁷⁴ The Board tried to alleviate the problem by asking the state

legislatures to send to the War Office lists of officers appointed by the respective legislatures to serve in the Continental Army, as well as the dates of their commission and time of appointment.⁷⁵ Again, the states did not prove to be very cooperative and the Board of War continued to read and consider petitions from irate officers.

Another duty the Board found to be very trying was coordinating activities between Congress and the different states in enlisting troops and filling up regiments. The Board recommended that each state be divided into districts and an official appointed in each district to recruit men and fill up the regiments. It was suggested that each man enlist for three years or the duration of the war. The enlistees should be given a period of liberty at the time of their enlistment and freedom to choose the regiments they wished to serve in whenever possible.⁷⁶ Practical as these recommendations may have been, they were really only suggestions and even a congressional resolution could not automatically insure a positive response from the states which, as mentioned, had in many cases established their own boards of war and were likely to follow their own inclinations as far as recruiting methods were concerned.⁷⁷

The Board of War had sole supervision over the recruitment

of a Corps of Invalids. Rather than releasing troops outright who were only "slightly" injured, these men were used for garrison duty, recruiting, and drilling.⁷⁸ The Board informed Doctor David Shippen, head of the medical department, that before discharging men from the hospitals as unfit for service, medical personnel should first consider whether such men might be deemed suitable to perform garrison duty and be assigned to the Invalid Corps. Men having only one arm or leg the slightly injured, if otherwise considered capable, were to be regarded as fit for service with the Corps. The Board decided to announce in the Philadelphia newspapers that injured men currently on half pay would have to report to Philadelphia, if within twenty miles of the city, and if judged capable of duty, be activated and put on full pay. All men located beyond twenty miles of Philadelphia were directed to report to the nearest Continental general field officer, physician, or surgeon to be examined.⁷⁹

Also intended as a school to propagate military knowledge and discipline, the Invalid Corps was hardly greeted with enthusiasm by men who had, in some cases, already sacrificed an arm or a leg for their country. Although the dangers involved in performing garrison duty were usually

not great, members of the Corps were usually poorly clothed and ill fed. Many found themselves serving at West Point where boredom became a morale problem to be confronted by officers commanding the Invalid Corps.⁸⁰

Not surprisingly, the Board of War received many petitions from disconsolate members of the Corps begging to be relieved from further service; their pleas were usually based on the premise that their wounds had failed to heal properly and had left them unable to function. Thus the Board had to release many Invalid Corps members from the service, particularly when a doctor's testimonial of extreme ill-health accompanied a petition. But the Corps was not abolished although as late as March 1781 Richard Peters had to report to Congress that only a very small proportion of the invalids were able to perform effectively due to the wide variety of discomforts suffered by the afflicted. Still, some invalids remained useful for looking after prisoners and guarding stores.⁸¹ Of course, some soldiers were so badly hurt that they were never coerced to join the Invalid Corps at all. On a recommendation from the Board, Congress resolved to suggest that the individual states make provisions for the maintenance of disabled, wounded soldiers, and to keep an account of the expense so

that they might eventually be compensated through the Continental Treasury.⁸²

While the Board's duties were sometimes mundane, its members were, on occasion, required to make life or death decisions. Cases of desertion, for instance, were often directed to the War Office. Whenever possible the Board would refer these cases to Washington.⁸³ But this was not always practicable and the Board sometimes had to decide whether a deserter would live or die. These cases were usually complicated; The Board was far removed from the scene of contention, and could not hold interviews with those concerned but had to base their judgment on affidavits sent to the War Office.

When the Board considered a deserter to be insane, a surprisingly frequent occurrence, the usual recommendation stipulated that the deserter be "committed". When the Board reasoned it possessed insufficient evidence to reach a definite verdict, the case was referred back to the commanding officer in the department where the alleged desertion took place. Thus, a soldier in a Massachusetts regiment who was condemned to death by his commanding officer for intending to desert to the enemy, was judged, on evidence available to the Board, to be insane and subject only to

incarceration. But as a proviso, the Board decided that if General Edward Heath, commander in the department where the desertion took place, should decide that the prisoner was in fact sane after all, he could overrule the Board and proceed with the execution.⁸⁴ The Board of War was plainly hesitant to condone the death penalty. When in a position to do so, Board members could always discover a reason to cancel or annul an execution due to "mitigating circumstances."⁸⁵ We speculate that the Board of War, being composed solely of civilians, was largely unaware of the harsh measures sometimes necessary to insure that discipline would be maintained in the American armies.

In November 1777 John Adams was relieved of his position as president of the Board of War to pursue diplomatic missions for the United States in Europe. Adams did not regret leaving the War Office for, as he wrote in his autobiography, the Board

Kept me in continual employment, not to say Drudgery, from the 12th of June 1776 till the Eleventh of November 1777; When I left Congress forever. Not only my mornings and Evenings were filled up with Crowd of Business before the Board, but a great part of my time in Congress was engaged in making, explaining, and Justifying our Reports and Proceedings ... Other gentlemen attended as they pleased, but as I was Chairman, or as they were pleased to call it president, I must never be absent. 86

With Adams' departure the Board continued to attend to a "crowd of business" but delegates were now actively debating means to make the Board of War more efficient. In fact, drastic alterations in the structure of the Board were shortly to be incorporated.

ABBREVIATIONS

- 1 - DAB - The Dictionary of American Biography
- 2 - G.W. - The Writings of George Washington
- 3 - JCC - The Journals of the Continental Congress
- 4 - HSP - The Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- 5 - LMCC - Letters of Members of the Continental Congress
- 6 - LODC - Letters of Delegates to Congress
- 7 - MHS - The Massachusetts Historical Society
- 8 - NYHS - The New York Historical Society
- 9 - PCC - Papers of the Continental Congress

- 1 - Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments, p. 8; Edmund C. Burnett ed., Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, (Washington D.C., 1923), vol. 11, pp. 1, 94, 204.
- 2 - Worthington C. Ford, Journals of the Continental Congress, (Washington D.C., 1925), vol. 11, pp. 107-108, 128. vol. IV, pp. 55, 154, 162, 169, 276; Jennings B. Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1935), pp. 7-8.
- 3 - Jack N. Rakove, The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress, (New York, 1979), pp. 192-195.
- 4 - JCC, vol. IV, pp. 85. 293.
- 5 - JCC, vol. V, pp. 434-435.
- 6 - LMCC, vol. 11, p. 186.
- 7 - John Adams to Joseph Warren, July 7, 1776. Robert Taylor ed., The Papers of John Adams, (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), vol. IV, p. 364.
- 8 - LMCC, vol. 111, pp. 391, 394-395, 420-421. Rakove, The Beginnings of National Politics, pp. 201-202.
- 9 - JCC, vol V, p. 438.
- 10 - Octavius Pickering and Morris Upham, The Life of Timothy Pickering, (Boston, 1867-1873), vol. IV, p. 205.
- 11 - The Dictionary of American Biography, (New York, 1934), vol. XIV, p. 322. The Peters Papers in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania offer scant material for the period we are concerned with here.
- 12 - JCC, vol. V, p. 575.
- 13 - JCC, vol. V, p. 757.
- 14 - JCC, vol. VI, p. 923.

- 15 - JCC, vol. VI, p. 1068.
- 16 - JCC, vol. VII, p. 32.
- 17 - JCC, vol. VII, p. 204. Clymer was serving on the Treasury Board at the same time but was discharged from that duty on May 8, 1777 in order to be able to devote greater attention to the Board of War. JCC- vol. VII, p. 337.
- 18 - JCC, vol. VII, p. 337.
- 19 - "I have got into the old routine of the war office and Congress which takes up my time in such a manner that I can scarce write a line. I have time not to think, nor to speak". John Adams to Abigail Adams, L.H. Butterfield, ed., Adams Family Correspondence, (Cambridge Mass., 1963), vol. 11, p. 162.
- 20 - John Hancock to Robert Morris, December 23, 1776, Paul Smith ed., Letters of Delegates to Congress, (Washington D.C., 1978), vol. V, p. 643. JCC, vol. VI, p. 1033.
- 21 - Christopher Collier, Roger Sherman's Connecticut: Yankee Politics and the American Revolution, (Middleton Conn., 1971), p. 138.
- 22 - John Adams to Abigail Adams, June 26, 1776, LODC, vol. 1V, p. 324.
- 23 - John Adams to James Ward, July 10, 1776, Charles Francis Adams, The Works of John Adams, (Freeport, N.Y., 1855), vol. 1X, p. 422.
- 24 - John Adams to Nathanael Greene, July 14, 1776, Ibid., pp. 443-445.
- 25 - Horatio Gates to John Adams, July 12, 1776, Taylor, The Papers of John Adams, Vol. 1V, p. 388.
- 26 - John Adams to William Tudor, August 24, 1776, LODC, vol. 1V, p. 556.

- 27 - On the administration of the British army, see David Syrett, Shipping and the American War, 1775-1783, (London, 1970) pp. 1 - 60; Piers Macksey, The War for America, 1775-1783, (London, 1964), pp. 1-26.
- 28 - James A. Huston, The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1945, (Washington D.C., 1962), p. 4; Harry M. Ward, Unite or Die: Intercolony Relations, 1690-1763, (Port Washington, N.Y., 1971), p. 78.
- 29 - F.E. Whitton, Wolfe and North America, (New York, 1914), pp. 112-113. Ward, op. cited., p. 73.
- 30 - Ward, op. cited., p. 75.
- 31 - Ibid., pp. 256, 281.
- 32 - George Washington to Congress, June 13, 1776, John F. Fitzpatrick ed., The Writings of George Washington, (Washington D.C., 1932), vol. V, p. 128.
- 33 - Washington to Congress, June 20, 1776, G.W., vol. V, p. 159.
- 34 - John Hancock to Congress, June 14, 1776, LODC, vol. IV, p. 217.
- 35 - Hancock to Richard Peters, June 14, 1776. LODC, vol. IV, p. 217.
- 36 - Taylor, Adams Papers, vol. IV, pp. 252-253.
- 37 - The Board of War to Washington, June 21, 1776. LODC, vol. IV, p. 280. JCC, vol. V, pp. 434-435, 438.
- 38 - G.W., vol. V, pp. 200-201.
- 39 - The Papers of the Continental Congress (Washington D.C., The National Archives), "Reports of Committees", Items 21-22. Report of September 27, 1776.
- 42 - Orlando W. Stephenson, "The Supply of Gunpowder in 1776", The American Historical Review, (January, 1925), pp. 271-281.

- 43 - Adams to James Warren, June 26, 1776. LODC, vol. V, p. 404. To procure flints the Board advertised in Pennsylvania newspapers and received a favorable response.
- 44 - JCC, vol V, p. 831.
- 45 - For example, the surviving records of the Pennsylvania Board of War provide little evidence of that body's attempts to coordinate activities with the Continental Board of War, despite pleas from the latter. The Pennsylvania Board of War was composed of five members appointed by the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania. Their duties were somewhat similar to those of the Continental Board, though less diverse, and, of course, of a much smaller scale. "Pennsylvania Board of War Papers", The Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- 46 - PCC, Item 147, "Papers of the Board of War", The Board of War to Congress, June 14, 1776. Unless otherwise noted, PCC henceforth refers to the Papers of the Board of War.
- 47 - The Board of War to Congress, January 20, 1777. PCC, Item 147.
- 48 - Board of War meeting, January 30, 1777, PCC.
- 49 - Board of War meeting, January 21, 1777, PCC.
- 50 - Board of War meeting, January 23, 1777, PCC.
- 51 - George Washington to the Board of War, August 5, 1777. G.W., IX, pp. 19-20.
- 52 - George Washington to the Board of War, June 20, 1777. G.W., vol. VIII, pp. 272-273.
- 53 - Harold C. Peterson, Weapons of the Revolutionary War", American History Illustrated. (April, 1968), pp. 27-46, pp. 27-28.
- 54 - Ibid., pp. 25-29.
- 55 - George Washington to the Board of War, June 20, 1777. G.W., vol. VIII, pp. 272-273. Neil L. York,

"The Pennsylvania Rifle: Revolutionary Weapon in a Conventional War?" The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, (July, 1979), pp. 302-324.

- 56 - Ibid., p. 310.
- 57 - Richard Peters to the Maryland Council of Safety, October 26, 1776. LODC, vol. V, pp. 390-391.
- 58 - Anthony Wayne to the Board of War, June 3, 1777. Anthony Wayne Papers, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- 59 - Anthony Wayne to Richard Peters, February 8, 1778, Wayne Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- 60 - York, "Pennsylvania Rifle", passim.
- 61 - Board of War meeting, January 23, 1777. PCC.
- 62 - JCC, vol. V, pp. 729, 762-763.
- 63 - Josiah Bartlett to William Whipple, September 10, 1776. LODC, vol. V, p. 128.
- 64 - Benjamin Rush to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, LODC, vol. V, p. 337.
- 65 - The Board of War to Washington, October 29, 1776. LODC, vol. V, p. 375.
- 66 - The Board of War to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, LODC, vol. V, p. 482. The Board of War to Washington, November 14, 1776; LODC, vol. V, p. 483.
- 67 - The Board of War to Congress, January 25, 1777. PCC.
- 68 - Board of War meeting, January 21, 1777. PCC.
- 69 - Board of War meeting, July 10, 1777. PCC.
- 70 - Benedict Arnold to the Board of War, July 5, 1777. PCC. George Morgan to the Governor of New Orleans, April 22, 1777. The George Morgan Papers (Washington D.C., The Library of Congress).

- 71 - Board of War meeting. PCC.
- 72 - Board of War meeting May 23, 1777. PCC.
- 73 - Board of War meeting, May 10, 1777, PCC.
- 74 - Board of War meeting, February 12, 1777, where it was decided to send all disputes relating to rank on to Washington. The Pennsylvania Board of War was so informed. PCC.
- 75 - Board of War meeting, April 1, 1777. PCC.
- 76 - Board of War meeting, July 24, 1777. PCC.
- 77 - State boards of war were established in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Virginia that I know of for certain.
- 78 - JCC, vol. VI, April 27, 1777.
- 79 - Board of War meeting, June 23, 1777. PCC. The "Invalid" Corps is an unfortunate derivative from the French. The Corps was recreated by the War Department during the Civil War on April 23, 1863 and the following year the Corps title was changed to the Veteran Reserve Corps. Russell P. Weigley, History of the United States Army. (New York, 1967), p. 128.
- 80 - James Ripley Jacobs, The Beginning of the United States Army (Princeton, New Jersey, 1947), pp. 282-284.
- 81 Richard Peters to Congress, March 15, 1781, PCC, Item 148.
- 82 - Board of War meeting, May 24, 1777. PCC.
- 83 - Board of War meeting, October 21, 1777. PCC.
- 84 - Board of War meeting, June 19, 1777. PCC.
- 85 - For example, the case of one Thomas McCann, convicted by a court martial at Charleston, S.C. for desertion. Board of War meeting, June 17, 1777. PCC.

86 - Butterfield, Adams Papers, vol. 111, p. 342. It would appear from records of Board meetings that Adams missed quite a number of meetings the two months before he was dismissed from the Board.

Ch. II

Reorganization and Intrigue

Modern historians, notably Bernhard Knollenberg, have laid to rest the myth of a Conway Cabal. The Cabal was supposedly a conspiracy involving Brigadier General Thomas and the Reorganized Board of War, intended to replace Washington with Horatio Gates as Commander-in-Chief of the American forces. Gates, the commander at what was to that point the United States greatest victory in the war, Saratoga, had recently been selected as president of the Board of War. Without a doubt, Gates gained an inflated image of his own military merits due to the praise heaped onto him by many congressmen and his fellow countrymen in the aftermath of Burgoyne's surrender.

Gates was joined on the restructured Board of War, that now included military officers, by Timothy Pickering, formerly Washington's adjutant general, and Richard Peters, the Board's former secretary. In addition, Thomas Mifflin, who had served as quartermaster general, came on the Board. Mifflin harbored personal animosities against Washington, and dis-trusted his competence as Commander-in-Chief. Conway, meanwhile, was to serve as inspector general starting in the winter of 1778. He was expected to instill discipline and professionalism into the disorganized American army. But Conway, like Mifflin, and Gates as well, doubted Washington's

abilities. Conway expressed these doubts to Gates and Mifflin with whom he was on familiar terms.

In the highly charged atmosphere that was prevalent after the contrasting campaigns of the fall of 1777 in New York and Pennsylvania, even the slightest criticism of Washington was taken poorly by his closest lieutenants, notably Nathanael Greene. When criticism of Washington expressed by Conway and Mifflin in correspondence to Gates became public knowledge, Washington's supporters sensed a conspiracy was being hatched by Conway and the Board of War to replace Washington with Gates.

While Gates gave out hints that he felt himself qualified to serve as Commander-in-Chief, no evidence has ever surfaced that he acted as part of a scheme to replace Washington. As we shall see, nevertheless, the possibility of a conspiracy was used by Washington and his supporters to discredit Conway, Gates, and Mifflin, and in so doing, destroy the prospects for the Board of War playing a more intensive part in the American war effort.

The system whereby only members of Congress sat on the Board of War did not prove successful. The business of the War Office, with its many obligations, demanded continuous attention. Further, many delegates failed to serve any

appreciable time in Congress. It often happened that a delegate would no sooner take his place on the Board, than he left Congress or was directed to another board or committee. To complicate matters, delegates chosen as members of the Board of War usually did not possess enough knowledge of military matters to effectively deal with the problems confronting them. Astute delegates became aware of these difficulties after only a few months of the Board's operation. In the autumn of 1776 many congressmen realized that the principle of complete dominance of civilians over military concerns would have to give way. As a result, Washington was granted wide-ranging powers during the crisis of December 1776, and Congress began to consider allowing military officers to participate on the Board of War.

On December 26, 1776, Congress appointed a committee of five delegates "to prepare a plan for the better conducting the executive business of Congress by boards composed of persons not members of Congress."¹ Congress hereby realized that the war could easily be lost if drastic, and even unpopular measures were not adopted. Thus Samuel Chase complained to Brigadier General John Sullivan of the impropriety of one aspect of the military system which was then in force: "If we expect to succeed in the present war,

we must change our mode of conduct. The Business of the Congress must be placed in different hands. A gentleman of the military must be of the Board of War!"²

The congressional committee appointed to prepare a plan for establishing a revamped Board of War and Ordnance was eager to begin its assignment but was confused about how to proceed. In an attempt to get started, Thomas Nelson, a member of the committee, wrote to Major General Horatio Gates, "and not having a thorough knowledge of the Duties of these Boards", requested that Gates furnish him with a plan to meet the designs of Congress.³ Whether Nelson ever took the logical step of consulting the original Board is undocumented.

The committee structure became a victim of the perpetual congressional turnover in membership, and it was not until April 8, 1777 that the committee announced that it had a plan prepared for the formation of a reconstituted Board of War and Ordnance. But consideration of the plan was postponed indefinitely because of more pressing business and it was not until July 18 that Congress resolved to appoint a Board of War consisting of three men who were not members of Congress. The appointment of this Board was set for

July 22 but was then postponed and the next recorded action was the consideration on October 16 of a report from the committee on departments. It was not until November that members for the new Board were chosen.⁴

These delays hardly attest to the urgency exhibited in the resolutions and decisions adopted by Congress almost eleven months previously. Of course, the military situation had stabilized after the American victories at Trenton and Princeton, and it is not surprising that delegates were less anxious to reestablish the war department upon the lines of letting officers sit on the Board of War. Nevertheless, the plan designed in the dark days of late 1776 was still due to become operative; the question was when. In an attempt to reorganize its various departments, Congress was, in fact, a victim of the evils it was trying to correct. Inexperienced men, too few in numbers, were taking on heavy responsibilities and delays were unavoidable.

Meanwhile, through all the confusion caused by the forthcoming realignment, the Board continued to sit. Four new members were added as late as October 17, 1777; John Harvie, John Witherspoon, William Williams, and Joseph Jones.⁵ Harvie, for one, admitted that he had no innate talent for the job he was called on to perform, "and yet truly I am one

of the Board of War without having the skill in Military Affairs of an Orderly Sergeant." ⁶ On November 17 Francis Dana and Jonathon Bayard Smith were added to the Board. ⁷ Richard Henry Lee had previously been appointed to the Board as well, so that while Congress continued to plan the imminent demise of the Board of War in its original form, the War Office still continued to function with new members being constantly appointed.

The dull, usually routine business of the War Office ground on concerned with matters such as requesting the government of Connecticut to permit workers at Salisbury Iron Works to cast mortars for Continental use of the calibre and number recommended by Brigadier General Henry Knox. ⁸ On November 6 the Board requested the Foreign Affairs Committee write to the American commissioners in France concerning the possibility of procuring much needed supplies. ⁹

In the midst of these mundane activities the Board took a step that was to bear an influence on the course of American civil-military relations in the near future. On November 4 the Board recommended that Colonel James Wilkinson, Adjutant General in the Northern Department and described by Gates as "a promising military genius", be awarded a brevet commission of brigadier general. ¹⁰ Wilkinson's major claim to fame to

this point had been his bringing the official news of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga to Congress. Wilkinson's journey from Saratoga to York, Pennsylvania, where Congress was meeting, was an eventful journey that will be considered in further detail. For the present it is only necessary to mention that high-ranking American officers did not look favorably upon the twenty-one year old Wilkinson being appointed to a brevet brigadier generalship ostensibly for carrying the glad tidings from the north to Congress.

On November 19, 1777, the Board was directed by Congress to submit a report on the reform of the presently leaderless Quartermaster Department. Thomas Mifflin, the former Quartermaster General, was suspected by some delegates of having used his position to secure profits and contracts for himself and friends and relations. Mifflin had been unhappy in performing the duties of Quartermaster General. He resigned his post on June 5, 1776 and was replaced by Colonel Stephen Moylan; but Moylan had not been able to handle the job and Mifflin was reappointed.¹² The problem, however, was that Mifflin was a man in search of glory on the battlefield. The administrative responsibilities of the Quartermaster Department did not sufficiently provide the opportunities he sought in order to secure fame.

In eighteenth century armies the quartermaster general was usually the right-hand man of the commanding general. As the principal staff officer, it was the quartermaster's duty to gather information, assist the commanding general in planning his marches, and distribute deployment orders to the general officers. The quartermaster general also explored the field of operations, opened and repaired roads, chose proper points for bridges, and examined fords. Added to this was the toil of laying out the camp, procuring materials, transporting men and supplies, furnishing horses and pack animals, and providing for their maintenance.

Congress originally allowed Mifflin to organize the Quartermaster Department as he saw fit. This, unfortunately, did not satisfy Mifflin who, burdened by the numerous, mundane responsibilities confronting him, continued to yearn for a field command. Naturally, Mifflin was reluctant to accept the post of quartermaster general a second time when Moylan proved incompetent, blamed by Washington for a huge loss of supplies in the campaign around New York City.¹⁴

Although Mifflin was promoted to Major General, he continued to be unhappy and, claiming illness, resigned shortly after the loss of Philadelphia. Washington was shocked as no reliable successor was available to immediately

replace him. Mifflin, meanwhile, was replaced in his role by a Colonel Henry Emanuel Lufferlich, of whom a committee of Congress when visiting camp in February 1778 reported did not possess "talents or activity equal to this important office."¹⁵

Attempting to apply order in a chaotic situation, Congress ordered the Board of War to submit a plan for the restructuring of the Quartermaster Department on November 19, and on November 21 Mifflin was requested to appear at the War Office. But strangely, the former Quartermaster General was not consulted on this occasion regarding matters pertaining to his old department. Rather, the Board was interested in gaining Mifflin's ideas concerning the establishment of the new Board of War. Richard Henry Lee, at the time a leading member of the soon to be defunct Board, had mentioned Mifflin's name in Congress as a prospective commissioner on the realigned Board. Mifflin enjoyed the support of many delegates and having apparently recovered his health, his talents could undoubtedly be put to good use. Lee insured the prestige-conscious Mifflin that the new Board would constitute "A most important department on which our righteous warfare enimently depends". As an added incentive, Mifflin was assured that he could retain

the rank of Major General while serving on the Board.¹⁶

At the meeting of November 21 the Board and prospective commissioner Mifflin devised a number of suggestions which if approved by Congress would hopefully render the new Board a more efficient instrument. First, it was determined that an adequate number of commissioners was not anticipated by Congress to sit on the new Board. Congress presumed on appointing three commissioners but this was deemed insufficient. Particularly so since it was expected that a Board member would from time to time visit the different armies and garrisons to insure that the various regulations adopted by Congress were being carried out, and to examine and ascertain the needs of the armies as well as the defects prevailing in the different departments.¹⁷ Thus, it was recommended that two additional commissioners be appointed to the Board of War, making a total of five, any three to equal a quorum.

The old Board strongly suggested that Richard Peters' services be included in some capacity on the reestablished Board of War, either remaining as secretary or preferably being promoted to the status of a full commissioner. Peters, they said, had "discharged the duties of an arduous and complicated Department in its Infant Stage, with Honor to himself, and much Disinterestness, and with Fidelity and advantage to

the Public."¹⁸

Mifflin volunteered the motion that Major General Horatio Gates, the recent conqueror of Burgoyne and hero of the Saratoga campaign, be induced to serve as the president of the new Board. Mifflin reasoned that Gates, with his military expertise, would suggest changes in the army

essential to good discipline, order, and economy, and that his character and popularity in the Army would facilitate the execution of such reformations when adopted by Congress -- a task in the opinion of this committee more arduous and important than the formation of any new Establishment, however wise it may be in theory.¹⁹

Finally, the old Board recommended that it continue handling the normal affairs of the War Office until the commissioners appointed to the restructured Board were free to attend to their duties.²⁰

Writing to Washington on October 20, 1777, Lee revealed the names of some of the candidates Congress was considering to sit on the new Board of War. Prominent among those names Lee mentioned were Colonel Timothy Pickering, Washington's adjutant general, Colonel Robert Harrison, Washington's secretary, and Colonel Joseph Reed. Lee suggested Brigadier General Thomas Conway, an Irishman who had served in the French Army, as a possible replacement for Pickering. Lee assured Washington that Congress would not insist that he give up the services of either Pickering or Harrison if the Commander-in-

Chief considered them indispensable, or before adequate replacements were found.²¹

Conway, who Lee named as a suitable candidate for adjutant general, had been corresponding with Lee and the Board of War for some time. Exiled with his family from Ireland when he was only six years old, and enrolled in the French army at fourteen, Conway frankly admitted that he had come to America "for to increase my fortune and that of my family." He hoped to attain the corresponding rank of brigadier when he returned to France, meaning that he would probably have to serve as a major general in the American army.²² Silas Deane, who had recruited Conway in France, had not guaranteed him that he would serve in any specific position or rank in the Continental forces. Nevertheless, finding it difficult to advance through the French officer corps, Conway happily accepted Deane's proposal and as an experienced officer who spoke English well, was enthusiastically received by the majority of delegates in Congress. On May 13, 1777, Congress appointed him a brigadier general, a rank which, temporarily at least, satisfied Conway.²³ But ultimately Conway desired a field command in order to better distinguish himself and insure rapid promotion to his desired rank of major general. He was assigned a brigadier under John Sullivan's command

and impressed Sullivan by his performance at both Brandywine and Germantown: "His regulations in his Brigade are much better than any in the Army and his knowledge of military matter in general far exceeds any officer we have."²⁴

On September 25, 1777 Conway informed Congress that he wished to be promoted to the rank of major general. He claimed to be better qualified than Baron Johann de Kalb, who was already serving as a major general in American, but had been Conway's inferior in rank when both had served in the French army. Now all twenty-three American brigadiers were Conway's seniors by dates of commission. If Conway was to be promoted over all of them, Washington rightly feared that a storm of discontent might break loose among the American officers, a situation the Commander-in-Chief especially wished to avoid since a large number of able but unhappy officers were already requesting permission to leave the Army.¹⁵

The American brigadier generals were determined to prevent Conway's promotion to major general. They organized a petition and sent it to Congress. The brigadiers wrote to Congress, "We have commanded with him (Conway) in the field and are totally unacquainted with any Superior act of merit which would entitle him to rise above us."²⁶ In Nathanael Greene's opinion, Conway was a "great incendiary, a man of too much

intrigue and too little judgment." But John Sullivan, who was in the best position to know, having served as Conway's immediate superior, complimented his skills and poise under battle condition. Lieutenant Colonel Jon Laurens, the son of Henry Laurens, the President of Congress, personally disliked Conway. In a frank moment, however, he admitted that Conway was adept in disciplining a regiment, a sore need in the American army.²⁷

Conway himself suggested a means whereby he would receive his promotion to major general, but still manage to soothe the sensibilities of the other brigadiers. He wrote a number of letters to the Board of War advocating the need for an inspector general to promote discipline in the army and reform abuses. The Board reacted favorably, recommending to Congress that an inspector general be appointed "agreeable to the practice of the best disciplined European armies." The duties of the inspector general would include insuring that every soldier and officer was instructed in the correct measures as established by the Board; that the rules of discipline be strictly observed, and officers command the troops properly and with justice. Further, the inspector general would carefully examine the returns of each regiment and forward reports to the Board and Congress.²⁸

While Lee had originally nominated Conway for the position of adjutant general, who would be better qualified than the latter to assume the duties of inspector general? Even his enemies grudgingly admitted that the Irishman possessed a talent for drill and regulation, and the need for discipline and organization within the ranks was not disputed. Thus, as Conway suggested, he could be promoted to the rank of major general, but in a special staff capacity, whereby he would supervise maneuvers and drill troops but not command in the field. In this manner the Board hoped to mollify the American brigadier generals, while at the same time filling the gap presented by the lack of an inspector general.²⁹

In the future the fortunes of the new Board of War and Conway would converge to the detriment of both the general and the War Office. Meanwhile, Congress continued on its painfully slow approach in choosing commissioners to sit on the reorganized Board. As early as June 1776 Washington had expressed his desire to work in close relationship to the War Office. He had hoped the Board could relieve him of the burden of much of the administrative paperwork that moved across his desk. But Congressional inefficiency, overworked and inexperienced Board members, and Washington's propensity to assume responsibilities tended to hamper and disarrange

close working relationship foreseen by Washington in his connection with the original Board of War. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Washington distrusted Lee's promises that the new Board would provide him with more relief from his countless duties.³⁰ Certainly, the idea of his personal secretary, Harrison, and his adjutant general, Pickering, leaving him for the War Office, must have left the Commander-in-Chief unhappy, regardless of how much their abilities would improve the performance of the new Board. Nevertheless, he was prepared to sacrifice their services to him for the higher good.

As usual Congress considered prospective commissioners for the realigned Board of War at a painstakingly slow pace. They proceeded, however, to make their choices on an intelligent, pragmatic basis.

We have seen that Lee had campaigned to seat Mifflin on the Board, and the latter, though supposedly recovering from serious illness, was eager to accept. Washington was dubious of Mifflin's motives, the latter having resigned his post as Quartermaster General at a most unpropitious time leaving the department in a state of limbo, as there was no one experienced available to replace him. In any case, there was no disputing that Mifflin was a competent administrator and as knowledgeable

and experienced in the supply domain as anyone else. Since he could not be persuaded to resume his duties as Quartermaster General, Mifflin's talents could still be put to good use at the War Office. This was because the new Board of War was expected to play a more important role in the regulation and supply of the army than its predecessor.³¹

Judged on the premise that the Board would be active in the supply realm, the services of a man in the Commissary Department would be required at the War Office. The logical candidate to fill this need was Joseph Trumbull, the able but overworked Commissary General from Connecticut. Congressional delegate Elbridge Gerry considered it crucial that Trumbull bring his expertise to the War Office. The problem was that Trumbull was in poor health. In addition, he was on bad terms with Joseph Reed of Pennsylvania, who was also being considered for the Board. But Gerry informed Trumbull that if he consented to serve on the Board, he would make sure Reed's candidacy would be rejected. Finally, Gerry told Trumbull, "If you decline this office, it must have all the effects so as it represents yourself of giving up the cause."³²

With Mifflin and Trumbull, assuming the latter accepted his appointment, on the Board, the War Office would have two men

familiar and knowledgable with the supply services. Congress was also on the right track in staffing the new Board by including Richard Peters, who was so familiar with the routine labors of the War Office. The most important addition to the Board, if he agreed to serve, would be Gates. The President of Congress, Henry Laurens of South Carolina, had informed Gates on November 25, 1777, that Congress had unanimously selected him as the President of the Board of War.³³ Gates was, of course, at the zenith of his military career at this time. By defeating Burgoyne at Saratoga, he had performed the greatest feat of American arms up to that point in the war. Although the victory had resulted largely through the support Gates received from his subordinate officers, Benedict Arnold and Daniel Morgan, Gates was pleased to accept the majority of the credit. While Gates had been winning battles and renown in the north, the Commander-in-Chief, Washington, had been outmaneuvered and outfought by the British at Brandywine and Germantown, resulting in the loss of the American capital, Philadelphia. Some congressmen were quick to make comparisons of the military merits of the two commanders based on the contrasting outcomes of the campaigns -- most of these judgments, naturally, were unfavorable to Washington.³⁴

This is not the place to compare the relative abilities

of Washington and Gates as military commanders, the subsequent history of the war having fairly determined that controversy. Instead, we can reflect that Gates, at the height of his glory and prestige, was seriously considered as a suitable Candidate for president of the new Board of War. This stipulated that the architect of America's most impressive and important military success would give up his command in the field and use his talents to try and overcome the dilemmas of military administration. Thus it is abundantly clear that in the autumn and winter of 1777 Congress attached great significance to, and harbored high hopes for the administration of the restructured Board of War. In terms of congressional recognition and appreciation of its potential worth, the War Office had achieved the summit of its importance.

Gates consented to serve as president of the Board under the provision that he would retain his status as major general and act as such on the battlefield if the occasion warranted.³⁵ It was understood by Gates and Congress that the president of the Board might be summoned from the War Office to take command in the field if a crisis situation developed.

Under the assumption that Gates might sometimes be called away from the War Office, Timothy Pickering was expected to be present on the Board to offer expert military counsel.

Pickering, who had written a manual on drill techniques, was chosen by Congress to serve as a commissioner on November 7, 1777, and accepted his appointment on November 15.³⁶ At the time, Pickering conceded that his duties at the War Office would probably be extensive, although he admitted he had no knowledge of what those duties actually comprised.³⁷

Pickering was a devoted patriot, hardworking, puritanical -- and extremely short of funds, not having any independent means. Because the salary of each commissioner chosen to sit on the new Board was set at two thousand dollars a year, this bettered by one quarter Pickering's previous salary as adjutant general. The increase in pay gladdened Pickering as did his belief that even after the war was over and independence won, the need would still exist for the continued operation of the Board of War. Pickering felt that if he performed his duties admirably, he could secure a permanent place and income on the Board of War.³⁸

In a letter to his wife, Pickering praised Congress's prescience in making appointments to the new Board of War: "Those who had been in the Army (Pickering, Mifflin, Gates) could best judge of its wants, and having felt them, would of course probably provide suitable supplies, so far as the means were in their power."³⁹ Pickering's ideas made obvious sense.

Time would tell, however, how much real power the new Board of War would actually possess.

Although the appointments to the Board were decided in November 1777, it would be more than two months before a quorum of commissioners could be brought together. Gates was understandably delayed in tying up loose ends in the Northern Department. He had to arrange the fate of the Convention prisoners and take steps to insure against a potential British move northward from New York City.⁴⁰ Pickering had to remain with the main army in winter quarters at Valley Forge until a reliable successor could be found to replace him as adjutant general. He did not reach York, Pennsylvania, where Congress and the Board were located until February 4, 1778.⁴¹

Thomas Mifflin could not report directly to the Board as he was kept occupied trying to square his accounts for the period in which he served as quartermaster general. Joseph Trumbull, meanwhile, worn out by his exertions as commissary general, was unable to report to York because of ill health and was, in fact, shortly to die. Richard Peters, fortunately was available and donated his services with the old Board, that continued to function, awaiting the arrival of the new commissioners. Since the business of the War Office would not

wait, Congress was forced to make temporary appointments to the Board, selecting Edward Langworthy and Jonathon Bayard Smith; Smith having served on the Board for a brief period previously.⁴²

Since Richard Peters had been chosen as a commissioner on the new Board, the War Office was in need of a secretary. Accordingly, Congress chose James Wilkinson for that position on January 6, 1778. We have already seen that the old Board, encouraged by Gates, had recommended Wilkinson's promotion to brigadier general as an award for his services as Gates' adjutant and for his delivering the official confirmation of Burgoyne's surrender to Congress. High-ranking American officers did not appreciate or understand the recognition being paid to Wilkinson and, as in the case of Conway's proposed promotion, felt it was underserved.⁴³ Some members of Congress shared the feelings of the officers. While Wilkinson was awarded his commission as brigadier general, perhaps so that the hero of the hour, Gates, would not take offense, a few delegates designed a scheme to "remove him (Wilkinson) out of the way by appointing him Secretary to the Board of War or by sending him to Georgia" (Georgia?). In this manner, if Wilkinson accepted his appointment to the Board, he would be serving under his admirer, Gates, and he

would not be serving in the field. This would hopefully satisfy the disgruntled officers. Unfortunately, what was not commonly known was that Gates and Wilkinson had experienced a falling out and had become enemies.

When Wilkinson left Gates to deliver the official account of the victory over Burgoyne, he embarked on a leisurely trip to reach Congress. In Reading, Pennsylvania, Wilkinson met Mifflin who was in town to attend to personal affairs. Mifflin gave Wilkinson his views on the recent campaigns, and said he now believed Washington had become a puppet of Nathanael Greene, who was in turn unpatriotic and an incompetent officer.⁴⁵ While the former Quartermaster General had once been a staunch supporter of Washington, he had changed his views. Mifflin might have been inclined to disparage the Commander-in-Chief's military attributes because Washington had not seen fit to appoint him to a field command where he could lead men in battle. Mifflin performed as well as could be expected, however, as Quartermaster General, under trying conditions. He was also an excellent recruiting officer and cunning politician. But it is doubtful whether he would have made a good commander. One witness noted that Mifflin easily became disconcerted and, on one occasion after hearing a few shots, "flew about as though he would have raised the whole army."⁴⁶

After his meeting with Mifflin, Wilkinson stayed a night in the household of Brigadier General William Alexander or, as he preferred to be called, Lord Stirling, an officer loyal to Washington. Wilkinson confided to Stirling's aide, Major William McWilliams, about a letter Conway had written to Gates that the latter, according to Wilkinson, read aloud to some of his officers. Among other interesting items, the letter supposedly listed thirteen reasons, many to Washington's discredit, for the American defeat at Brandywine. Informed of the existence of this letter by McWilliams, Stirling sent on a report to Washington.⁴⁷ This account contained an extract of the letter Gates had received from Conway that contained the words, as remembered by Wilkinson, "Heaven has determined to save your country or a weak General and bad counsellor would have ruined it." The reference to "a weak General and bad counsellor" almost certainly pertained to Washington and Greene respectively. We can also assume that it was Gates whom heaven had determined to save the country since he had recently won an extraordinary victory, and, of course, the letter was addressed to him. After Washington received the damaging extract of the letter from Stirling, he sent a note to Conway informing him that he was aware of what Conway was saying about him, but avoided further comment.⁴⁸

Although Congress appointed Conway inspector general, there was so much hostility directed toward him at Valley Forge, that he found himself unable to perform his duties. Conway claimed that he was eager to begin instructing and drilling the troops. Washington, on the other hand, said that it was impossible for that to occur until proper regulations for the inspector generalship were drawn up and issued by the new Board of War; the same Board that had yet to conduct a single meeting! Meanwhile, Conway was aware of rumors circulating around camp that had Mifflin and Gates intriguing to have Washington removed as Commander-in-Chief, to be replaced by Gates. Also, the plotters were determined that Conway be given credit for whatever success the American forces had achieved at Germantown. Conway told Gates he considered such accusations to be nonsense. Nevertheless, he was deeply depressed because his abilities were not being put to use at Valley Forge, and was seriously considering returning to France.⁴⁹ Adding to Conway's distress was the fact that officers who had earlier praised his capabilities as a soldier, now failed to support him since he was in disfavor with Washington. The young Frenchman, the Marquis de Lafayette, for example, had earlier commended Conway's abilities as an officer. Now, however, he made sure to remind

Washington that although Conway had served in the French Army, he was, in fact, Irish and his conduct should not reflect on the other French officers fighting for the American cause.⁵⁰

Washington now regarded Conway as his personal enemy and thus it would seem that any friend of Conway could not be considered loyal to Washington. Up to recently, Washington had been unaware that Conway and Gates knew one another or were exchanging letters. The knowledge of their acquaintance served to support his worst suspicions. Gates had already lost considerable standing with the Commander-in-Chief by his obstinancy in not reporting his victory at Saratoga directly to Washington; an oversight Washington considered to be a personal reproach. Exacerbating the matter was an incident that occurred soon after Gates' victory when Washington sent Colonel Alexander Hamilton north to gain much needed reinforcements from Gates for the army in Pennsylvania. But Gates hesitated to weaken his army, fearing a move north from New York City led by General Sir Henry Clinton. Hamilton did not believe Gates' fears had any real foundation because he was selfishly holding back the troops. This helped to further undermine Gates in Washington's eyes. Mounting evidence seemed to indicate Gates was involved with, or at least

quietly sanctioning the movement Washington now believed he recognized to be developing, the ultimate purpose of which was to have him removed. Gates, oddly enough, did not seem to realize the extent to which he was under suspicion from Washington and his faithful lieutenants. His primary concern by far within the context of the controversy was to identify the villain who had been reading and circulating his private correspondence.⁵¹ Gates was inclined to believe that his enemy, Hamilton, had somehow come into possession of the letter, copied it, and sent it to Washington.⁵² His anger seems genuine. If, as the unreliable Wilkinson claims, Gates had previously read the letter before some of his staff officers, he never admitted it or conveniently forgot.

Gates first learned that extracts of Conway's letter had fallen into Washington's hands from Mifflin in November 1777. Mifflin's letter is interesting in that it contains these lines: "The extract was a collection of just sentiments My dear General, take care of your generosity and frank disposition. They cannot injure yourself, but may injure some of your best friends." While hardly indicative of a conspiracy in the making, Mifflin leaves little doubt in the letter as to the direction of his own feelings.

Gates, meanwhile, seems to have indeed become somewhat

arrogant.⁵⁴ This is not at all surprising considering the large amount of praise he was now receiving. A particularly ardent admirer was Congressman James Lovell who had become disenchanted with Washington and wished Gates as his replacement.⁵⁵ It would seem likely that Gates could envision himself as the overall leader of the American forces. In any case, although he was too cautious to openly participate in a campaign designed to cause the downfall of Washington, he did not do anything to still criticism of his Commander-in-Chief. As he confided to Conway, he was in total agreement with the latter as to the cause of America's military misfortunes, and Conway had already made clear that he thought the problem stemmed from Washington's incapacity.⁵⁶

Gates was not so much bothered that he would be called to account for planning the removal of Washington, but he vented his anger first on Hamilton and then on Wilkinson, both of whom he suspected of tampering with his mail. Wilkinson admitted that he might have seen the infamous letter and spoke of it as a "matter of notoreity", though not intending to deliberately injure either Gates or Conway.⁵⁷ In his memoirs, Wilkinson claims that Washington, at least, absolved him of all blame in the affair.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it was young Wilkinson's rather impetuous conduct which served to arouse

underlying tensions and controversy. His subsequent career in the United States Army was riddled by intrigue and deceit on his part. Wilkinson cannot be convicted on the basis of the evidence available as the culprit who perpetuated the feud which became known as the "Conway Cabal". Nonetheless, circumstantial evidence and his own personal history cast a dubious aura on Wilkinson's role in the affair.

Henry Laurens, the President of Congress, obtained the original copy of Conway's letter. He reported: "I have seen the letter this day. It is true that General Washington was misinformed, the letter does not contain the words which have been reported to him, but ten times worse in every view."⁵⁹ Because of the Conway letter Washington was insulted, outraged, and looked for people to blame. The evidence against Conway and Mifflin was accumulating, due in no small part to the efforts of Washington's leading lieutenants to add fuel to the fire. Mifflin and Conway were outspoken and their views received wide circulation. As we have noted, Gates was more tactful and less the object of direct accusation, he had displayed numerous examples of not paying deferential respect to the Commander-in-Chief, if not displaying outright disobedience, especially by his dilatoriness in sending Washington reinforcements. Hamilton and Greene

particularity made certain that Washington was aware of these omissions. Nevertheless, Gates did not appear to suspect that he was supposed to have committed any wrong-doings. He continued to write letters to Washington, Congress, and Conway, concerning the identifying of the villain who was reading his mail.⁶⁰

Around the middle of January 1778, a folio was found on the stairway of the temporary hall of Congress in York, the contents of which denounced Washington's strategical and administrative abilities. The author, remaining anonymous, accused Washington of not being an attacking general and of failing to make good use of the militia at his disposal. According to the writer, "the liberties of America are safe only in the hands of the militia." A warning in the tract stated that "the people of America have been guilty of idolatry by making a man their God." The folio was discovered by Henry Laurens who forwarded it directly to Washington. In response the Commander-in-Chief proclaimed that if such sentiments prevailed he would not protest to an inquiry being made into his conduct. But no action was taken, probably because the charges originated from an anonymous source, and were considered to be, at least by Laurens, mere gossip.⁶¹

Whether Washington considered the contents of the folio

entitled "Thoughts of a Freeman" to be simply gossip is doubtful. His suspicions were constantly reinforced by friends and associates, particularly Greene, who kept him well informed of the supposed dangers rising against him. But Washington's detractors, alarmed by the hostile reaction against them on the part of the Commander-in-Chief's lieutenants, were becoming more careful and as just noted, tended to express their views anonymously. Thus, Patrick Henry, a confidant of Washington at the time, received an unsigned letter in January 1778 which attested that while the army under Washington's command was in total chaos, the northern army under Gates had shown what Americans were capable of accomplishing with an adept general leading them. The problem had to be located at the top since, according to the writer, Washington's force was in actuality no way inferior to the northern army. "A Gates, a (Charles) a Lee, or a Conway, would in a few weeks render them an irresistable body of men."⁶²

Thomas Conway, stunned and angered by the reproaches he had received at the hands of Washington and his loyal followers, attempted to take his case directly to the Commander-in-Chief himself. But if he seriously hoped for a reconciliation, he did not attempt to achieve it in an intelligent manner. First, Conway informed Washington that there was not a subaltern in

Europe who would hesitate to write to his comrades offering opinions on the worth of the various generals and armies. According to Conway, European commanders never took serious alarm at this practice: "Must such an odious and tyrannical inquisition begin in this country?"

While Conway was correct on this point, that is that the plusses and minuses of armies and commanders were frequently commented upon in the correspondence of European officers, he did not take into consideration the special circumstances of the American insurgency which, while not demanding total censure, did require a modicum of circumspection and restraint. The war was less a private military struggle testing the resolve of the combatants alone, but rather a test which affected almost all the inhabitants of the rebellious colonies. Too much criticism of the military leaders, especially criticism which might be unjust, would prove detrimental to the attempt of rallying the populace to support the cause. Conway then committed the error of becoming sarcastic and condescending towards Washington: "I do not pretend, Sir, to be a consummate general; but as an old sailor knows more of a ship than admirals who have never been at sea, long experience and constant practise made me think, that I in some measure could be a helping hand in putting your army

upon a better footing, and in correcting the many abuses of which no one is more sensible of than you are." Conway proceeded to compare Washington to Frederick the Great, recognizing that while only a few other mortals could attain such heights, "But you sir, and the great Frederick know perfectly well that this trade is not learned in a few months. I have served steadily thirty years." Conway had, by this extremely tactless, though sometimes perceptive letter, passed the point of no return in his relations with Washington. The Commander-in-Chief was insulted by Conway's insolence and the apparent portrayal of Washington as an amateur soldier.⁶⁴

The controversy arising out of the suspected conspiracy severely forestalled the administration, and damaged the prestige of the realigned Board of War. Not only were Mifflin and Gates believed by many to be Washington's mortal enemies, but the two other newly appointed commissioners, Peters and Pickering, became suspect, though apparently from guilt by association rather than by any real evidence.

Washington's devotees were often over-zealous in their support of him. Mifflin, for example, was harassed by General John Cadwalader who would eventually challenge Conway to a duel in which the latter survived a ball passing through

his mouth and neck. Colonel Daniel Morgan became convinced through rumors that Peters was plotting against Washington. Peters found himself being watched and trailed by the burly Morgan and feared for his safety.⁶⁵

Peters, who was an optimistic and usually cheerful individual, was dismayed by the endless feuding and grew pessimistic for the prospects of the new Board: "For my part I wish myself anywhere but in this disagreeable scene Unless great alterations take place, the first and most capital of which is the restoration of personal harmony, I don't expect much from an arrangement of this Department in which I confess, leaving myself out of the question, promised great advantages to the cause."⁶⁶ The former secretary to the old Board was convinced that rumors of a conspiracy were unfounded, and he felt certain of this when Gates finally arrived and could not be disputed, but who like all men, had his imperfections. As for Gates, Pickering worked cordially with him at the War Office, but he was "not bound to elevate any mortal into a God." While he found Gates to possess a wide fund of military knowledge, from information Pickering had received from officers who served with Gates in the Saratoga campaign, he had become convinced that Benedict Arnold and Daniel Morgan had played the pivotal roles in achieving the

final American victory.⁷⁰

The first important duty assigned to the new Board of War designated three commissioners along with three congressional delegates to report to camp in order to concert measures with Washington for the reform of the army. The committee would examine supply needs and investigate "upon the great Business of introducing Discipline and Oeconomy into the Army."⁷¹ Further, the committee would coordinate efforts with Washington to execute a plan for reducing the number of battalions in the Continental line; recommend to Congress the necessary appointments of general officers; remove officers in the civil departments for misconduct, negligence, or incompetency, and appoint others in their place; attend to complaints involving rank, and report the need for reinforcements and the best way to obtain them.⁷²

The plan made excellent sense. One of the major drawbacks in the American war effort up to that point was an obvious lack of cooperation and coordination, despite repeated avowals of good will from all sides, between Congress, the Commander-in-Chief, and the Board of War. Perhaps face to face communication, if constituting the start of a pattern would help to alleviate some of the most outstanding difficulties, and allow the business of military administration to proceed in a less

piece-meal fashion.

Problems remained before the plan could be put into effect. The congressional resolve naming the three Board members who would accompany the delegates to camp was announced on January 12, 1778.⁷³ The commissioners chosen were Gates, Pickering, and Mifflin. It has already been noted that all of these gentlemen were delayed in reaching York for a variety of reasons and as late as January 17, the old Board, headed by R.H. Lee still manned the War Office.⁷⁴

The project for having three commissioners from the Board visit camp was soon cancelled by Congress.⁷⁵ Supposedly, Congress was anxious for the realigned Board to commence operations, and its business was far too extensive to permit representatives from the undermanned War Office to remove to Valley Forge, even for a few days. Besides, Pickering had not even arrived at York and Gates had not had time to become accustomed to his new duties and surroundings.⁷⁶ Of course, Peters might have accompanied Gates and Mifflin to camp, with the old Board handling the routine affairs of the War Office for a slightly longer period. The start in operation of the new Board of War had already been postponed so long, a further delay should hardly have been alarming, considering the importance of meeting with Washington in order to exchange

ideas on how best to promote workable and efficient military administration. The real reason Mifflin and Gates could not travel to camp was obvious, and Peters hinted at the cause in a private letter to Robert Morris: "You will be informed that Congress have thought it most prudent considering the state of Parties at Camp to keep General Mifflin and Gates here and send you⁷⁷ and Mr. (Charles)Carrol as Commissioners of the Army."⁷⁸ Apparently, the respective parties at camp and on the Board of War were so hostile towards each other that an important meeting, which might have proven to be extremely beneficial to the war effort, could not be held.

Thus, the reorganized Board of War, which had been conceived in a climate of optimism and great promise, found itself hamstrung before it even began to function. If members of the Board could not go to camp to meet Washington personally because of jealousies and rumors of conspiracy, the War Office could hardly hope to operate effectively as an administrative department. Cordial dealings with the Commander-in-Chief and his lieutenants were necessary for the Board of War to perform its mission in providing services for the army and enhancing the successful prosecution of the war. Washington still commanded the allegiance of the majority of general officers in the army and delegates in Congress, but Gates'

prestige, which necessarily had to remain intact to insure the viability of the Board, began to fade as rumors of his probable role in opposition to Washington started to spread. A further decline in the reputations of both the Board of War and its president became imminent when on January 22, 1778 Congress resolved that the War Office organize an incursion into Canada.⁷⁹

Notes

- 1 - JCC, vol. VI, p. 1. Benjamin Harrison to Robert Morris, December 29, 1776; LMCC, vol. II, p. 196.
- 2 - Samuel Chase to John Sullivan, December 24, 1776. LMCC, vol. II, p. 186.
- 3 - Thomas Nelson to Horatio Gates, December 31, 1776. LMCC, vol. III, pp. 199-200.
- 4 - All this can be followed in JCC vol. IV and is conveniently summarized in LMCC vol. III, note. I, pp. 210-211. The duties of the new Board as outlined in the congressional resolution of April 8, 1777 is almost a replica of the responsibilities Congress assigned the Board at the outset of its existence. See JCC vol. VI, pp. 241-242.
- 5 - JCC vol. IX, p. 813.
- 6 - John Harvie to Thomas Jefferson, October 18, 1777, Julian Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, (Princeton, N.J., 1952), vol. II, p. 241-242.
- 7 - JCC vol. IX, p. 936. Dana was released from the Board of War to sit on the Treasury Board on December 3, 1776.
- 8 - Board of War meeting, October 29, 1777. The Papers of the Continental Congress, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- 9 - Board of War meeting, November 6, 1777, PCC.
- 10 - Board of War meeting, November 4, 1777, PCC.
- 11 - JCC vol. IX, November 19, 1777.
- 12 - Kenneth Rossman, Thomas Mifflin and the Politics of the American Revolution, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952), p. 49.
- 13 - Erna Risch, Quartermaster Support of the Army; A History of the Corps, 1775-1939. (Washington, D.C., 1962), pp. 1-3.
- 14 - G.W. vol. VI, p. 170.

- 15 - Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, p. 95.
- 16 - James Curtis Ballager, ed., The Letters of Richard Henry Lee, (New York, 1912), vol. I, pp. 347-348. Lee was probably the president of the Board at this time. His name always leads the list of members recorded present at Board meetings as Adams' name did when the latter was president of the Board. Lee also dealt with most of the correspondence not handled by Richard Peters.
- 17 - Board members, particularly Adams, had previously performed similar duties but on separate assignments, and not in line with their duties on the Board of War.
- 18 - In Lee's handwriting.
- 19 - At the same time that Mifflin was championing Gates for president of the realigned Board, he was also offering mysterious suggestions that Schuyler, Gates' former rival for the northern command, head the Board. JCC vol. IX, pp. 971, 794, 831, 962-963. LMCC vol. II, pp. 559-589.
- 20 - Board of War meeting, November 21, 1777, PCC.
- 21 - Lee to Washington, October 20, 1777, Ballager, Lee Letters, vol. I, pp. 138-139.
- 22 - Thomas Flexner, George Washington and the American Revolution, (Boston, 1968), p. 531.
- 23 - Douglas Southall Freeman, George Washington, Leader of the American Revolution, (New York, 1951), vol. IV, p. 545.
- 24 - Ibid., p. 547.
- 25 - Thomas Conway to the President of Congress, September 25, 1777, "Letters of Thomas Conway", Item 160, PCC.
- 26 - "Letters of Lachlan McIntosh", January 6, 1778, Item 161, PCC.
- 27 - Nathanael Greene to the President of Congress, January 12, 1778, "Letters from Major General Nathanael Greene", Item 155, PCC; Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, p. 116.

- 28 - Board of War meeting, December 12, 1777 - minutes mistakenly dated November 12 - PCC.
- 29 - Bernhard Knollenberg, Washington and the Revolution: A Reappraisal, (New York, 1940), p. 42.
- 30 - R.H. Lee to Washington, November 20, 1777, Ballager, Lee Letters, vol. I, p. 355.
- 31 - William Williams to Jonathon Trumbull, November 28, 1777, LMCC vol. II, p. 573. It should be noted that although Mifflin no longer performed the duties of Quartermaster General, his resignation had never officially been approved by Congress.
- 32 - Elbridge Gerry to Joseph Trumbull, November 27, 1777, LMCC vol. II, pp. 571-572.
- 33 - Henry Laurens to Horatio Gates, November 28, 1777, Horatio Gates Papers, New York Historical Society.
- 34 - Joseph Lovell to Gates, November 5, 1777, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 35 - Elephalet Dyer to Joseph Trumbull, December 15, 1777, LMCC vol. II, p. 589.
- 36 - Joseph Lovell to Joseph Trumbull, January 27, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 54.
- 37 - Timothy Pickering to Henry Laurens, November 15, 1777, Timothy Pickering Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- 38 - Pickering to Rebecca Pickering, November 4, 1777, Pickering Papers, MHS.
- 39 - Pickering to Rebecca Pickering, November 18, 1777, Pickering and Upham, The Life of Pickering, vol. I, pp. 88-89. Pickering thought that Washington was responsible "through Congress" for making appointments to the Board.
- 40 - Gates Papers, NYHS, November and December 1777, passim., e.g., Gates to Washington, November 2, 1777.

- 41 - JCC vol. X, p. 21. Upham and Pickering, op cited, pp. 183-184, 203.
- 42 - JCC vol. X, p. 41.
- 43 - For example, Nathanael Greene to the President of Congress, January 12, 1778, "Letters from Greene", Item 155, PCC.
- 44 - Nathaniel Folsom to Josiah Bartlett, January 2, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 4.
- 45 - James Wilkinson, Memoirs of my Own Time, (Philadelphia, 1816), vol. I, pp. 370-371. Greene was aware of the rumors circulating concerning his influence over Washington, and discounted them. Greene to Alexander McDougall, February 5, 1778, Alexander McDougall Papers, NYHS.
- 46 - Flexner, Washington and the Revolution, p. 248.
- 47 - Wilkinson, Memoirs, p. 373. Flexner, Washington and the Revolution, p. 248.
- 48 - Washington to Conway, G.W., vol. X, p. 29.
- 49 - Conway to Gates, January 4, 1778, Gates Papers, NYHS. Rossman, Thomas Mifflin, p. 119.
- 50 - The Marquis de Lafayette to Washington, November 16, 1777, Jared Sparks, The Writings of George Washington (Boston, 1834-1837), vol. V, p. 483.
- 51 - Gates to Washington, December 8, 1777, Ibid., p. 487.
- 52 - Wilkinson, Memoirs, p. 373.
- 53 - Thomas Mifflin to Gates, November 28, 1777, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 54 - For example, Gates to his wife, October 20, 1777, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 55 - James Lovell to Gates, November 27, 1777, LMCC vol. II, pp. 570-571.

- 56 - Gates to Thomas Conway, December 3, 1777, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 57 - Wilkinson, Memoirs, p. 388.
- 58 - Ibid., p. 109.
- 59 - Henry Laurens to Isaac Motte, January 26, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 52.
- 60 - Gates to Conway, December 3, 1777, Gates to Washington, December 8, 1777, Gates to the President of Congress, December 11, 1777, all in Sparks, Writings of Washington, vol. V, p. 485-488. Gates to Mifflin, December 4, 1777, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 61 - Sparks, Writings of Washington, vol. V, pp. 497-499; Freeman, Washington in the Revolution, vol. IV, p. 599.
- 62 - Anonymous to Patrick Henry, January 12, 1778, Sparks, Writings of Washington, vol. V, p. 496.
- 63 - Conway to Washington, January 10, 1778, Ibid., p. 494.
- 64 - Fitzpatrick, G.W., vol. X, pp. 249-250.
- 65 - Flexner, Washington in the Revolution, p. 269; Don Higginbotham, The War for American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789 (Bloomington, Indiana, 1977), p. 220.
- 66 - Richard Peters to Robert Morris, February 3, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 46, n.l.
- 67 - Peters to Anthony Wayne, January 29, 1778, Anthony Wayne Papers, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- 68 - Peters to Wayne, December 6, 1777, Peters to Wayne, October 11, 1777, Wayne Papers, HSP.
- 69 - Peters to Robert Morris, January 21, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 456, n. 6. Like Washington, Peters had strong interests in agriculture, and how production might be improved. He longed for the end of the war so he could "go back to planting potatoes." Peters to Wayne,

- 70 - Pickering to William Pickman, March 24, 1778, Pickering Papers, MHS.
- 71 - James Lovell to Samuel Adams, January 13, 1778, LMCC vol. III, p. 31.
- 72 - JCC, vol. X, pp. 40-41, January 10, 1778.
- 73 - JCC, vol. X, p. 41, January 12, 1778. The delegates chosen were Francis Dana, Joseph Reed and Nathaniel Folsom.
- 74 - Board of War meeting, January 17, 1778, PCC.
- 75 - JCC, vol. X, p. 67, January 20, 1778.
- 76 - Gates to the President of Congress, February 1, 1778, "Letters of Horatio Gates, 1775-1782", Item 154, PCC.
- 77 - Peters was confusing Robert Morris with Gouverneur Morris.
- 78 - Peters to Robert Morris, LMCC vol. III, p. 456, n.6., January 21, 1778.
- 79 - JCC vol. X, pp. 84-85, January 22, 1778.

Ch. III

Zenith and Decline

The United Colonies had sponsored a two-pronged invasion into Canada in 1775 led by Brigadier Generals Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold. The expedition ended disastrously for the Americans with Montgomery dead and Arnold severely injured. Still, for the most part, the Americans had fought valiantly, advancing into the streets of Quebec City before being repulsed. Despite this failure, Congress did not relinquish the dream of conquering Canada from the British. In early 1778, buoyed by the victory at Saratoga, Congress again turned its attention to Canada. Horatio Gates, now president of the Board of War, had always believed Canada represented a promising military field. While serving at Albany, New York, in late 1777, intelligence sources convinced Gates the time was right for the United States to once more launch an attack into Canada. Congress needed little convincing and ordered Brigadier General John Stark on December 3, 1777, to carry out a raid against the British fleet locked in the ice of the Richelieu River near St. Johns. Although never carried out, the idea was to open up Canada to a later invasion by that route while destroying British shipping so that it could not be employed in a southward drive against American ports. Gates, meanwhile, formulated a plan for a more powerful drive into Canada. He had become convinced the inhabitants of Quebec were disaffected

by British rule and ready to rise in revolt. Gates thought an American invasion would spark such a rebellion.¹

The congressional instructions detailing the various duties of both the original Board of War and the restructured Board, had mentioned nothing concerning the War Office formulating military strategy or planning campaigns. We have noted that the old Board had been responsible for organizing local defense measures in the Philadelphia area in early 1777 and had participated in concocting a scheme to invade British West Florida and make that area the fourteenth state. But a British attack on Philadelphia in early 1777 was forestalled and the invasion of Florida did not have a real chance of being launched since economic and logistical barriers could not be overcome. Now with Gates heading the Board, Congress apparently intended to expand the Board's power and permit the War Office to plan and to initiate a major military operation.

On January 23, 1778 Congress appointed the young Marquis de Lafayette to command the proposed expedition, Thomas Conway second in command, and John Stark, the militia leader, third in command.² Lafayette was, of course, French, while Conway had served in the French army and possessed a mastery of the language. Therefore both were logical appointments since nine tenths of the white inhabitants of Quebec were French and

Catholic, and Congress hoped that the population would rally to the American forces and consider them as liberators come to free them from British despotism. Also, it was plain that Conway's appointment as inspector general was not working out since he was not permitted to perform his duties at Valley Forge. Conway's new assignment would take him from camp and the hostile atmosphere that surrounded him there.³

Lafayette longed for an opportunity to achieve military glory and was extremely pleased to be leading the expedition. Unfortunately, the announcement that Conway would be his immediate subordinate both angered and distressed him: "Among all the men who would be sent under me Mr. Conway is the most disagreeable to me and the most prejudicial to the cause." Lafayette understood that Conway had spoken of Washington in insolent and abusive terms, and that he cared little for the reasons America had risen in rebellion, but only wished to further his own ambitions and acquire a fortune. Lafayette also wished the force he would lead to be considered a detached part of the main army under the immediate command of Washington. He had no desire to follow instructions given by the Board of War, which he believed to be composed of Washington's enemies and in league with Conway.⁴

Meanwhile, many American politicians and general officers

were unhappy with the choice of both Lafayette and Conway to lead the invasion. Gouverneur Morris informed Congress that awarding such high commands to two "foreigners" would have an adverse affect on American public opinion.⁵ Anthony Wayne expressed doubts about the purpose of the expedition, and was particularly concerned that the inexperienced Lafayette was designated first in command. Although loyal to Washington, Wayne could still state: "Was I assured that a Gates or a Mifflin was destined for that business I would be content."⁶

What many people did not realize was that the decision to appoint Lafayette to lead the expedition was made primarily more in a political context, concerned with securing America a favored place with France. Lafayette, however, appeared to be aware of this. When on January 24 Gates ordered Lafayette to proceed to Albany and make necessary preparations for the upcoming offensive, the young Frenchman instead went to York to meet and complain to Congress. He was upset that his appointment had not been made directly known to the Commander-in-Chief. Also, in case any doubt remained, Lafayette made it clear that he would not lead the expedition if Conway remained his second in command, and demanded he be replaced either by General Alexander McDougall or General Johann de Kalb. Lafayette also met with the Board of War and

repeated his demands, threatening that if his terms were not satisfied, he would return to France and take all the French officers serving in the American army with him!¹⁷

While many French officers performed admirably in the American army, proving especially useful as artillerists and engineers, many of them were simply superfluous. In requesting a set of standards from Congress so that the Board of War could have something concrete to refer to when judging applications submitted by foreign officers seeking commissions in the American army, Gates reported that French officers in general were found to be less useful in the American service than was anticipated. Many were unacquainted with the English language, and besides, there were too many American officers for the number of men they had to command.⁸ Thus Congress might not have considered the loss of the majority of French officers to be a tragedy, but were more concerned over the political implications which might prove harmful to the American cause.

Congress was hopeful that a Franco-American alliance might shortly be secured and negotiations with that end in mind were being pursued in Paris between representatives of the United States and the French monarchy. Lafayette's departing from America in a huff, and taking most of the other

French officers with him would hardly signal a point of good will to France. Further, as Henry Laurens observed, "Had an irruption of this nature taken place, the World at large must have been informed of the unmerited insult offered the General and Commander in Chief and Censure must have followed both on Congress and the Board of War."

Laurens was no doubt correct in stating that the moment was unpropitious to broadcast dissension when delicate negotiations were taking place which might well determine whether the new nation would conclude an alliance with France and receive the resources it needed to survive. Therefore, Lafayette was permitted to recruit McDougall and Kalb to accompany him on the expedition, and Gates had already notified him that he could take along all the French officers he needed. The Board of War wanted to begin the invasion as quickly as possible, and Gated ordered Lafayette once again to leave for Albany where he would receive further instructions from Conway, who, though no longer designated as second in command, was still expected to participate in the expedition, and had moved north to attend to supply and other logistical requirements.¹⁰

Because of the season's lateness and the need for secrecy, the Board considered rapid deployment essential to insuring

the success of the operation. This was the major reason that Washington had not been consulted at greater length -- an omission which proved so appalling to Lafayette. Actually, Gates wrote to the Commander-in-Chief on January 24, only two days after Congress resolved that the Board plan the expedition, for permission to use Colonel Moses Hazen's regiment in the offensive. Gates also requested Washington's opinion of whether or not the expedition was feasible, and for any further advice he might wish to pass along.¹¹ Washington replied that, while he was willing to give up Hazen's regiment, he could not comment on the Canadian expedition since he still did not understand its object, or the means to be employed to insure success.¹²

In reality, Washington had formed definite opinions in regard to the expedition. He considered it to be "the child of folly", which "must be productive of capital ills, circumstanced as our affairs are at present." But he was unwilling to say anything against the proposed offensive publicly, since, he claimed, it represented the "first fruit" of the new Board of War and deserved an opportunity to succeed or fail.¹³

Washington's attitude was paradoxical for if the expedition was indeed the child of folly as he asserted, the Commander-in-Chief was duty-bound to express his views publicly. We

can only speculate about the motives behind Washington's cloak of silence. Perhaps he wished to witness the failure of his perceived enemies on the Board of War, particularly Gates and Mifflin. More likely, the Commander-in-Chief did not wish to obstruct the ambitions of his young friend Lafayette, who was finally being given the major command he had yearned for since coming to America; all this despite the high risk of failure Washington contemplated.

As noted, Lafayette's dallying in York distressed Gates and the Board as they were convinced that speed was crucial to insure success. As the Board instructed Lafayette: "The rapidity of your motions and the consternation of the enemy will do the business." Upon gaining possession of St. Johns or Montreal, Lafayette was to publish a declaration to the inhabitants inviting them to join the army of the United States. If no favorable response was forthcoming, Lafayette was to destroy all works and vessels within his reach and then retreat. If the inhabitants proved cooperative, they were to be invited to send delegates to Congress prerequisite to joining the United States. But the Board's instructions emphasized that Lafayette's first objective would be to capture or destroy enemy vessels and stores which could be utilized in a British campaign originating from Canada.¹⁴

Thus it is important to stress that the scope of the attack, as perceived by the Board was well defined and relatively limited. Lafayette was to be prepared to take advantage, if the opportunity developed, to convince the inhabitants they shared a common cause with the Americans: opposition to British despotism.

Delay could prove costly, as the Board often reiterated, since a winter expedition required that Lake Champlain be froze over to speed the movement to the north. Still, Lafayette did not arrive in Albany until February 17. There he became angered over the apparent lack of preparations made to prepare for the offensive. As far as Lafayette was concerned, the fault was clearly the Board of War's, for as he understood the situation, the whole project was originated and developed in the War Office. Instructions to Lafayette from the Board promised 2,500 regulars would have assembled at Albany. Further, a large body of militiaman under General Stark were expected to help out by burning the enemy's flotilla, leaving Lafayette free to march on Montreal. Stark, however did not act. He claimed not to have received precise instructions from the Board and the enemy flotilla was still intact when Lafayette reached Albany.¹⁵

Equally displeasing to Lafayette was the absense of arms,

ammunition, clothing, and money needed to outfit and pay the troops. Moses Hazen, the Deputy Quartermaster General, had rushed to Albany ahead of his regiment by orders of the Board. Nothing went smoothly for Hazen, however, in his effort to secure men and supplies. Governor Chittendon of Vermont had promised to provide 300 men but he quickly became sceptical and demanded "proper evidence" from Congress as to the purpose of the offensive, and what duties the men would perform, before making a final commitment. Governor George Clinton of New York ordered out 400 militiamen but was unable to meet his quota of clothing which left the militia useless as a fighting force under the harsh winter conditions. In fact, despite the freezing temperatures, winter clothing of almost any type was scarce. When Lafayette finally reached Albany fewer than 1,500 troops were fit for duty and he had received recommendations from Generals Arnold, Schuyler, and Benjamin Lincoln to call off the expedition. Almost alone, Moses Hazen was inclined to advance. However, all of Hazen's actions were suspect since, as Deputy Quartermaster, rumors spread that he was enriching himself at the public's expense.¹⁶

Lafayette was more disconsolate still because McDougall had not been able to join him, ostensibly due to ill health. This was particularly bad news because the proposed expedition

would proceed through country totally unfamiliar to Lafayette and his fellow French officers, while McDougall was an experienced officer who possessed some knowledge of the area. Not unnaturally, Lafayette put no faith into information passed along to him by Conway or the Board of War.¹⁷

McDougall may indeed have been incapacitated, but there were other reasons why he would possibly choose not to participate in the offensive. Most importantly, he seems to have been strongly influenced by Nathanael Greene. Greene informed McDougall that the expedition had no purpose but to glorify Conway.¹⁸

Like Washington and the majority of his other general officers, McDougall found himself in an ambiguous position regarding the prospects for the Canadian operation. McDougall delivered helpful advice to Lafayette in regard to negotiating the country he would travel through, admonishing him to

"Remember Burgoyne!" and to keep an open line of retreat.¹⁹

On the other hand, he agreed with Greene that the expedition was doomed to fail. Further, if the "junto", by which McDougall meant the Board of War and Conway, hoped the incursion into Canada would strengthen their prospects at the expense of Washington, they were bound to be disappointed.²⁰ Like Greene, McDougall could not understand the purpose of the expedition.

If, as he had heard, its prime aim was to destroy shipping, then "3,000" (sic) men constituted a too large force.

But he was not inclined to voice his objections. McDougall, along with Greene and Washington, was sympathetic to Lafayette's desire for a general command. They realized, however, that if the campaign did flounder, the blame would be directed toward Conway, Gates, and the Board of War, rather than Lafayette.²¹

When Lafayette arrived in Albany he was chagrined to discover that Gates, technically at least, was still considered to be the Commander-in-Chief in the Northern Department, a post Lafayette apparently believed he had attained with Gates' appointment as President of the Board of War, and with his own assignment to lead the invasion into Canada. This rankled him as much as the fact that he was confronted with a situation in Albany which, as described, appeared hopeless, with few men and no money to pay them, little or no winter clothing, and a general lack of supplies and forage. The blame for this situation, according to Lafayette, rested entirely with the Board of War although, as we have noticed, various state executives and the Albany Committee had been ordered by the Board to make the necessary preparations but they could not or would not comply for a number of reasons.²²

In a fury Lafayette wrote to Henry Laurens, the President of

Congress, and referred to Gates sarcastically as the "future commander in chief" of all the American forces, a hint at what Lafayette believed was Gates' major ambition, and the motive behind all his actions -- supplanting Washington. On February 19, only two days after arriving in Albany, Lafayette was determined to renounce the expedition completely having judged that the whole plan was designed by the Board to glorify Conway. He informed Laurens: "I'll publish my instructions with notes through the world and I'll loose rather the honor of twenty Gates and twenty boards of war than to let my own reputation be hurted in the least thing."

Lafayette, in his rage, did not bother to consider how pointless his theory might be that the Board of War intended to use the offensive as a means of glorifying Conway. If this were true, it hardly made sense that the Board would not do everything in its power to make sure adequate preparations were made prior to the attack; another charge brought against the Board by Lafayette. In fact, shortly after Lafayette arrived in Albany, Conway himself suggested that the invasion be cancelled due to the general lack of clothing, ammunition, and provisions. Irrespective of this, Lafayette was convinced that the Board was trying to embarrass him. He pleaded to

Washington, "Why am I so far from you and what business had that board of war to bring me through the ice and snow without knowing what I should do, neither what they were doing themselves . . . I have been shamefully deceived by the board of war."²⁴

Meanwhile, Robert Troup, Gates' aide, had arrived in Albany and was sending back reports to the President of the Board which conflicted in many ways with Lafayette's account of the situation. Referring to Lafayette as the "Fabian Prince,"²⁵ Troup believed that he was delaying the expedition unnecessarily. Truly, conditions were not all they could be, but like Moses Hazen, Troup was of the opinion that an advance was viable. The major stumbling block as seen by Troup were the maneuverings of General "A----d" (Arnold) with whom Gates had experienced personal differences during the Saratoga campaign. Troup judged that Arnold was prejudicing people against the merits of the Canadian expedition and had referred to Gates and Moses Hazen as "two ignorant and designing men." Finally, Troup reported that he had engaged Lafayette in a duel, wounding the young Frenchman in the leg, and recommended to Gates that Lafayette be transferred to the southern army (Washington's command) to display his "blunders of youth."²⁶

Like his aide, Troup, Gates was presently feuding with another young man of high military ambitions and an exalted conception of honor: James Wilkinson. As noted, Congress had appointed Wilkinson as Secretary to the new Board of War. Through this means Congress hoped to remove Wilkinson from a scene of contention with senior officers upset by Wilkinson's supposedly undeserved promotion to brigadier general. Unfortunately, Gates and Wilkinson became enemies. Gates accused his former adjutant of tampering with his mail and of spreading rumors that the conqueror of Burgoyne was scheming against Washington. Wilkinson challenged Gates to a duel claiming that Gates' charges had impugned his character.²⁷ According to the untrustworthy Wilkinson, they actually met on the field and were prepared to fire when Gates gracefully backed out.²⁸ Nevertheless, Wilkinson and Gates could hardly be expected to work together in the War Office and Wilkinson resigned as secretary explaining that "I could not consistently do Business with Major General Gates after the uncandid, ARTful, ungenerous, and unjust practices he has employed to dishonor me." In fact, there is little reason to believe that Wilkinson spent any appreciable time as the board's secretary if he served at all. Thus the mountainous paper work which daily passed through the War Office

was handled mainly by Gates and Peters, even though both had more than enough work to do without taking on a secretary's duty as well. Although Congress constantly promised the Board that it was momentarily expecting to hire a secretary, and candidates for the post were ample, none was assigned to the War Office for an extensive period.²⁹ But the want of a reliable secretary was hardly the only difficulty inflicting the Board. If the War Office was not paying appropriate attention to the problems presented by Lafayette and the Canadian operation, one reason was that the undermanned Board was being deluged with other responsibilities which, though usually mundane, required careful attention.

While Conway, on the spot in Albany, reported that the expedition should not proceed, he still reasoned that the Board of War should be absolved of all blame in the affair. Being three hundred miles away, the Board could not be expected to judge the situation other than by returns and intelligence received, and if these did not reach the War Office or were inaccurate, a recurring problem, the Board could hardly be held accountable. Conway explained all this to Lafayette, pointing out that the Board of War could not be aware of the true situation, as many men were permitted to go home before Lafayette's

arrival, on what amounted to a permanent furlough, because of a lack of clothing and pay.³⁰ Supposedly, this was never reported to the War Office, nor the absence of assistance expected from the executives of New York and Vermont. In any case, Lafayette's anger towards the Board was not mollified.

On February 24, 1778, Congress instructed the Board to remind Lafayette that because of the inclement weather, he was to make certain that his men were well-clothed and supplied with provisions before making any move. He should "regulate his conduct according to the probability of success, without exposing his troops to any great or very apparent hazard, and report the reasons of his conduct to the Board."³¹ Of course, by this time Lafayette had no intention of going anywhere but was determined to save his honor and place the failure for the campaign to develop where he was certain it belonged: on Gates and the Board of War.

Lafayette had an active, sympathetic ally in the person of Henry Laurens, the President of Congress, who agreed that Gates and the Board, Conway and Troup, were all involved in an intricate plot to further their own ambitions at the expense of Washington and his loyal supporters.³² Lafayette, ignoring common sense, stuck rigidly to his belief that the conspiracy

involved his replacement by Conway, despite the fact that Conway shared his opinion that the expedition would have to be cancelled.³³

Finally, on March 2 Congress resolved that the Board of War should instruct Lafayette to suspend for the present the attack into Canada, at the same time informing him that Congress did not hold him responsible in any manner for the failure of the operation to begin. Instead, Congress affirmed its admiration for his prudence, activity, and zeal. Further, Congress was convinced that he had done everything in his power to put the expedition into effect.³⁴

It is impossible to determine to what extent this testimonial represented the true sentiments of Congress, or was politically motivated as a reflection of the alliance recently completed with France. In any case, Lafayette was not recalled and he still feared he might be superseded by Conway. If so, he again threatened to take all the French officers in America back with him to France: it was a question of honor!³⁵ The expedition was postponed indefinitely but there remained the need for troops to remain in the Albany area to guard against a British incursion originating from Canada, and to try and make treaties with the Indians inhabiting the region. This was the reason Lafayette did not immediately relinquish his command. In the

meantime, Lafayette reminded Gates. that he considered him ✓ responsible, as Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Department, as well as President of the Board of War, for the still pitiful state of the soldiers under his command. The men were without food and had not received their pay. As a final caveat, Lafayette implied that the threat of mutiny existed.³⁶

Equally upsetting for Lafayette was his conviction that some of his most revealing letters were being furtively opened and their contents revealed. He was convinced that the guilty party had to be Richard Peters who Lafayette mistakenly believed was still the Board's secretary. Writing to Laurens on March 12, Lafayette's invective against the Board overflowed: "I see nothing in the conduct of Gal. Conway and the board of war but deception and treachery. The conduct of the board shall be brought to the light and I'll take care of the insolent fellow (Peters) who opened my letter to you."³⁷

Lafayette was not alone in making virulent denunciations against the Board of War. George Clinton, Governor of New York, denounced the Board's foray into the realm of strategic planning. "I need not ask you who contrived and planned the Northern Expedition. I have seen the Marquis's Instructions. They are curious indeed. They suppose the Enemy are to be pannic

Struck and fly on the approach of our Army. Our Army you may be assured are to take the advantage of this, pursue them, and take possession of Montreal with all the public stores and Cloathing therein. What a pity we had not men sufficient to have carried all this into Execution, that those we had were not cloathed or paid, that provisions and Forage had not been provided in Season."³⁸ Of course, a major reason why the troops were not adequately clothed and did not have sufficient provisions was that state executives like Clinton had failed, either because of insufficient resources, or laxity, to provide them in conformity with the Board's instructions.

Alexander Hamilton, a confirmed opponent of the War Office, expanded from mere strategical criticism in his denunciation of the Board. "I doubt not the defects of a certain synod will appear to you not the subject of speculation only; but as disorders in the state, that require a remedy . . . Arrangements on which the existence of the army depends . . . are delayed in a most astonishing manner; and I doubt whether they will be adopted at all."³⁹

Thus the Canadian expedition was "postponed" and Gates and the War Office were left in an ignominious position. The new Board's venture into military strategy had ended before it was every properly begun. But the question remains: how much of

this minor debacle can be honestly considered a failure of the Board of War? A modern historian of the American Revolution has described the expedition as "a wretchedly conceived operation, and its witlessness argues that the Board of War was poor at strategic thinking to send cub scouts and senior citizens against British professionals would seem rather obtuse than malicious."⁴⁰

In the Board's defense, it should be remembered that the Board was ordered by Congress to prepare for the offensive on extremely short notice. The attack, to have any hope for success, had to be launched while Lake Champlain was still frozen to facilitate the movement of men and supplies, while neutralizing British naval supremacy. On such short notice, the Board was hamstrung in making preparations to insure that the troops would be adequately provisioned, and have sufficient winter clothing. The Board sent Conway and Moses Hazen to Albany in order to see that the War Office's instructions were adhered to, but state executives, in particular George Clinton, the Governor of New York, proved hesitant to cooperate, unconvinced that the offensive, as they understood its goals, was viable. Meanwhile, the Board was saddled with the inexperienced Lafayette as first-in-command of the expedition. In deciding on Lafayette,

Congress most likely chose him in order to appease Washington and his followers, and to insure their support of the offensive. Also, Congress may have wished Lafayette's appointment to be considered as a sign of good faith with France, Americans then being in Paris trying to arrange a crucial alliance.

Whatever might have been the logic behind Congress's reasoning, the choice of Lafayette to lead the incursion proved to be unwise. After only two days in Albany, he grew panicky and called off the whole offensive because of an admittedly unpromising supply situation. Perhaps his action was correct but he showed little initiative and resourcefulness, and instead of doing everything in his power to improve the sorry situation, was content to blame the Board of War for all his problems.

The War Office itself had hardly distinguished itself during this unfortunate episode in the war. Gates was especially anxious to start the offensive; this despite the dangers inherent in a winter expedition, as proven by the earlier American invasion of Canada in 1775-6. The Board's major fault was its inability to define the purpose and goals of the operation. The Board's priority seems to have been the destruction of British shipping, which implied a limited hit and run

campaign probably not requiring an overabundance of men and materials. But the War Office's instructions were either not made perfectly clear or misinterpreted by Lafayette. His reactions appear to indicate his assignment called for capturing Montreal and bringing Canada in as the fourteenth state. Equally uncertain of the purpose of the mission were Washington, Greene and McDougall. The Board, of course, would have welcomed the submission of Canada and this was probably Gates' primary goal when the Board began planning the invasion. In the course of the planning effort, however, the Board reduced its goal to the destruction of British shipping. The conquest of Canada became a secondary priority, to be attempted if Lafayette found the inhabitants prepared to rise up against the British. Unfortunately, the War Office never made this clear in its instructions to Lafayette.

Overall, the Conway Cabal episode was a serious setback in the fortunes of the Board of War. In summary, many of Washington's military and congressional supporters came to suspect Thomas Conway and the Board of War of trying to take actual control of the military effort away from the Commander-in-Chief. According to some of Washington's lieutenants, notably Greene and McDougall, the Board devised reorganization plans, and the

invasion of Canada as part of a scheme to unseat Washington. Awarding the command of the Canadian expedition to Lafayette was part of the plot, meant to lure the young Frenchman away from Washington. If Washington protested to the Board's designs and resigned, Gates, the president of the Board of War would assume the role of Commander-in-Chief of the American forces, a position his supporters deemed him more worthy of than Washington. In the words of Gates' most recent biographer, the plans were "too intricate, unreal, and convoluted to bear any sense of reality."⁴¹ David Nelson's summation is undoubtedly correct; nevertheless, Washington and his closest advisers were convinced a conspiracy aimed against them was materializing, and they based their actions accordingly. The resulting friction between Gates' and Washington's supporters could have only harmed the American cause. The Conway Cabal episode and the aborted Canadian invasion were ludicrous in their various aspects. They were crucial, however, in confirming Washington's position as Commander-in-Chief and as the leading American military strategist. Equally important, the outcome discredited the Board of War. This proved to have a detrimental effect on American military administration which remained inadequate and uncertain throughout the conflict.

In April, 1778, Gates was called from the Board of War and assigned a command in the Hudson Highlands. During the short period he served as president of the Board, Gates displayed an energy equal to that of John Adams. Despite his obvious failings as a strategist, Gates was able to perform many important duties. His concerns included the construction of a foundry at Carlisle, Pennsylvania,⁴² the readiness of troops stationed at Fort Pitt,⁴³ Indian and prisoner affairs,⁴⁴ the defense of the Hudson River,⁴⁵ and the health of the soldiers in the field. In the latter regard, the Board decided to print and distribute a pamphlet written by a prominent medical doctor and patriot, Benjamin Rush, that outlined proper hygiene methods in the field. Unfortunately, the Board met with difficulties in having copies printed and a long delay ensued before the pamphlet was finally distributed to the armies.⁴⁶ The greatest part of the Board's time under Gates' presidency was spent in reorganizing the various staff departments, and in trying to provision, clothe and equip the troops. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

With the departure of Conway from camp, the office of the inspector general remained unfilled. Congress finally

selected the Baron von Steuben for the position and the Board of War immediately became active in drawing up regulations for, and administering the new office. Steuben, like Conway, was a foreigner, but the Baron was a man of tact and genial manners, and thus met with a favorable reception from Washington and his lieutenants at Valley Forge. Steuben did not flaunt his military knowledge or look down upon the Americans as inferior soldiers, but graciously requested advice from both the general officers at camp as well as from Gates and the Board.⁴⁷ Gates informed Steuben of what was obvious; that few armies needed discipline more than the American, but would not venture to advise someone his superior in the art of war.⁴⁸ From the tone of this note, recent events had apparently humbled Gates. Gates left the Board before he could collaborate with Steuben in drawing up rules to govern the office of the inspector general.

With the departure of Gates no other president was chosen by Congress to replace him. Nevertheless, the War Office was ably managed by Peters and Pickering who worked closely with Steuben in devising regulations. Pickering was particularly informed since he had shown an interest in the training and discipline of troops and had written a book on

the subject.

Steuben was placed by Congress directly under the authority of the Board.⁴⁹ This hardly presented a problem as a close personal friendship developed between Peters, Pickering, and Steuben. Steuben became a frequent guest at the Peters' family mansion, Belmont, overlooking Philadelphia, where he was idolized by Peters' son.⁵⁰ Pickering, sometimes destitute also frequented Belmont where he received many of his meals. These close relationships produced the harmony necessary to hasten the completion of the regulations which were to prove such a benefit to the American continental line.

Unfortunately, the Board found it much simpler to compose regulations with Steuben than to have the product of their labors, the so-called "Blue Book", printed and distributed. The printer and binder, one "Norman", was so incompetent that the Blue Book was delayed in its allocation.⁵¹ Steuben complained to Peters, "Yes my Dear Friend, the Board of War has hurt me considerably by the delay of the Regulation. Is it possible to employ only one book binder for a work of which the whole army at once are to have copies?"⁵² Peters patiently explained the Board's predicament, Congress having dispensed no funds to hire extra printers, and weighed down

with so many other important duties, it was impossible for the War Office to devote all its attention to seeing the Blue Book printed and distributed, important as that task was. In Peters' opinion, the Board was overwhelmed with so many difficulties, that it had to display as much fortitude and courage as the soldiers in the field just to carry on.⁵³ Finally, the Blue Book was prepared and distributed, serving as the official United States Army drill regulations for over fifty years from the time it was drawn up.

That inveterate foe of the War Office, Alexander Hamilton, believed that the Board, even minus Gates, was again planning to undermine Washington in its relation to the inspector general. Hamilton interpreted the plan established by Congress, based on a report presented by the Board, to be devious in that it made the inspector general independent of the Commander-in-Chief, Washington, and dependent on the Board alone. Hamilton was wrong but he suggested nevertheless that Washington should introduce and Congress ratify a reform of the inspector general's department which reduced the Board's authority over it for, as he informed William Duer, "Perhaps you will not differ much from me when I suppose that so as relates to the Board of War, the former scheme was that

of faction, and therefore ought to be renounced."⁵⁴ But Hamilton's influence was not decisive on this occasion and, working cooperatively with Steuben, unimpeded for the most part by controversies and jealousies, the Board of War proved that it could do its part in training the army, and thereby contributing to the final American victory.

Notes

- 1 JCC, vol. IX, pp. 999-1,000. Paul David Nelson, General Horatio Gates, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1976), pp. 171-2.
- 2 JCC, vol. X, pp. 84, 87.
- 3 Nelson, Gates, p. 172.
- 4 Lafayette to Henry Laurens, January 20, 1778. Stanley J. Idzerda, ed., Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution, Selected Letters and Papers, (Ithica, New York, 1977), vol. 1, December 7, 1776-March 30, 1778, p. 254.
5. Governor Morris to the President of Congress, January 20, 1778. Lafayette Papers, p. 258.
- 6 Anthony Wayne to Horatio Gates, January 27, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHW.
- 7 LMCC, vol. 111, pp. 64-5. Nelson, Gates, op cite. p. 73.
- 8 Gates to Henry Laurens, February 10, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 9 Henry Laurens to Samuel Rutledge, January 30, 1778. LMCC, vol. 111, p. 64.
- 10 The Board of War to Lafayette, January 24, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 11 Gates to Washington, January 24, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 12 Washington to Gates, January 27, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 13 Washington to Thomas Nelson, Jr., February 8, 1778. G.W., vol. X, pp. 432-433.
- 14 "Instructions for the Marquis de Lafayette, Major General in the Army of the United States of America, and Commanding an Expedition to Canada", January 31, 1778. Lafayette Papers, pp. 263-7.

- 15 Lafayette to Gates, February 20, 1778. Lafayette Papers, p. 248, n. 1.
- 16 Lafayette Papers, p. 283, n. 2; Allen S. Everest, Moses Hazen and the Canadian Refugees in the American Revolution, (Syracuse, New York, 1976), pp. 58-59.
- 17 Lafayette to Alexander McDougall, January 5, 1778. Alexander McDougall Papers, NYHS.
- 18 Nathanael Greene to McDougall, February 5, 1778. McDougall Papers, NYHS.
- 19 McDougall to Lafayette, February 11, 1778. McDougall Papers, NYHS.
- 20 McDougall to Greene, February 20, 1778. McDougall Papers, NYHS.
- 21 Actually, the projected figure was for 2500 men and the final turnout fell short of this.
- 22 Lafayette Papers, p. 294.
- 23 Lafayette to Henry Laurens, February 19, 1778. Lafayette Papers, pp. 297.
- 24 Lafayette to Washington, February 19, 1778. Lafayette Papers, pp. 299-300.
- 25 Robert Troup to Gates, February 27, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 26 Troup to Gates, February 19, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS. Arnold had also experienced an unexplained run-in with the old Board of War, Washington to Arnold, December 3, 1779, G.W., vol. VIII, p.
- 27 James Wilkinson to Gates, February 22, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 28 Wilkinson, Memoirs, op. cited., p. 388.

- 29 William Smith to Gates, February 24, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS. James Wilson to Gates, LMCC, vol. 111, n. 4, p. 142.
- 30 Thomas Conway to Gates, February 19, 1778, Conway to Lafayette, February 20, 1778. Lafayette Papers, pp. 313, n. 31, p. 312.
- 31 JCC, February 24, 1778, p. 193.
- 32 Henry Laurens to Lafayette, February 5, 1778. Lafayette Papers, p. 281, n. 2.
- 33 Lafayette to Laurens, February 23, 1778. Lafayette Papers, p. 319. Lafayette to Washington, February 23, 1778. Ibid., p. 322.
- 34 JCC, vol. X, March 22, 1778, p. 217.
- 35 Lafayette to the President of Congress, March 12, 1778. Lafayette Papers, p. 349.
- 36 Lafayette to Gates, March 12, 1778. Ibid., p. 347.
- 37 Lafayette to Laurens, March 12, 1778. Ibid., p. 351.
- 38 George Clinton to Alexander Hamilton, March 5, 1778. Harold C. Syrett, ed., The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, (New York, 1961), vol. 1, 1768-1778, pp. 436-7.
- 39 Hamilton to Clinton, March 12, 1778. Ibid., p. 439.
- 40 Marshall Smelser, The Winning of Independence, (Chicago 1972), p. 207.
- 41 Nelson, Horatio Gates, op. cited., pp. 160-161.
- 42 Gates to Laurens, February 6, 1778. Board of War Papers, PCC.
- 43 i.e., Board of War meeting, April 11, 1778. PCC.
- 44 Gates to Elias Boudinot, March 2, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.

- 45 Board of War meeting, March 4, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 46 Benjamin Rush to Gates, February 4, 1778, April 9, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 47 Baron von Steuben to Gates, March 21, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 48 Gates to Steuben, March 25, 1778. Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 49 Steuben to Congress, March 5, 1778, Peters to Steuben, May 18, 1778, Steuben to Congress, May 27, 1778. Baron von Steuben Papers, NYHS.
- 50 Steuben to Peters, June 10, 1778. Peters Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. John McAuley Palmer, General von Steuben, (New Haven, Connecticut, 1937), p. 206.
- 51 Timothy Pickering to Steuben, June 11, 1778. Steuben Papers, NYHS.
- 52 Steuben to Peters, June 10, 1778. Peters Papers, HSP.
- 53 Peters to Steuben, June 19, 1778. Steuben Papers, NYHS.
- 54 Hamilton to William Duer, June 18, 1778, Hamilton to George Clinton, March 12, 1778. Hamilton remained a steadfast opponent of the Board. Over a year later he suggested to John Jay that a Colonel William Malcolm, who had earlier quit the army to be appointed to the Board of War: "He is a restless temper, artful, plausible, and popular, addicted to cabal." According to Hamilton, such a man would be useful for the "common cause", because "if he could not rule the board, he would perplex it." Syrett, Hamilton Papers, vol. 1, pp. 439, 498-9, 190.

Ch. IV

Administration of the Supply Departments

A cursory examination of the powers invested in the Board of War by Congress during the course of the Revolution would seem to indicate that the War Office played an instrumental role in supplying the American forces with food, clothing, arms and ammunition. In truth, the Board's impact in the supply field was slight. As a small, supervisory council, usually far removed from the area of action and transaction, the Board's efforts to supply the troops were inordinately circumscribed.

Before detailing the Board's limited part it is necessary to describe the economic circumstances that cast such a long shadow over business conducted by the Board in the supply area. Without an elemental understanding of these conditions, the difficulties faced by the War Office would be incomprehensible.

In the eighteenth century the thirteen British colonies had developed a diversified and rich economy. The great part of the wealth was agricultural and all staple crops were grown. Manufacturing was not substantive although it did provide for many popular needs of the people. In fact, a surplus of exports was available in the areas of shipbuilding, iron manufacturing, and milling. But for the most part

the economy was fragmented and while capital was available, it was scattered among scores of businesses and farming enterprises. Regions generally developed their economies independently of one another; roads were few and hardly passable much of the year, and most communications were poor. Each colony exchanged more goods with the British Isles and the West Indies than with each other.¹

At the start of the war the local economy furnished ample provisions, clothing, and many other necessities required by a large army. But pessimists predicted that the British would eventually block imports and exports; the colonists would disagree among themselves; and since the people lived scattered over great distances, they would be unable to concentrate their resources. These forecasts, sadly, came true in large measure.²

Before the outbreak of war America imported from Britain many scarce and high-grade products such as woolen cloth, blankets, cannon, gunpowder, edged tools, and instruments of navigation. War naturally cut off the importation of these articles while it forced an increased need for them. One expedient available to Congress was to turn to other suppliers, particularly France. As early as September, 1775, Congress

created a Secret Committee and empowered it to make contracts for the purchase of foreign war supplies. In November, 1775, the Committee received the authority to export to the West Indies such American products that might in return gain arms, ammunition and saltpetre.³

As the war progressed Congress looked to foreign sources to alleviate the armies' supply difficulties. As president of the Board of War in 1776 John Adams stated that America possessed the innate resources and will it needed to be self-supportive. But this proved incorrect. As the conflict expanded, shifting in its territorial dimensions, the ability of the revolutionaries to command their internal resources decreased.⁴ British control of the seas made Americans rely on inadequate communications system based largely on inland water transport. Except for winter freezes and summer droughts, roads, such as they were, became quagmires. Unbridged rivers running from the mountains into the sea made north-south land transport slow and expensive.⁵ Cumulatively, these conditions amounted to severe supply difficulties for the American forces.

In the administrative sphere, areas of responsibility remained unfocused and ill-defined throughout the war. The

different army service agencies competed against agents of state governments, enterprising civilians, and each other in pursuit of scarce supplies. This process bid up prices to the detriment of everyone concerned.⁶

As noted, Congress had early on established Continental Quartermaster and Commissary Departments to serve the military forces. But instability at the head of these departments proved a major hindrance to the American cause. For example, Joseph Trumbull was a reliable and efficient Commissary General but was severely overworked. He died shortly after being selected as a commissioner on the reorganized Board of War in 1777 and no competent successor was found to replace him as Commissary General. Thomas Mifflin was never content serving as Quartermaster General and after he resigned his post for a second time in October 1777, no replacement was found until Major General Nathanael Greene reluctantly accepted the office in February 1778. In the interim, the Department was loosely supervised by the Board of War.

One reason both Mifflin and Greene wished to avoid the Quartermaster Generalship, aside from the numerous headaches intrinsic in the situation was the suspicion that followed anyone who accepted a position in public office where vast

sums of money exchanged hands. In fact, while many patriots served their country selflessly, others, Mifflin and Greene among them, combined public service and private profit. A more lenient business ethic existed at the time⁷ but many patriots still interpreted Greene's and Mifflin's business practices as an abuse of their position. Parenthetically, many public servants failed to make a personal fortune only because they lacked an opportunity. Such a case was Richard Peters who, though relatively well-off compared to many of his associates, was nevertheless dismayed that his duties at the War Office left him no chance to enrich himself. In a letter to Robert Morris, Peters pleaded,

I don't care how vain you think me when I tell you that I am conscious of deserving some share of the advantages of this diabolical war. I have earned it by my labor and my losses. I have gained a Right to demand something from Fortune as a retribution for her past unfavorable treatment.⁸

A most compelling fact that drew suspicion upon public figures such as Mifflin and Greene was that they usually acted without effective supervision. The civil executive departments connected with the army; the Quartermaster, Commissary, Clothier, Hospital and Marine, were supposedly supervised, though not administered by shifting committees and different boards such as, of course, the War Office. As E. James

Ferguson has noted, the Board of War and the separate committees held no real power over the heads of the most important departments, who in turn did not really direct their own departments since it was practically impossible to manage the inferior agents who swarmed over the countryside. These agents usually acted on their own initiative, spending public money as they saw fit. Ferguson has described this system as administratively weak in authority at the top and staffed below with small capitalists claiming their fortunes.¹⁰

Actually, it would appear that to supply an army a fusion of public and private business was necessary at this time. Established merchant capitalists such as Joseph Trumbull, one of his successors as Commissary General, Jeremiah Wadsworth, and Robert Morris, were needed to supply the army in the absence of a bureaucratized procurement system. Profiteering was generally frowned on because patriots, including some of the most active capitalists, stressed public virtue, sacrifices, and the danger of internal subversion.¹¹

While the Continental Army had its own Quartermaster and Commissary Departments, the states supplied much of the food, clothing, and transportation out of their own coffers, advancing money to Congress with the understanding that a

general settlement of accounts would eventually take place. Further, the states engaged in various economic enterprises, financing, manufacturing and trade, and each state maintained its own armed forces in the guise of militia.¹²

At the grass roots level the problems faced by the Board of War in relation to supplying the armies, in fact, the problems faced by the Board in practically every facet not directly stemming from a political context, can usually be assumed to be related to money, or more precisely, the lack of money. A recent historian has claimed that the revolutionaries gradually lost control of the country's resources because of their fiscal policy.¹³ What did this policy entail?

No matter how small the war and limited the military action, it still required funding. Congress's need for money was unbounded in supporting an army and navy, securing supplies, and sending agents abroad on various missions. But a shortage of hard money existed and not all the coin in circulation in 1775 would have paid a year's expenses for the Continental Army.¹⁴ The answer, not at all unusual in the eighteenth century, was currency finance. Having limited means to pay the costs of the war, Congress turned to the expedient of

printing paper money, an activity in which the colonies had long experience. It was only natural that Congress would turn to the printing press. Congress lacked the power to impose a direct tax and printing money was a much safer political measure than taxing would have been.

Although specie was by far the preferred medium of exchange, it was often drained off by the adverse balance of trade with Britain. Alexander Hamilton estimated that in 1775 the total circulating medium of the thirteen rebellious colonies amounted to only thirty million dollars, about eight million in specie, the rest in colonial paper. This was not enough to meet the needs of war.¹⁵ Congress thus issued huge amounts of money in bills of credit that were ostensibly to be met by contributions from the states through taxes, with each state assessed its individual quota. But the states did not prove especially cooperative and depreciation of the currency set in by the end of 1776. By 1778 Congress was issuing bills of credit approximately every four weeks. Still, state legislatures usually ignored requests to impose taxation, preferring to owe money rather than to pay it. Astute delegates and others with a minimum of economic knowledge realized that depreciation can be considered a form of taxation in itself

since every possessor of money paid a tax in proportion to the time he held it under depreciation. In the words of Gouverneur Morris: "Depreciation is an assessor that reaches every farthing and baffles every attempt to deceive it."¹⁶ The British, of course, helped the depreciating economy along by counterfeiting bills in large numbers.

Paper money, therefore, was the monetary instrument used by Congress for the first five years of the war. Other incomes, such as bonds, foreign loans, and the profits of privateers were distinctly secondary. Whatever the "benefits" of depreciation as a taxing implement, it could not be adjudged an economic policy as such and in 1779 Congress finally decided to stop the issuance of paper money. On September 3 of that year, Congress decided that when 200,000,000 dollars was at last in circulation, emissions were to cease, with some 160,000,000 dollars having already been issued. This step, signifying the decline of paper money, would give power to the states at the expense of Congress.¹⁷

As noted, the states, like the Continental Government, had previously favored a policy of fighting first and paying later. The chief executives and legislatures hesitated to tax, largely because they feared the reaction of the public.

Attempts to make people pay taxes, in areas such as the Carolina back country where many of the people resented the slightest government interference in their lives, could easily lead to violence which the opportunistic Tories might exploit.¹⁸ Also, as Ralph V. Harlow understood over fifty years ago, in order for any government to tax its citizens, there must be an adequate volume of viable money in circulation together with general business prosperity so that people have incomes from which levies might be drawn. But when the revolution broke out, the commercial sections of the country were thrown into temporary financial distress because of the interruption of the ordinary lines of trade.¹⁹

The strongest opposition to currency depreciation came from Washington and the officers and soldiers of the army. Soaring prices exhausted its purchasing funds before anticipated needs had been met. It became difficult for the army to use paper money and buy supplies. Farmers would increasingly refuse to accept paper in exchange for their produce. By 1778 the army found it necessary to seize supplies, giving receipts to the dispossessed farmers. Even more damaging was the injury inflicted by depreciation on the morale of the soldiers. Men who had enlisted for three years grumbled

when their pay dwindled. Later, recruits had to be offered higher compensation to enlist to the anger of veterans who received less. Shrinking pay retarded enlistments and bred desertions. Washington described the currency as "the great impediment to all vigorous measures."²⁰

Impressments fell on friend and foe alike and military operations were sometimes totally supported by this method, after the Continental money began its rapid fall in 1779. Force often had to be used and certificates were given to those goods and services impressed. The certificates bore no interest and, in any case, Congress had no money and the nominal sums expressed on the notes declined in real value as paper money depreciated, eventually wiping out the certificates.²¹

The Board of War became involved in this unhappy situation in 1779 when Congress assigned the Board to superintend the Civil Departments of the Army. The War Office was inundated by requests from officers in the supply departments requesting information and advice concerning nonexistent, inapplicable or overlapping regulations regarding the payment of certificates to the civilian population.

In one case, the Board received an application from a merchant who had supplied Brigadier General William Smallwood's

Maryland troops with several thousand pounds worth of clothing. Smallwood provided the merchant with undisputedly authentic certificates, but when these were presented to the Clothier General for reimbursement, he refused because the regulations of his department apparently did not allow him to make payments. The Board advised the merchant to apply to the Auditor of Accounts, who took no notice because the merchant could not attest to how the clothing was distributed although it was undoubtedly used by the Maryland troops. Such cases were common and, as the Board warned Congress, "Many of the best Whigs inhabiting the Vicinity of the Lines are in this situation and are of course much chagrin'd and dissatisfied. In all these cases, the public Faith has been looked upon as pledged to the People for Payment and of course public Credit has suffered."²²

The Board received numerous complaints about officers who signed certificates with no authority to do so and then sold the provisions they received or kept them for personal use. The Board suggested that Congress pass a resolution whereby officers would have to send separate copies of all certificates they distributed to the deputy or agent in the department involved who would in turn send on copies to the

Board to make a final determination whether the respective officer acted in the public good. Officers suspected of cheating the public would be court martialed. The Board pointed out that in Europe, officers often took provisions from the inhabitants but were obliged to refund the money. Failure to do so resulted in the officer being cashiered. Further, the Board suggested that the heads of the different departments be permitted to examine and settle accounts, being supplied with money to pay off certificates.²³ All the Board's recommendations seem to be sound in theory but they rested on the assumption that a viable currency was or soon would be in circulation. Otherwise it would make little difference to most civilians whether they were paid off or not.

When Congress finally stopped issuing paper money, it first attempted to switch major support of the war from Congress to the states in order to obtain requisitions in actual goods needed by the army. Still, the states failed to develop executive departments with men skilled in the business of supplying armies and navies. State legislatures functioned generally on an ad hoc basis, not planning strategic campaigns but reacting to emergencies with inefficient haste.

Local militia officers would call out companies after purchasing essential equipment on their own credit until the government sent means to pay or issued certificates exchangeable for money. Professional traders often took up the task of rounding up cattle, buying provisions from farmers, and purchasing clothing. They submitted their bills to the legislatures hoping to obtain specie. The states presently concentrated such functions in a few individuals, supplying them with paper money and relying on them to pay middlemen for supplies and services.²⁴

By a series of diverse measures the wartime currency was withdrawn from circulation. Further, on February 20, 1781, Congress elected Robert Morris to a newly created office; Superintendent of Finance. Morris attempted to provide the United States with a stable currency redeemable in specie and to pay in coin the interest on the debts Congress had contracted in order to gain faith with public creditors who would then hopefully lend the government some money. Morris had at his disposal large quantities of coins and bills of exchange that the United States was obtaining from France and Holland.²⁵

The Board of War's relations with the administrative

departments were usually ill-defined. This was particularly true regarding the Quartermaster Department. The Board was periodically assigned by Congress to suggest changes and improvements in the department. It was not until September 25, 1779, that the Quartermaster Department was placed under the direct supervision of the Board. This occurred only fourteen months before the Board of War was dissolved. But even before being ordered to supervise the Quartermaster Department, the Board had often been involved directly or indirectly in overseeing its affairs. This had especially been the case when the office of Quartermaster General had been left vacant between the respective terms of Thomas Mifflin and Nathanael Greene.

One of the laborious tasks the reorganized Board of War had to attend to was the restructuring of the Quartermaster Department in the wake of Mifflin's second resignation as Quartermaster General in October, 1777. The Board, after consulting with Mifflin, ostensibly a member of the Board of War, but an infrequent attendee at Board meetings, compiled its report in late January, 1778. The report opened by stating the obvious fact that large sums of money were needed in the department to pay bills and procure wanted

items: "The want of cash, the Board cannot help mentioning, is not peculiar to this Department but is a complaint made by almost all the officers in the Civil Departments of the Army." Of course, but Congress had to be aware of this, yet did not possess the means to correct the problem.

More substantially, the Board suggested that a Quartermaster General be appointed to arrange the department, "with the approbation and concurrence of the Board of War." The Board believed that the Quartermaster General appointed should handle no cash besides his salary and small occasional sums designed to defray petty expenses in the army. Also in its report, the War Office recommended that a Commissary for horses and wagons be appointed as well as agents for the purchase of such items as tents, entrenching tools, and for all the smaller supplies of the department, such as paper items.²⁶ The Board's recommendations were clearly intended to relieve the next Quartermaster General of many of the minor duties and responsibilities which had proved such a distraction to Mifflin.

When Nathanael Greene reluctantly agreed to assume the office of Quartermaster General in February, 1778, he did not prove amenable to all of the suggestions passed along

to Congress by the Board of War pertaining to the reform of the Quartermaster Department. The disastrous condition of the department induced Congress to agree to most of Greene's important demands as he was obviously a talented administrator and valuable time could not be lost in reforming the department.

First, Greene demanded that two of his business partners, Charles Pettit and James Cox, be permitted to serve as his main assistants. Congress agreed to this. Both were men of ability. Pettit a lawyer and expert accountant was to be put in charge of money affairs, while Cox, a wealthy merchant, would attend to the purchasing and examining of supplies. Greene himself would attend to the ordering and making sure that supplies were delivered to the army.²⁷

Taking his business partners with him into the realm of public service, Greene could not have pleased the new Board since in its report to Congress, the War Office had warned against leaving the new Quartermaster General open to charges of profiteering.

Still, the dispersal of powers among Greene and his top assistants would mark a vast improvement from the period when the Board was loosely supervising the department.

During that period the War Office was in a constant state of flux and its membership was too small to permit Board commissioners to embark on the necessary travelling mandatory to meet the responsibilities of the Quartermaster Department.

Strapped by too many obligations, the Board's overseeing of the Quartermaster Department was haphazard and Greene inherited a chaotic situation. In the department were 140 deputy quartermasters and auditors, 115 wagonmasters, 131 deputy commissary generals of forage, 86 foragemasters, 77 clerks, 105 expresses, and one superintendent of artificers; in all, 3,000 men.²⁸ Greene had to attempt to temper this unwieldy growth and deal with articles and equipment scattered over the country, with accumulated debts and with accounts neglected. Greene was forced to make persistent calls on Congress and the Board of War for authority, explanations, and, of course, money. Greene was particularly anxious that Thomas Mifflin, his predecessor, complete his accounts so that the new Quartermaster General could grasp the departments' exact situation. But Mifflin, involved in various controversies, did not settle his accounts completely until June 22, 1780.²⁹

After becoming accustomed to his new position, Greene rejected any interference from the Board of War in the affairs of his department. Greene, like Hamilton and a number of other prominent patriots, was a die-hard enemy of the re-organized Board, convinced that in common with Conway and Gates, the War Office had conspired against Washington, associating Greene as a malevolent influence on the Commander-in-Chief. Even when Gates left the Board in May, 1778, Greene's attitude toward the Board did not modify to any noticeable extent. Thus, he did not appreciate taking orders from the War Office and seems to have attempted to keep his public business with the Board to a minimum.

Conflicts were unavoidable. Greene was bequeathed an overloaded department, manned by different agents and assistant quartermasters, many of whom were ineffective and superfluous. Greene admitted to the Board that he found it expedient to appoint private merchants to make purchases who had not been offered a deputation in the Quartermaster line. He often had more knowledge of the ability and character of these merchants than of appointed deputies. In one instance, this led to a quarrel between a deputy, a Colonel Chase, who claimed to be acting with the authority of the Board, and a private

merchant, Benjamin Andrews, regarding the right to purchase and distribute tent cloth. Here was a prime example of overlapping authorities, in opposition to one another.

Greene complained to the Board: "For however necessary it might have been for the Board to execute the office of the Quartermaster-general while the place was vacant, I cannot admit the supposition that so respectable a body, would continue the excercise of it after they knew it was filled ... This kind of competition is surely injurious to the public in a high degree."³⁰

In fact, the Board was not blind to the veracity behind Greene's argument, as Gates noted in a report to Congress: "but above all we lament that any jealousies should arise between those who are trying to accomplish the same point. God knows we have only one view - to see that provisions are procured in such quantities as shall certainly answer the present and future demands of the army. Who are the procurers is to us a matter of perfect indifference. We wish not to interfere in the business, on the contrary, we would gladly be rid of it, tho in obedience to the orders of Congress we most readily took upon ourselves the direction of it."³¹

The Board was not grasping for power over the staff departments and would have been extremely pleased to let the Quartermaster Department treat of its own business without interference from the War Office. But this was not possible, especially since Congress had assigned the Board supervisory authority over the Quartermaster Department in September, 1779. Nevertheless, the Board's influence on the affairs of the department remained small since, it must again be stressed, the War Office was undermanned, sometimes consisting of only Pickering and Peters, and therefore in no position to send a commissioner into the field to inspect the transactions and proceedings of the department.

Greene apparently provided little contact with the Board but his assistant, Pettit, did furnish some communication. In April, 1780, Pettit outlined for the Board the basic problems which confronted his department. The difficulties, not surprisingly, stemmed from the want of money. Wagoners refused to work without pay, as did Boatmen who refused to transport stores. "Not a Boat nor Waggon can be put in motion without money to pay their wages, nor can the necessary forage be procured either from the States." Pettit feared the Quartermaster Department was in danger of total stagnation. A few days later Pettit suggested to the Board that since

his department was so greatly in debt to the public, the issuance of public certificates paying high interest should be advocated. This step would hopefully raise confidence in the public credit.³² Pettit's petition was not unique as staff department officers frequently applied to the Board of War to recommend alterations in the economic policy that might prove beneficial to their own concerns and the supply services as a whole. But the petitioners overestimated the power invested in the Board by Congress. The War Office was helpless to adjust money matters. It could only pass along the suggestions it received along with the Board's recommendations to Congress.

Since the Board of War was not able to designate War Office members as active field supervisors, the Board's involvement as "supervisor" of the Quartermaster Department was mostly restricted to the power of its pen. The Board could only implore the various state executives and agents in the field to supply the troops with money and supplies.

By late 1779 and 1780, Congress was counting increasingly on the individual states to provide resources to keep the army in existence. Therefore, when General Gates went south in the spring of 1780 to assume the command of the southern

army, the Board attempted to assist its former president by calling on the states to support Gates and the soldiers under his command. The Board appealed to the governors of Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina to provide the required supplies and transportation. But the coffers of the separate states were as spent as that of Congress and little assistance was forthcoming.³³

After Gates met disaster at the battle of Camden, to be replaced by Greene, who in turn was replaced by Pickering as Quartermaster General, the Board faced a similar predicament as Greene went south to relieve Gates. The Board addressed numerous pleas to the southern state executives in order to gain assistance for Greene, but little could be accomplished where resources simply did not exist. Greene informed Congress in November 1780 that Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, could provide him with no clothing, transportation, provisions or arms and ammunition as he passed through the state. As Greene summed up the situation, "The want of money and the want of public credit are the bane of all our business."³⁴

To complicate matters further, the usual lack of cooperation was prevalent between the diverse state and continental

staff departments. For example, Greene was short of tents and expected to receive sufficient cloth to make them from an anticipated surplus once naval requirements had been fulfilled. But the Admiralty Board used all the available duck, leaving the Board of War to scramble about in order to locate a contractor who would be willing to sell available cloth.³⁵

Thus the Board of War in its relation to the Quartermaster Department during Greene's term as Quartermaster General was not able to promote positive reforms. This was due in part to its ancillary status, as well as to the fact that Greene was a confirmed opponent of the War Office. Greene's only use for the War Office was as a means for securing contracts for cannon, shot shells, and bar iron. Along with Pettit, Greene owned iron works in New Jersey.³⁶

The Board's association with Greene's successor as Quartermaster General, Pickering, showed a substantial improvement. Pickering and Peters were, as we have seen, close friends, the former having been a houseguest at Peters' home when both served on the Board of War.³⁷ The Board now strengthened its hand in attending to the general regulations of the Quartermaster Department. Shortly before the Board was

abolished it became actively involved, on Pickering's initiative, in attempting a series of reforms. They proposed that the supply services should be incorporated under one head in order to promote efficiency and save money. As the Board astutely noted in making its recommendations to Congress, "Ours is become a War of finance as well as of military operations."³⁸

Although undoubtedly aware of the limitations of the Board's power, Pickering conveyed his ideas for reform to the War Office which in turn tried to convince Congress about the correctness of the Quartermaster General's proposals. Pickering basically hoped to amalgamate the Corps of Artificers as well as the Commissary General of Purchases under his own direction. Meanwhile, the duties of the Commissary of Provisions would be handled by the deputy quartermasters, while the position of the assistant Quartermaster General could be abolished. Deputy assistant quartermasters could act as commissaries of prisoners, all to be under the regulation of the Board of War.

The important premise behind Pickering's suggestions was this: "By committing the whole supply business to one Department (his own) it will be rendered more simple and more

convenient to the troops and all concerned ... It will readily be admitted that the more any business is divided among independent heads, the greater will be the delays in the execution."³⁹ But Washington, the Commander-in-Chief, remained dubious of the reform measures advocated by Pickering and the Board of War. While he agreed that some departments could be abolished, particularly the Corps of Artificers, and others consolidated, he feared that by such a centralization process Pickering would be taking on more duties than he could properly manage alone.⁴⁰ While the proposals submitted by Pickering and the Board of War were never implemented in their original form, a great consolidation of duties under one executive did evolve, though not under the leadership of the Quartermaster General, but rather through the auspices of the Superintendent of Finance, Robert Morris. Morris, by the nature of his powerful post and his dominant personality, became instrumental in the direction of the supply services. This method did in fact achieve superior if not wholly satisfactory results.

Provisioning the American armies was another peripheral responsibility the Board undertook on those occasions when Congress instructed the War Office to do so. More often than

not, the Board's connection with the Commissary Departments was limited to supervisory measures, in that it designed measures which meant to define areas of responsibility within the departments and thus make the respective staffs and agents more effective. In other words, the Board was primarily concerned with regulation.

At certain periods the Board was forced by the turn of events to take a more pronounced role in the business of the commissary departments. When Joseph Trumbull left his post as Commissary General in 1777, the resulting confusion resembled that of the Quartermaster Department at a comparable period. To the War Office fell many of the seemingly never-ending perplexities involved in supplying America's soldiers with adequate amounts of food.

The War Office was by no means a roving staff department and only rarely could it afford to spare one of its members for on-site inspections. To accomplish anything, the Board was usually reduced to writing letters to the actors on the scene. As far as provisioning goes, the Board's dispatches often reflected mundane undertakings such as attempting to discover an acceptable substitute for pickled herring, an unpopular ration with the troops.⁴¹ In another case the

Board was ordered by Congress to send an agent to Virginia to report on the condition of salted beef purchased for the use of the army.⁴²

The Board was kept constantly busy trying to supply provisions for Fort Pitt, an important outpost on the western frontier. Congress had more than enough to do in concentrating its focus on the main theaters of military activity. The needs of the frontier, therefore, were often referred to the Board's attention.⁴³ So far removed from Fort Pitt, however, the Board could be of only limited assistance. The commissioners did keep in contact with Colonel George Morgan, commissary of purchases in the west, and constantly pleaded for funds from Congress and the state governments.⁴⁴

The Board of War's authority over the Quartermaster and Commissary Departments was obviously limited. But in two other supply areas, clothing and military stores, various circumstances induced Congress to assign the Board more important duties.

Congress's original instructions outlining the duties of the Board of War, drawn up in June, 1776, specifically stated that the Board would be responsible for military stores. By

itself, this signified only that the Board would keep exact accounts of all the arms, ammunition, and other military stores, and their location. As was so often the case, however, the actual obligations of the War Office far exceeded its defined responsibilities. The Board became directly involved with the domestic manufacture of armaments and their upkeep. The Board also became involved with the establishment of foundries and the regulation of soldiers and private citizens who produced, repaired, and transported armaments.

A particularly important task allotted to the Board's jurisdiction was the direction of the Military Stores Department. On February 6, 1778 the Board, which on that day consisted of Peters and Gates, decided that there was needed a Commissary of Military Stores whose job it would be to receive and deliver all arms, ammunition and accoutrements of every type. The Commissary General would receive returns from every state and would in turn deliver them to the Board of War. All Continental armorers would come under the direction of the Board and the Commissary General of Military Stores.⁴⁵ Congress agreed with the Board's proposal and its plan was implemented.

Artificers were soldiers, craftsmen, technicians and skilled laborers who operated military depots and accompanied troops into the field. Separate companies and smaller detachments existed from the earliest days of the Revolution. Only Colonel Benjamin Flower, however, selected by the Board of War as Commissary General of Military Stores, commanded the single regiment of artillery of artificers, although Lieutenant Colonel Juduthan Baldwin raised companies as quartermaster artificers.⁴⁶

Flower performed his duties exceptionally well and his relations with the Board were excellent. Unfortunately, in the summer of 1778, Flower came under suspicion in Congress. He was charged with committing violations in office by his assistant commissary general, Cornelius Sweers. This created, ultimately, severe difficulties for the Board in its relation with Congress and damaged the functioning capability of the Department of Military Stores.

The trouble started on August 1, 1778, when Congress decided to place Sweers in jail and charge him with forgery. Sweers had apparently misappropriated funds placed in his care.⁴⁷ This was a common charge brought against officers in supply and staff departments but, for a change, viable

evidence was available that would probably condemn Sweers. Still, Sweers did not immediately admit his guilt. He instead transferred responsibility of any wrongdoing to his immediate superior, Benjamin Flower. Congress ordered the Board of War to arrest and jail Colonel Flower, although the only charge brought against him was covering up Sweers' transgressions.⁴⁸

The Board was convinced of Flower's integrity. Peters and Pickering delayed carrying out Congress's orders by claiming more explicit instructions as to the manner of Flower's confinement were required. Pickering further informed Congress that jailing Flower would ultimately prove harmful to the welfare of the army. In all his transactions with the Board, claimed Pickering, Flower had shown himself to be a "public officer of singular worth." In fact, Flower had labored so diligently in the public service that he had become ill and to throw him in jail might prove fatal. Pickering thus hoped that Congress' instructions to the Board ordering that Flower be "safely kept" did not mean jailing him. In any case, the Board was certain Flower would not attempt to leave Philadelphia since he owned considerable property in the city.⁴⁹

The Board's delaying action raised a furor in Congress. The delegates thought their instructions were in no manner ambiguous and that Flower should be jailed immediately. The delegates decided that the Board's response constituted "a breach of the privilege of Congress" and the execution of Flower's arrest was assigned to Major General Benedict Arnold.⁵⁰ Three days later Congress composed a formal denunciation of the Board of War's conduct:

That it is the duty of the Board of War implicitly to obey and execute every order or direction of Congress agreeable to the terms of such order and direction, and that any neglect or delay in executing any order of Congress and every excuse for disobedience and any evasion to execute such order is a breach of duty and derogatory to the authority, honor, and dignity of Congress. That T. Pickering's letter of Aug. 4 cannot be considered the act of the Board of War because the resolve of Congress of April 21 requires that not less than three persons be present to constitute a Board of War. That T. Pickering Esq. by writing the said letter, and Richard Peters Esq. by assenting thereto are guilty of a high insult to this house, that by requesting Congress to excuse them from an immediate execution of their order to arrest and safely keep Colonel B. Flower they were guilty of a breach of duty That their offering reasons to prove the innocence of Colonel Flower was insolent and affrontive.

Pickering and Peters were ordered to report to Congress and tell why they neglected to arrest Flower.⁵¹ Over forty-five years later, Peters reminded Pickering of the Flower affair. He was still incredulous that Congress ever believed that

Board of War business could not be carried on without three commissioners being present.

The whole of the arduous labors were generally thrown on us and we cared nothing about precedency. Sometimes one of us and sometimes the other styled ourselves President in letters or papers as according as the one or the other did the business, and most commonly signed without addition. After you left me (August, 1780) the Board very commonly consisted of myself though occasionally others attended. Sometimes members of Congress were authorized to compose part of the Board. But they were for the most part solemn witnesses.⁵²

On August 8 the Board, Peters and Pickering, wrote Congress they were distressed that they might have offended Congress on the subject of Flowers, and were sorry to keep the delegates from dealing with more important matters; "We mean on every occasion to lend our feeble aid in forwarding the public business, and never intentionally to embarrass Congress or thwart their measures."⁵³

In a separate note to Congress, Pickering attested that Peters was not involved in composing the letter which Congress found so offensive, but that Pickering himself was the sole author. Further, Pickering defended Flower, predicting correctly that his arrest would detract from the dignity and lessen the influence of Congress, Flower being the head of a very important department. Finally, Pickering asserted that all of the Board's actions were undertaken with

the good of the nation in mind.⁵⁴ In any case, the Board's first letter to Congress, signed by both Pickering and Peters was judged sufficient atonement by the delegates and the order stipulating that both commissioners appear before the bar of Congress was rescinded.⁵⁵ At last, on August 24, a congressional committee to whom were referred the facts relative to the Flower case, reported that insufficient evidence had been provided by Sweers to support the charges brought against Flower. The Commissary General of Military Stores was therefore released and allowed to resume the functions of his office.⁵⁶

A few days before this judgment was delivered, Pickering, no doubt aware that the investigation would find Flower innocent, wrote to his wife that if Congress had heeded the information provided by the Board of War, it would have prevented the loss of its own honor and much personal distress for Colonel Flower. Of greater significance, Pickering believed that the incarceration of Flower damaged the public welfare for a number of weeks. For this reason among others Pickering deliberated leaving the Board of War. But he hesitated because his departure would leave Peters as the only functioning member.⁵⁷

So ended the Board's involvement in another affair that, like the Conway Cabal controversy, was petty in nature but consequential in its implications since it further damaged the Board's credibility. Further, the matter was harmful to the American cause. Flower's services were lost for many weeks and his confinement could not have been beneficial to his already deteriorating health. He died in office and his replacement did not measure up to the standards established by Flower. Nevertheless, as Peters reminded Pickering many years later: "Thus ended to the no small pleasure of the members generally, a misconceived business, which was the first and last misunderstanding or want of harmony, between Congress and either of us, during your stay on the Board, or my abidance in the department from its first institution in June 1776, until I turned over in November, 1781, its duties to General (Benjamin) Lincoln."⁵⁸

By that time (1823) Peters' memory had faded. It is true, nevertheless, that from the culmination of the Flower controversy until the abolition of the Board of War, relations between Congress and the War Office were cordial. Still, the hopes many delegates had once invested in the restructured Board for becoming an important administrative office had

long remained unfulfilled.

When the altercation with Congress was finished, the Board and Colonel Flower continued their attempts to increase as best they could the rate of domestic arms production. Before the Revolution, iron was one of America's staple manufactures, and a line of furnaces and forges extended from New Hampshire to South Carolina. Salisbury furnace in Connecticut was started in 1762, rebuilt in 1770, and its products were long considered the best in America. Springfield, Massachusetts, often in danger of Indian raids was convenient of access for New England and the middle states, and was well adapted as an arsenal and place for manufacturing arms. Artisans began this work in private shops, until in 1778 Congress established Continental workshops in Springfield. Cannon was cast and forging was done although small arms were not produced in any wuantity until after the war.⁵⁹

Outside of New England, at the outset of hostilities the careful hand crafting of rifles was carried on by scores of gunsmiths from New York to North Carolina. It was optimistically estimated that the gunsmiths of Pennsylvania could annually furnish 100,000 stands of arms. In addition, during the colonial wars, cannon had been cast in the middle states

where production could hopefully be resumed.⁶⁰ But the immediate effect of the war was to curtail production of all arms. Numbers of skilled laborers were lured from the furnaces and workshops by the initial excitement of military adventure. Further, some ironmasters who express pro-British sentiments were forced to leave the country, resulting in furnaces closing for lack of competent management.⁶¹

The rapidly diminishing condition of the economy became crucial in determining the contracted output of iron products. Before the war iron forges and furnaces found an expanding home market along the Atlantic seaboard and notably in Philadelphia. But a large portion of the production of pig and bar iron was being shipped to British markets. Although the majority of these markets closed at the outbreak of the war. The contract arrangements made with artificers for fabricating small arms, and with furnace owners for the casting of cannon, were based on normal pre-war prices of labor and raw materials. But as early as November, 1776, when the expenses of the gun factories were reconsidered, it was estimated that prices of steels and iron had increased about fifty-two and seventy-nine per cent respectively, and workmen's wages fifty-six per cent.⁶² Therefore, the Board of War and the Commissary General of

Military Stores effort to manufacture sufficient supplies of small arms and cannon was exposed to the tremors of the economy and consequent labor related crisis.

The precarious stock of military stores became a constant worry for the Board of War. Especially before the appointment of Flowers, who applied some consistent regulation to his department, supplies were often dispersed in locations where they were not needed, and many times left unguarded, open to sabotage, or capture by Tories or the British.⁶³ In conjunction with Flowers, the Board made certain that more dependable security precautions were taken.

Prominent among other difficulties relating to the Military Stores Department was the persistent shortage of labor capable of manufacturing armaments. Flower insisted that militia be taken from the line to perform these duties.⁶⁴ This was accomplished but in some cases arms makers were drafted into the militia unknowingly or irrespective of the priority placed on their remaining in the workshops and foundries. In June, 1777, for instance, the Board had to insist that Pennsylvania authorities discharge from the militia eleven men employed in a cannon foundry and nail works owned by Mark Bird in Berks County, Pennsylvania.⁶⁵

When militiamen were drafted as artificers, it was usually realized they knew little if anything about the arts of arms making and casting cannon. When a foundry was constructed at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the Board was forced to search for a master cannon maker who would be willing to instruct trainees for a supplemental income.⁶⁶ Another problem developed when men were taken from line duties to work as military artificers. Many soldiers grumbled at the change in their assignments and some even refused to be reassigned. One of Gates' last duties as president of the Board of War was to address a proclamation to the soldiers at the Carlisle Foundry. He described the need for artificers in the army and encouraged the men to apply themselves to the task of learning the trade.⁶⁷

One of the most vexing difficulties encountered by the Board concerned its effort to keep up the morale of all the people employed in the ordnance department who were adversely affected by the currency depreciation. In May, 1779, the Board informed Congress that the Military Stores Department was on the verge of dissolution. Officers would not continue in the department "to their certain ruin," nor would the men re-enlist or new recruits sign up until their money

demands had been met. Instead of relying on soldiers, the Board recommended that civilian volunteers be used so there would be some degree of certainty supplies would be produced. According to the Board: "The artificers employed in daily wages are transient, clamorous, ungovernable, and extortionate," continually threatening to discontinue working unless they received adequate compensation. Officers in the artificers' regiment had seen their families reduced to poverty and enlisted artificers were unhappy that hired men drew ten times more pay for performing the same jobs. Monetary problems were particularly severe for the enlisted artificers because they were more frequently married than line troops since they were usually older than line troops and their employment allowed them to remain in one locale.⁶⁸

The Board further informed Congress that if large numbers of artillery artificers were to resign, most could prosper in private business. They were skilled workers, many of whom possessed considerable property. Nevertheless, most of the artificers were staunch patriots who would have been satisfied with salaries far short of what they could earn in private business. But they were determined not to deprive their families of adequate food and shelter. The Board

admonished Congress: "not being able to gain military glory ... they will be forced to resign for want of subsistence unless speedily relieved in which case ordnance supplies must stop as they are none to replace them ... The Military officer has promotion and glory for his objects, but the artificer has only his wages to invite him to his duty." To emphasize the point the Board reminded Congress that in the British army the pay of a carpenter exceeded that of a lieutenant. Finally, the War Office recommended pay increases for all officers and enlisted men in the Military Stores Department. The Board noted that its proposed pay increases represented salaries four times greater than those paid to the artificers in February 1778, while the necessities of life now (May, 1779) cost ten times more.⁶⁹

A positive response from Congress was not immediately forthcoming. A majority of personnel in the Military Stores Department nevertheless continued to perform their duties, albeit reluctantly. One of the most experienced and valuable officers in the department was so deeply in debt that he was forced to sell his bed covers, one of his last material possessions, in order to get subsistence for himself and his family.⁷⁰ Congress did not have the money needed to

alleviate the problems but hoped the separate states could supply the artificers with provisions. The states, however, were unwilling or unable to cooperate. As late as October, 1780, Peters had to report that the artificers and their families were still receiving far less than adequate food supplies. The fortunate were able to get by through securing private work. Others, unable to fall back on neglected businesses or to secure other outside employment, were left in a "State of Absolute Want." The War Office, after having made futile appeals to Continental authorities, state governments, and public charities advised Congress that it was placing the facts before the delegates, and would refuse to accept blame in the matter.⁷¹ Regardless, pleas and complaints from the artificers in the Military Stores Department continued to be sent directly or transferred to the War Office. Meanwhile, the states did not provide the artificers with adequate provisions, and a congressional plan which would eventually furnish compensation in wages for the adverse consequences of currency depreciation did not develop.⁷²

Under the circumstances the Board considered discontinuing the foundries at Carlisle and Springfield. Instead, all the smaller posts in Pennsylvania, along with some indispensable

artificers were consolidated into one establishment at Carlisle.⁷³ The Springfield laboratory continued functioning, but a number of less able artificers and commissary officers were dismissed, permitting those who remained to receive pay and provisions. One officer dismissed by means of a congressional resolve and concurred with by the Board of War, was David Mason, a fusemaker. Although he held the position of Superintendant at the Springfield laboratory, Mason was not a Military Stores officer, but belonged to the regular artillery line, under the command of Brigadier General Henry Knox. Knox complained to Washington about Mason's dismissal, stating that the success of any bombardment was dependent on the accuracy in which fuses were executed and Mason's fusemaking, in Knox's opinion, was unsurpassed, even in Europe. Washington passed this information on to the Board, but the War Office would not rescind its original ruling, arguing that the Commissary General of Military Stores would supply all the fuses necessary if furnished with money, and his men with sufficient provisions. If Mason was to remain at Springfield, he would have to be stripped of his rank and pay, and employed as a private citizen.⁷⁴ This judgment must have rankled Knox, but the Board had sent a special surveyor

to Springfield only a few months previously who reported on numerous abuses at the post, and recommended the removal of certain officers, Mason perhaps among them.⁷⁵

While it only seems logical that their closely related endeavors would bring the Board of War and Knox into a close working relationship, this does not appear to have developed. Early in the war, Knox approved the establishment of the Board of War as a regulatory and management department which would lessen his own burdens by keeping careful accounts and gathering returns for all artillery and artillery-related stores. Knox also believed the Board might sponsor the creation of an artillery school, an "American Woolwich", which was "a place to which our enemies are indebted for the superiority of their artillery to all who have opposed them."⁷⁶ An artillery school was not created, but the Board could still prove useful to Knox by approving the appointment of foreigners, particularly French officers, who applied for commissions in the American service.

Foreign artillery and engineer officers, as specialists in their respective fields, were much in demand, unlike the majority of foreigners who applied for appointments in the American service. The artillery profession was not well-

advanced among Americans at the start of the war, and numbers of instructors remained necessary to teach the art to new recruits throughout the conflict. Therefore, the Board of War almost always recommended that Congress grant commissions to foreign artillery officers.

Still, a degree of circumspection was necessary. For example, in July, 1779, Knox reported to Washington that a Frenchman, a Mr. Garanger, could be usefully employed in the artillery as an instructor with the rank of Captain in the Army, but without any particular rank or command in the line of artillery. Washington, urging Garanger's appointment, warned the Board, "The officers of artillery are very tenacious of their privileges and jealous of the introduction of new men into the corp ... it would be inexpedient to excite any discontents among them. Mr. Garanger from his knowledge of the theory and practice of artillery may be useful but he must be employed with caution and management."⁷⁷ The Board complied precisely with the wishes of Know and Washington.

The Board of War provided Knox with supplies through the auspices of the Military Stores Department. When that Department was unable to function effectively due to lack of pay

and provisions, Knox suffered. The Board of War, in turn, had to rely on Congress to furnish the funds necessary to support the Military Stores Department, as the War Office patiently explained to Knox, on those numerous occasions when anticipated supplies were not delivered when expected.⁷⁹

A great blow was suffered by both Knox and the Board by the death in April, 1781, of Benjamin Flower, the Commissary General of Military Stores. Peters described his replacement, Samuel Hodgson, as "a man of Integrity and Industry," who was willing to perform his duties without a deputy, and save the government money.⁸⁰ But Hodgson did not prove nearly so diligent as Flower: in carrying out his responsibilities, and the Department consequently suffered. Hodgson tended to follow his own rules, and had to be admonished by Peters that it was absolutely necessary that he observe implicitly the instructions issued by the Board.⁸¹

The Board of War did not solely rely on Continental Staff Departments to supply armaments, but entered into agreements with private contractors. These agreements could not be fulfilled at times because of a lack of materials.⁸² More often, the Board found itself unable to arrange adequate contracts with ironmasters as to the price to be paid for

arms.⁸³ Even when the Board and the private contractors were able to come to a reasonable accord, the War Office frequently was unable to fulfill its obligations when the work was completed. In December, 1780, iron masters in Pennsylvania and New Jersey bemoaned the fact that the Board had given them a personal guarantee that they would receive their money upon the execution of their compact. Peters informed Congress that by failing to provide the money due to the iron masters, the Board was greatly embarrassed and discredited. Further, the iron masters refused to supply arms in the future, until their previous contracts had been satisfied.⁸⁴

Even after receiving full or partial payment for their services, most iron masters were still not content. For instance, in February, 1781, Pennsylvania iron masters petitioned the Board, asserting that they had come to an accord with an agent appointed by the War Office to fill an order for "shots and shell," payment to be made in gold, silver, or an equivalent amount in paper money. When the work was completed, the iron masters had been paid only a quarter of the money owed them, and that sum had depreciated by more than one-third since the time the original agreement was reached. Also, they had received certificates as compensation

which could not be cashed without suffering a large discount.⁸⁵
In fact, many iron masters refused to accept certificates, for, as one of them exclaimed, "how is it possible for an iron worker to do business that way ... to be payed off in bills of exchange."⁸⁶ Without real money, the iron masters found difficulty in paying wages to their workers and carrying on the forges.⁸⁷

The barriers confronting the Board of War in its attempt to increase domestic arms production were insurmountable. The solution to the arms shortages would have to be rectified through the use of foreign sources, as the Board itself continually reminded Congress.⁸⁸ This expedient became a de facto congressional policy, and its more than moderate success proved crucial in providing adequate equipment needed by the American forces, although the details of munition importation are beyond the scope of this account.⁸⁹

Once shipments from abroad were received in America, they usually came under the jurisdiction of the War Office or the Marine Board, or, in some cases, whoever was first on the scene. In September, 1779, the Board sent a representative from the Military Stores Department to receive and forward to a location designated by the Board, 5,000 muskets procured

in France. But before the Board's representative could appear, an agent from the Virginia Board of War arrived and distributed the muskets to Virginia militiamen. The Virginia Board, without coordinating its actions with either Congress or the Continental Board of War, feared that a British incursion into Virginia was imminent, and that the state militia had to be adequately armed. Although the British did not in fact move into Virginia, the Continental Board's protests were in vain.⁹⁰

Late in the war Peters dispatched the Commissary General of Military Stores himself to act as an agent and to proceed to Boston in order to receive military stores recently arrived from France -- before other competitors for the much valued arms could abscond with the merchandise. Hodgson was ordered to make certain that the stores were well-secured and agents appointed to take charge of them. In moving the stores, all unnecessary transportation was to be avoided in order to save money.⁹¹

Shortly before the Board was dissolved, Peters, acting on a suggestion from Pickering, presently the Quartermaster General, recommended to Congress that the Artificer Corps be placed under the direction of Knox, the Commanding Officer of

Artillery.⁹² Washington believed that the artificers acted like officers of the line, instead of accommodating themselves to their station, did little useful work, and were overpaid besides.⁹³ Shortly before Washington reached this conclusion, the Board received a note from Nathaniel Barber, Commissary of Military Stores in Boston. Barber wished to resign his position to go into private business, pointing out that neither he nor those who worked under him "had received a farthing since August 1779." Barber hoped the Board might forward their pay.⁹⁴ Clearly, the problems and the merits of the men and officers of the Department of Military Art Stores was not understood or acknowledged by the Commander-in-Chief.

Thus, while the domestic production of armaments was insufficient, inadequate supervision from the overworked and undermanned Board of War was not a primary cause. Poor high level planning emanating from Congress, and faulty, confused administration, combined with an obvious lack of cooperation between state and continental authorities all tended to hamper the exploitation of America's own productive capacity and the most effective use of plentiful resources. This forced the United States to rely heavily on imported munitions.

Supervising the Department of Military Stores was a perplexing, wearisome task for the Board of War, but it was, nevertheless, a responsibility assigned to the War Office by Congress both in the original instructions of June, 1776, as well as those of the restructured Board, set up in December, 1777. On frequent occasions various obligations were assigned the Board for limited periods, which had not been expressly designated as a function of the War Office. The Board usually accepted these duties without a murmur. Such was not the case, however, when the Board was directed to regulate the Clothing Department.

The clothing situation in the American ranks was in disarray from the start of the war. The problems involved in manufacturing, purchasing and transporting clothing were many. Ineffective and on occasion dishonest, the directors in the Clothing Department were not trusted by either Congress or the Commander-in-Chief. Clothier General James Mease came under the scrutiny of delegates who accused him of using his position to amass a personal fortune. While these charges could not be ascertained, they distracted Mease from the performance of his duties. Congress increasingly called on the Board of War to try and make the Clothing Department more efficient.

A typical problem faced by Mease -- and referred to the Board -- involved the individual states appropriating cloth purchased from Continental funds for militia use. State authorities were able to take such action as the cloth was being transported through their respective states. The Board was powerless to correct this. All it could do was make sure the agents of the Clothier General submitted timely and accurate accounts as a means to keep track of goods, and to ask the states to change their ways.⁹⁵

Matters disintegrated further in the Clothing Department during the next year, 1778, and Congress demanded the Board assume greater responsibilities in running the affairs of the department. Mease's days as Clothier General were numbered when Washington began pressing Congress to institute a more effective system for clothing the troops. He claimed to receive little cooperation from Mease, and was opposed to supplying the soldiers with clothing by impressing it from the population.⁹⁶ In any case, Mease was disgruntled by all the criticism directed at him and was anxious to step down.⁹⁷ On October 9, 1778, a congressional committee appointed to investigate the activities of the Clothing Department reported its findings to Congress, and recommended that no more

purchases should be made by Mease; who had been suspended from his post in August anyway,⁹⁸ and that the states should begin to supply quotas of clothing. Further, until the states appointed agents and put their affairs in working order, the Board of War would assume responsibility for furnishing clothing to the armies.⁹⁹

Washington was pleased that matters dealing with clothing were being transferred to the Board's administration: "The prospect of having the Army Amply provided for, by your exertions, affords the highest degree of satisfaction."¹⁰⁰ As Washington explained in a later letter, "The regularity of that department has been an endless source of trouble to me and a great cause of discontent in the Army."¹⁰¹ Late in September, 1778, the Commander-in-Chief optimistically believed that by the new arrangement, the Board would be able to put the whole army in completely new uniforms as early as the following month.¹⁰²

Washington sadly over-estimated the prowess of the Board to transform the Clothing Department into an efficient organization. On October 5, 1778, the Board prepared a dismal report on the current state of the Clothing Department, and submitted it for congressional consideration. While the

Department was generally in a confused state of disrepair, the Board was presently negotiating with private suppliers who would hopefully soon alleviate the situation. More troubling than having the clothing manufactured, reported the Board, was transporting it to where it was needed most. As Washington himself recognized, there were few people available to drive the wagons needed to move the clothing.¹⁰³

The Board labored under the impression that its supervision, that is, its active involvement in the purchase of clothing, was only a temporary measure; the War Office to be relieved as soon as a suitable Clothier General was found to replace Mease. But it rapidly occurred to the commissioners on the Board that Congress was in no rush to rearrange the Clothing Department, or to appoint a new Clothier General, or to mitigate the Board's duties in relation to the troubled Department. On October 26th, Peters reported to Congress that the Board was overburdened by the clothing predicament. It was the opinion of the Board that a new Clothier General should be selected immediately along with one or more assistants. Peters cautioned that he did not wish to criticize Congress, but prompt action was needed "to give Vigour to a Department which at Present is in a Situation by no means eligible."¹⁰⁴

Congress, as usual, went about its business in a deliberate fashion, and did not act on the Board's suggestions.

On February 18 of the following year, the Board presented another report to Congress dealing with the plight of the Clothing Department. In general, the Department was still in an extremely unsatisfactory state. In related business, the Board had been instructed to oversee the Commissary of Hides in May, 1778, but had found it necessary to employ workers in the shoe business independent of the appointed commissaries to supply the Army. Shoes purchased were generally of poor quality, including imported shoes as well as those made in America. The shoes usually came without buckles and "were not given time to dry" before being used. Nevertheless, the Board could do little about the abuses in the Hides Department, having so many other concerns to attend to. Also in short supply were linens, hats, and blankets. "We have had Agents to buy all the articles we were directed to procure; but owing to the private Purchasers and the monstrous prices, our expectations have not been answered." The Board, which had been directed by Congress in August, 1778, to care for the storing, forwarding, and making up of imported clothing, was pessimistic that domestic supplies

could be increased to any sizable extent, and hoped that expected supplies from France would provide relief. Until then, deficiencies would prevail, and officers would have to continue to suffer such indignities as failing to appear on parade for lack of suitable uniforms. Finally, the Board protested that nine months previously a Committee of Congress was charged with examining and suggesting changes in the Clothing Department but the said committee had still failed to report. The War Office found itself unable to carry on the work of the Department in detail, and wished to be completely relieved from the responsibility for "we fear our characters will suffer if it is any longer expected from us."¹⁰⁵

Congress did not provide an adequate response and two weeks later, Peters reminded the delegates that the commissioners on the Board of War were not merchants, and therefore were not knowledgeable about the intricacies of purchasing clothing. They were, besides, far too occupied with their numerous other duties to give the Clothing Department the attention it required. The War Office's agents found themselves unable to compete with private merchants who bought up the goods in the ports as it arrived on vessels. The Board suggested that a private purchaser be appointed by

Congress to buy articles wanted by the Army. If this was not deemed satisfactory, Peters advised that the Commercial Committee was better suited than the Board to handle the chore of purchasing clothing. The Commercial Committee could deliver articles purchased onto the care of the Board, which would, in turn, distribute them among the troops.¹⁰⁶

Congress agreed to the Board's proposal of a transfer of responsibilities from the War Office to the Commercial Committee, but the Committee refused to purchase any supplies other than through importation. Thus it remained imperative that Congress assign a Clothier General to regulate the purchase of domestic supplies of clothing, as private merchants continued to monopolize the purchase of most available clothing which they would not sell to Continental authorities at reasonable prices. The Board believed that the best solution was to name someone in the Department as main purchaser and provide him with sufficient funds to secure clothing supplies.¹⁰⁷ Congress finally appointed a Clothier General but as late as April 7, 1779, no clothing purchaser had been named.¹⁰⁸

In July, Timothy Pickering again reminded Congress that the Board was still devoting more time to the Clothing

Department than was consistent with its assigned duties entailing general supervision of the Civil Departments. The same difficulties were prevalent, as merchandise produced in the states and recently arrived from Europe was being bought up before Continental agents could purchase it. Speaking for the Board, Pickering again pleaded that a stable system be established in the Clothing Department "before monopolizers have opportunities to grasp the whole."¹⁰⁹

In the summer of 1779, John Sullivan prepared to launch an expedition of destruction aimed at the lands of the Iroquois Indians, a confederation of tribes in alliance with the British. The Board of War was expected to provide clothing for the soldiers accompanying Sullivan. But Sullivan became dissatisfied with what he considered to be a dilatory effort on the part of the Board. On July 21, at Wyoming, Pennsylvania, Sullivan issued a General Order to the force under his command, stating: "The Commander-in-Chief (Sullivan) acquaints the Army that, had the Board of War complied with his requisitions ... respecting clothing, the numerous, brave, and virtuous soldiers at this post would not now be suffering through want of any articles in that way."¹¹⁰ On August 4, Pickering sent a note to Congress refuting Sullivan's charges, and attesting that

Sullivan had not been specific in presenting his requirements. Regardless of this, the Board had done its utmost to provide him with sufficient clothing.¹¹¹ The Board requested that a committee be formed in Congress to examine the truth of Sullivan's condemnations of the War Office, and such a committee was appointed on September 1.¹¹² On October 12, the committee submitted a report stating that Sullivan had never asked the Board to deliver a specific amount of clothing, and the Board could not exactly ascertain his requirements. Still, it was the committee's judgment that the Board had done everything within its power to aid Sullivan, and the only deficient article had been blankets. Thus, Sullivan's censure of the Board was unfounded,¹¹³ and, parenthetically, his mission a huge success.

Although exonerated from dereliction of duty, the Board was not pleased to continue to be in the clothing business. The unhealthy condition of the finances seemed to hamper all the Board's efforts to provide ample clothing for the troops, and its successes in this effort were few. Shirts, shoes, blankets, and hats were in short supply and according to the War Office, salvation would be achieved only through cooperation from the states. Although Washington and the

newly appointed Clothier General, the Board's old adversary James Wilkinson, had written to the respective states, few favorable responses were forthcoming.¹¹⁴ To make matters worse, little clothing arrived from Europe¹¹⁵ and the clothing situation for the troops serving in the southern army was especially desperate.¹¹⁶

In January, 1780, Peters announced that the Board was rarely in a position to supply adequate provisions of clothing, and even when goods were available, there was no money to pay for them.¹¹⁷ When the Board addressed the Treasury Office in an attempt to acquire funds needed to purchase clothing, that office replied: "That with respect to the Apprehension of the Board of War respecting further Supplies of Cloathing, the Board can assure Congress, that the State of the Treasury will not admit of any advances of money for the Purpose of purchasing Cloathing ... the States should supply Cloathing as stipulated in the Ordinance of Congress of March 23, 1779."¹¹⁸ To resort to modern terms, the Board of War was caught in a web of "buck passing."

The Board of War's supply responsibilities, as set forth by congressional mandate in June, 1776, remained constant throughout the war. By the letter of its original instructions

the Board was invested with wide powers to administer the Ordnance Department. This remained the focus of the Board's efforts in the supply area.

Occasionally, Congress gave the Board special supervisory powers over other supply services. Such was the case, for example, in November, 1779, when Congress placed the Commissary and Quartermaster Departments under the Board's direction. But this action had little effect in widening the Board's supervisory powers. Strong-willed department heads, notably Nathanael Greene, resented the Board of War interfering in the business of their departments. Since Congress failed to support the War Office's prerogatives, the small group of commissioners in Philadelphia could have little effect on administering Quartermaster and Commissary activities.

The Board's involvement in the Clothing Department quandary was somewhat different since no strong department head existed to hinder the Board's efforts. But the Board commissioners did not feel equal to the responsibility of running the Clothing Department, although the usual pleading to Congress to supply a department head went unanswered.¹¹⁹ The Board was able to make some modest improvements in the domestic manufacture of clothing, though foreign assistance proved

critical in this respect. Finally, the Board was able to make a small contribution toward supplying the American armies many needs. The War Office was a small part of a disorganized, loosely jointed apparatus that, while rarely running harmoniously, cumulatively amounted to success.

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- 2 - Ibid., pp. 221-222.
- 3 - JCC, vol. III, p. 336. Curtis P. Nettles, The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815, (New York, 1962), pp. 1-3; Elizabeth M. Nuxoll, "Congress and the Munitions Merchants: The Secret Committee of Trade During the American Revolution", (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, 1980, The City University of New York), passim.
- 4 - Richard Buell, Jr., "Times, Friend or Foe of the Revolution?", in Don Higginbotham, ed., Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War, (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), p. 128.
- 5 - R. Arthur Bowler, "Logistics and Operations in the American Revolution", in Ibid., pp. 55-56. On transporting goods, see Erna Risch, Supplying Washington's Army (Center of Military History U.S. Army .. Washington, D.C. 1981) pp. 64-91.
- 6 - Ibid., p. 58.
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- 8 - Richard Peters to Robert Morris, August 28, 1780, Peters Papers, HSP.
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- 20 - Nettles, Emergence of a National Economy, op. cited., p. 17; On Washington and the currence see Fitzpatrick, The Writings of Washington, vol. XII, p. 21, vol. XIV, p. 7. vol. XXVI, p. 277.
- 21 - Ferguson, Power of the Purse, op. cited., pp. 59-67.
- 22 - Peters to Congress, February 9, 1779, Papers of the Board of War, PCC, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- 23 - Ibid.
- 24 - Main, The Sovereign States, op. cited., p. 227.
- 25 - Nettles, Emergence of a National Economy, op. cited., p. 31.
- 26 - Board of War Meeting, January 28, 1778, PCC.

- 27 - Theodore Thayer, Nathanael Greene, Strategist of the American Revolution, (New York, 1960), pp. 227-228. On Green's tenure as Quartermaster General see Risch, Supplying Washington's Army, pp. 30, 42-47, 57-53, 54-58, 426-28.
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- 30 - Nathanael Greene to Henry Laurens, March 26, 1778, "letters From Major General Nathanael Greene", PCC, item no. 155.
- 31 - Gates to the President of Congress, February 26, 1778, and Gates to Congress, February 13, 1778, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
- 32 - Charles Pettit to the Board of War, April 24, 1780, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
- 33 - Peters to Congress, April 25, 1780, Board of War Meeting, June 14, 1780, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
- 34 - Greene to Congress, November 19, 1780, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
- 35 - Peters to Congress, April 26, 1781, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
- 36 - Thayer, Nathanael Greene, op. cited., pp. 236-237.
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- 39 - Pickering to Congress, March 21, 1781, Peters to Congress, March 24, 1778, the Board of War to Congress, March 28, 1781, Papers of the Board of War, PCC.
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Erna Risch's Supplying Washington's Army (Washington, 1981) appeared after this paper was written. Risch used basically the same sources, and her conclusions concerning the Board's relations with the supply departments and Congress do not differ from the author's. See especially pp. 12-13, 47-50, 185-186, 324-326.

Ch. V

Administration of Prisoner Affairs

On May 16, 1776, Congress stipulated that a department be created to deal with the affairs of prisoners of war.¹ When the Board of War was established in June, 1776, it was decided the War Office would handle prisoner concerns in addition to its other duties. The Board was ordered to oversee the direction and care of British captives held by American forces; to lend whatever material support it could to Americans detained by the British; attempt to improve overall conditions for Americans languishing in British prisons.²

At the end of 1776, the Board, realizing the immensity of the task, recommended to Congress that an office of commissary general of prisoners be created to aid the War Office with prisoner matters. Congress readily agreed and Washington, who was himself busily taxed in negotiating prisoner exchanges, nominated Elias Boudinot for the post of Commissary General of Prisoners. Congress approved Washington's choice on May 5, 1777, but did not clearly define Boudinot's responsibilities until June 6.³ Boudinot was to exercise authority, subject to the direction of Congress, the Board of War, and the Commander-in-Chief over British troops held in American prisons. He would also be invested with power to

negotiate with his British counterparts to find ways to ameliorate the hardships endured by Americans held in British prisons.⁴

Boudinot's relations with the Board of War were often unstable. He made it clear he did not recognize the authority vested in the Board to oversee his actions. Boudinot tended to bypass the Board in order to deal directly with Congress or Washington. In March, 1778, Gates, then president of the Board of War, wrote to Boudinot, advising the latter to pay a call at the War Office in order to consult with the commissioners on matters dealing with the welfare of American and enemy prisoners. Gates reminded Boudinot, "The Board are often embarrassed in their intentions of making partial Regulations from your not giving them from time to time the necessary intelligence of the general occurrences in your department which they beg they may in future have You will please to recollect that the Care of Prisoners is a particular duty of this Board."⁵ But as late as October, 1778, Peters had to report to Congress that the Board had yet to receive a single return or account from the Commissary General of Prisoners since he had been appointed to office.⁶

The Continental Congress and state governments were too occupied at the beginning of the war with all manner of political, military and diplomatic issues to devote the needed attention to the condition of American and British prisoners. The Board of War, when assigned the care of British prisoners, lacked guidance, and was uncertain how to proceed. Before Boudinot's appointment, the Board became involved in negotiations taking place between Washington and the British Army commander, Sir William Howe, concerning the possibility of prisoner exchanges.⁷ But without accurate lists of the names and numbers of prisoners involved, the Board was unable to provide ample assistance towards effecting prisoner exchanges.

Especially vexing for the Board was determining whether or not British, German and loyalist troops made prisoners would be permitted to "enlist" in the American armies. The commissioners on the Board finally agreed that the answer should be yes since the British had already accepted American prisoners into their army and "it is but justice that we should retaliate."⁸ But the Commander-in-Chief did not agree. Washington felt that such a policy was neither consistent nor good politics. It was incorrect to believe that because

the enemy had committed the "unjustifiable Action" of luring American troops to serve in the British army by promising greatly improved living conditions, that the Americans offer a similar bargain to enemy prisoners.⁹ In this case, Washington's views overrode the Board's arguments.

Almost as soon as it was established, the Board of War was confronted with the dilemma of finding suitable locations for holding enemy prisoners. The shifting military conflict in and around New York City, for example, involved moving prisoners from one place to another to avoid their liberation by the British. It was the Board's heavy burden to organize and arrange for the evacuation of prisoners and their relocation.¹⁰

Many prisoners were transferred to the area around Philadelphia where the Board as well as state and local authorities could more easily watch over them. In November, 1776, the Board had to take fast and effective action when paroled prisoners in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, vicinity were reported procuring intelligence and spreading false rumors. Joining its efforts with the Lancaster Committee of Safety, the Board had all parolees confined who were found

speaking on any political subject relative to the war, spreading false news, making derogatory remarks about the United States, or "injuring the credit of the continental currency."¹¹

The Board was uncertain in forming its policies regarding the treatment of enemy prisoners. The British, for their part, were initially also somewhat confused as how best to deal with the American prisoners. Although the British had captured and confined countless numbers of prisoners in the course of various military engagements in the eighteenth century, those troops had been foreigners, not rebels. The British did not consider the Americans a foreign enemy. To hold discussions with American authorities concerning the standard of treatment received by prisoners, might be construed as virtual recognition of American independence. The British were therefore reluctant to enter into any formal agreements establishing standards of conduct to be followed toward the prisoners. Prisoners on both sides thus became political pawns and the victims of unregulated, haphazard treatment.¹²

The British were often negligent in providing clothing, provisions, bedding and other necessities for their military

captives, many of whom were held in ports, particularly New York, on anchored warships. Also, there was no regular medical program organized for the prisoners although American prisoners were allowed to visit them occasionally.¹³ The British were not averse to having their prisoners supplied with medicines so long as the Americans provided them. Under these circumstances, Boudinot and his successors, along with the Board of War, attempted to supply the basic needs of the American prisoners.

On occasion, the British permitted the Commissary General of Prisoners to make inspection trips to locations where prisoners were being held. After completing the inspection, the Commissary General would usually direct a report to the Board of War. The Board would consider the information received and pass on its own recommendations to Congress as to the best means available for alleviating the prisoner's plight. For example, Boudinot was allowed to enter British-occupied New York in February, 1778, where he remained nearly a month. He found general wretchedness to prevail among the enlisted men, though, as was usually the case, the officers boarded out among the inhabitants on Long Island were, for the most part, healthy and comfortable. But not all the

officers were treated so well. Boudinot reported that a Colonel Miles, underfed and dressed in rags, suffered the indignity of having to serve as a stable boy for a British officer.¹⁴ While the officers' fortunes varied, reports to the Board indicated that almost all the enlisted prisoners suffered from want of food and clothing, and felt themselves deserted by Congress. Many were strongly tempted to join the British army; not because they had lost faith in the patriotic cause, but to alleviate their harsh living conditions.¹⁵

The Board of War's attempts to mitigate the sufferings of both officer and enlisted American prisoners achieved only mixed success. Supplying them with food and clothing was naturally the commissioners' main priority. More often than not, no provisions were immediately available and the Board had to contact numerous diverse sources before receiving a favorable response. When no flour was available in the public magazines around Philadelphia for use by prisoners in New York, for instance, the Board had to urge a not very willing Governor George Clinton of New York to furnish the needed goods by way of the Hudson River.¹⁶ While the state authorities occasionally cooperated with the Board in prisoner affairs, the states, as in most matters, usually developed their own

policies and methods for executing them. While the Board of War and the Commissary General of Prisoners were granted by Congress the authority to determine procedures effecting prisoner administration, the different states were likely to establish their own rules effecting food supply and prisoner exchanges, reflecting concern for state militia as opposed to the Continental troops. This caused problems for the Continental authorities, such as the Board of War, who were anxious to insure the welfare of all American prisoners.¹⁷

The Board's efforts to assist American prisoners involved the War Office in some far-reaching, unusual enterprises. For example, on December 21, 1780, the Board chartered the sloop Carolina Packet to carry flour and clothing to Charlestown, South Carolina, for use by the men taken prisoner when that city was captured by the British. After having been detained by the enemy, the vessel finally returned to Philadelphia on May 2, 1781. The owners of the sloop were promptly paid off, but believed that they were entitled to additional compensation for damages inflicted on the sloop by a group of American officers. Having happily been paroled, the officers expressed their joy by way of rambunc-

tious behavior aboard ship resulting in considerable damage. Besides paying for the damages, the owners also believed that the freed officers should be induced to pay the fare for their passage home. The Board responded that it would be wrong to force the officers to pay from their own pockets and that the owners be reimbursed through public funds. Congress referred the case to the Treasury Board which ingeniously decided on May 30 that the balance should be paid the owners through funds earmarked for use by the Board of War, which took it on itself to charter the sloop in the first place!¹⁸

Try as they might, the commissioners on the Board of War were rarely able to improve conditions endured by American prisoners incarcerated by the British. More often, the War Office was concerned with matters related to the predicament of British prisoners. The Board generally attempted to adhere to a policy which duplicated British conduct towards American prisoners. As early as August, 1775, Washington stated that captured enemy troops be regulated to a regimen similar to that enforced for American prisoners.¹⁹ But this was not practical since from the beginning of the war until the autumn of 1777 American

prisoners greatly outnumbered their British counterparts. Congress and the Board did not possess needed leverage to manipulate the treatment of enemy prisoners in a manner which would ensure fair conduct towards the American captives. However, after the surrender of Burgoyne the Americans corralled a large number of prisoners, as judged by eighteenth century standards, and retaliatory measures against enemy prisoners, as suggested by the Board, became more plausible as a form of policy. Until that point in the war, late 1777, the only retaliatory steps taken by Congress had consisted of close confinement of selected British officers and equalization of rations to those received by American prisoners.²⁰

After Saratoga, however, Congress opened a debate upon a report from the Board recommending that a policy of general retaliation upon all British captives be commenced immediately. The Board urged that the rations of enemy prisoners be reduced until evidence appeared that American inmates were experiencing a marked improvement in their overall living conditions.²¹ Congress accepted the Board's proposals and a policy of retaliation was started which continued, in sporadic fashion, depending on the reported state of American prisoners, over the next three years. In January, 1781, a more comprehensive

plan was approved and reductions made in British prisoners' rations made permanent until notice from Congress or the Board of War.²² Under wartime conditions, of course, the British prisoners were often subject to unplanned irregularities in their meal schedule.

The Board, when advising retaliatory policies, was primarily concerned with pressuring the British to improve conditions for American prisoners. Nevertheless, the War Office did not attempt to create a vendetta aimed at the British captives out of motives for revenge of harms done American prisoners. The Board proved on many occasions that it was concerned with the welfare of enemy prisoners, and did not wish to have them suffer unnecessarily. Numerous letters from British officers and enlisted men protesting some aspect of their imprisonment were received and acted on by the Board of War.

In May, 1778, for example, letters from Dr. John Conolly and other British prisoners held at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, were directed to the War Office. The prisoners complained of inhuman conditions prevailing at Carlisle. The letters were so strongly worded that the Board made the unusual gesture of sending one of its own commissioners, Timothy Pickering, to make an on-site investigation. Pickering discovered the

men were well-treated, the prison was clean and not, as reported by Dr. Conolly, "polluted with filth." In fact the prisoners, all of whom were officers, were allowed to keep two servants and most of the captives occupied two comfortable rooms. Men who became ill were immediately removed to a hospital where they received prompt medical attention.

According to Pickering, Conolly was instigating discontent because he had been temporarily confined after having "behaved amiss while on parole." The Board concluded in the report it delivered to Congress, based on Pickering's visit: "These gentlemen should be more strictly confined, as from the indulgence now given them there is a possibility of some of them at least making their escape."²³ Of course, on other occasions when the Board judged that British prisoners were indeed being mistreated, the commissioners took immediate action to rectify the situation.

One of the greatest heartaches endured by the Board in its dealings with British prisoners involved provisioning, housing, and moving the so-called "Convention" prisoners. Technically, Burgoyne did not surrender at Saratoga but was bound in a convention with Gates whereby the generals came to an agreement without receiving, or ignoring, official

instructions from their superiors. The terms of the convention that included the repatriation of the majority of the defeated troops, however, failed to receive ratification in Britain. Many members of Parliament feared ratification would acknowledge that the British were negotiating with a sovereign American state. American officials, on the other hand, wanted to keep firm control of the considerable number of prisoners taken at Saratoga. By doing so, the United States gained a strong bargaining chip in bettering the lives of Americans held captive by the British. By holding the prisoners in the United States also insured the British could not break the agreement and use the troops in other theaters of war. The enemy soldiers who fell into American hands as a result of the Saratoga campaign thus became very useful and powerful pawns for the United States. Further, they became an administrative responsibility of the Board of War. As we shall now see, however, the Board was rarely in a position where it could affect the fortunes of the Convention prisoners to a meaningful degree.

The total numbers of prisoners captured at Saratoga was, by the previous standards of the war, staggering. They were approximately 2,442 British, 2,198 German, and 1,000 Canadians,

for a total of 5,640 prisoners.²⁴ When the British and American governments failed to adhere to the convention agreement, the troops began a series of travels across the countryside as collective "Flying Dutchmen." The major factors determining the choice of places for their detention were the availability of food supplies, transportation facilities, and, perhaps most important, maximum security against escape or attempts to liberate the prisoners by British forces. Seaports were therefore always excluded as were most cities and sites on navigable rivers. The temperament of the population in the respective areas, whether they exhibited patriot or loyalist tendencies, also had to be taken into account.²⁵

With almost 6,000 prisoners to feed and care for, the American supply services were inordinately taxed. Everywhere the Convention troops were transferred, local committees found themselves unable to cope with the influx. Shortages in housing, food, and fuel plagued the national and state authorities in meeting the wants of the American forces, let alone those of the enemy prisoners. Under the circumstances, officers and men had to be imprisoned in different locations.

The British military authorities naturally complained of the separation of the officers from their men. They were further disturbed with the Americans' failure to allocate quarters according to rank, overcrowding, deficiencies of rations in quantity and unacceptable quality, long, arduous marches, and the curtailment of parole and prisoner exchanges. Americans responded by pointing out that the British Parliament had brought these difficulties upon the prisoners by refusing to ratify the pact reached between Burgoyne and Gates.

Burgoyne had, in fact, personally violated the agreement by not handing over to the Americans large numbers of guns, bayonets, and other equipment. In addition, Burgoyne withheld lists of the names of British and German soldiers who had surrendered.²⁶ This argument, however, conveniently ignored the point that the Gates-Burgoyne agreement was as odious to the American Congress as it was to Parliament since it called for the repatriation of the British and Hessian forces.

By the terms of its assigned responsibilities, the Board of War was deemed a pivotal part in the affairs of the Convention prisoners. From the War Office in Philadelphia, the

Board had to direct the movements of the prisoners, making certain they were not located in areas from which British raiders could possibly liberate them, and assuring that they were adequately fed, clothed and housed.

An elementary priority for the Board involved finding suitable shelter for the prisoners. Unfortunately, the commissioners found this task extremely difficult to fulfill. Having sturdy barracks constructed proved to be especially difficult.²⁷ Trustworthy contractors had to be found who would build dependable structures. But even when accredited builders could be located, the problem remained to arrange adequate payment under the circumstances of discredited currency.²⁸ The Board usually made contact with the various state authorities where the prisoners were being held, in the hope that they could arrange the construction of adequate living quarters. But as Governor Thomas Jefferson of Virginia reminded the Board in April, 1781, barracks could not be assembled without money to pay the contractors, and the state coffers were as empty as the Continental government's. Jefferson also remarked that even if a way was discovered to build barracks, there were not enough American soldiers available to stop fighting and guard the Convention prisoners.²⁹

The Board was hesitant to use militia troops on guard duty, as the commissioners believed them to be, for the most part, too undependable to undertake such an important responsibility. When the prisoners were interred in Virginia in 1779, the Board suggested to Congress that a new Continental regiment be recruited solely to perform the duty of guarding the prisoners. The War Office believed that men would enlist if they were guaranteed to be stationed near a barracks and could continue to live with their families.³⁰ But the Board's suggestions were not acted upon, and some prisoners were able to escape when insufficient numbers of guards were on hand to watch them. Partly due to the lack of guards, the captured troops were split up in March, 1781; non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, both British and German, were scattered around Virginia and Maryland, while some British officers had to be sent to Salisbury, Connecticut.³¹

Occasionally, the Board received reports indicating that the British were preparing expeditions designed to free the Convention prisoners. The Board tended to disparage these cries of alarm, as in September, 1779, when rumors reached the War Office that the British were planning an incursion into Virginia to deliver the captives. The state leaders

grew extremely jittery and asked the Board of War for large numbers of reinforcements to meet the expected raid. But speaking for the commissioners on the Board, Pickering informed Congress: "We cannot persuade ourselves that at this time the enemy would hazard a part of their army in Virginia, even if they thought the rescue of the Convention prisoners far more practicable than we do."³² Despite Americans often-expressed fears, the British never launched a truly concerted effort to liberate the Convention soldiers.

The Board received countless petitions from Convention prisoners, outlining their problems. Sometimes the Board, after making inquiries, found prisoners' complaints to be justifiable. Such was the case, for instance, in August, 1779, when a British captain was unprovokedly beaten by Joseph Jewel, an American jailer. The Board informed Congress of the incident, recommending that "Some regulation may be expedient in regard to the exercise of the Goalers over prisoners of war."³³ On occasion, the Board could be generous towards individual Convention prisoners. After reviewing a petition from an American soldier, Thomas Hartley, in 1780, the Board suggested to Congress that a prisoner, Lieutenant William Wilkinson of the 62nd British Regiment be

paroled. Wilkinson had acted humanely towards American prisoners captured in Quebec in 1776, of whom Hartley was one.³⁴ Generally, however, the Board was powerless to assist the Convention troops through its own auspices. For example, the War Office received a petition from the prisoners detained in Charlottesville, Virginia, in March, 1781. The prisoners complained they were receiving only scant rations and were going hungry. The Board was unable to help the prisoners, however, and could only resolve that the state governor be requested by Congress to provide sufficient quantities of provisions for the troops.³⁵ Based on past experience, the commissioners probably realized that they were making a futile gesture.

The last two years of its existence found the Board of War laboring just to keep the Convention prisoners alive. In March, 1780, the Board disclosed to Congress that many of the captives were virtually starving. There was less a problem involved in procuring food than in having it transported to the prisoners' stockades. The Continental wagonmasters could rarely move their teams for lack of forage. Meanwhile, private wagoners were hardly inclined to work for the United States, realizing they would probably receive worthless

currency in return for their labors.³⁶ When the prisoners were in transit, which was often the case, it became especially difficult to have provisions delivered to them since their stop-overs and even their final destination was often uncertain. Such a situation developed in December, 1780, when the prisoners were transferred from Charlottesville to Fort Frederick, Maryland, because of a rumored British raid, intended to free them. Of course, no raid occurred but the Board of War was unaware of the prisoners' swift departure from Charlottesville and could not organize with Continental or state agents to prepare for their arrival at Fort Frederick. Thus, when the prisoners came to Fort Frederick, they found only dilapidated barracks and insufficient food to feed them and their guards.³⁷

In the summer of 1781 General Cornwallis threatened to invade Virginia and Congress asked the Board to arrange for the prisoners in the state to be sent to a more secure location. In truth, regardless of Cornwallis's intentions, it was crucial that the Convention troops be removed from Virginia, for it was very difficult to find food to feed them there. The state was basically a tobacco and not a bread province. Wheat, as well as most other grains, were

not grown extensively. With trade channels largely cut off overland, the inhabitants had trouble enough collecting ample foodstuffs for themselves without worrying about the welfare of the prisoners. That problem was largely the Board of War's. Since flour was not available and to bring it in from Pennsylvania would have been logistically difficult and expensive, the Board suggested the prisoners be given Indian meal and rice as substitutes for bread. Unfortunately, neither the prisoners nor their guards, who usually shared the same food, found these acceptable except as a means to stave off starvation.³⁸

The Board was anxious to comply with Congress's wish and relocate the prisoners but, as usual, major roadblocks stood in the way. As Peters informed Congress: "We should as we are in all occasions be happy in executing the orders of Congress but in this as well as too many other matters we find ourselves embarrassed by Want of Means."

Peters also reported that, provisions being so scarce, prisoners had to be permitted to roam the countryside in search of food, a desperate but necessary expedient. Because there were few guards available to watch over them, the prisoners often escaped.³⁹ In fact the prisoners were

sometimes accompanied by former guards who had deserted to search for food.⁴⁰

The War Office's supervision over prisoners was thus severely handicapped by the fact that the Board of War was only one cog in a small, but nevertheless complicated administrative structure. Responsibility for the prisoners' welfare was dispersed among Congress, the states, the Board, the Commissary General of Prisoners, and the Commander-in-Chief, with demarcation lines unclearly drawn. Imprecise accountability combined with a notable lack of resources made for a haphazard stewardship of prisoner affairs.

Notes

- 1 JCC, vol. IV, p. 361.
- 2 Larry G. Bowman, Captive Americans: Prisoners During the American Revolution (Athens, Ohio, 1976), p. 68.
- 3 Ibid., p. 69; Board of War meeting, May 8, 1777, PCC.
4. J. J. Boudinot, ed., The Life, Public Services, and Letters of Elias Boudinot (New York, 1896), vol. 1, pp. 42-53.
- 5 Gates to Boudinot, March 2, 1778, Gates Papers, NYHS.
- 6 Peters to Congress, October 31, 1778, PCC. Peters was, in fact, referring to John Beatty who had replaced Boudinot as Commissary General of Prisoners in May, 1778, but was, in Peters' opinion, equally uncooperative.
- 7 The Board of War to Washington, November 8, 1776, LMCC, vol. II, pp. 147-148.
- 8 The Board of War to Washington, November 19, 1776, LODC, vol. v, p. 518.
- 9 Washington to the Board of War, November 22, 1776, G.W., vol. VI, p. 317; Peter Force, American Archives (Washington, D.C., 1848-1853), Fifth Series, vol. III, p. 778; LODC, vol. V, n. 5, p. 518.
- 10 The Board of War to Washington, November 23, 1776; Force American Archives, Fifth Series, vol. III, p. 820. The Board informed Washington that in consideration of the reported evacuation of Fort Lee, prisoners should be sent to New Brunswick.
- 11 The Board of War to the Lancaster Committee of Safety, November 15, 1776, Ibid., p. 698.
- 12 Bowman, Captive Americans, pp. 4-7.
- 13 Ibid.

- 14 Board of War meeting, May 30, 1777, PCC.
- 15 Boudinot to Peters, June 20, 1777, "Letters Addressed to Congress", Item no. 78, PCC.
- 16 Peters to Congress, October 5, 1780, PCC.
- 17 John Beatty to Washington, October 26, 1779; Washington to Beatty, October 30, 1779, Washington Papers, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- 18 Peters to Congress, May 2, 1781, PCC.
- 19 Fitzpatrick, G.W., vol. III, pp. 430-431.
- 20 Bowman, Captive Americans, p. 84.
- 21 JCC, vol. XI, p. 723.
- 22 Bowman, Captive Americans, p. 83.
- 23 Peters to Congress, May 22, 1778, PCC.
- 24 Charles A. Metzger, The Prisoner in the American Revolution, (Chicago, 1971), p. 245.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 246-247; JCC, vol. XX, p.530; Washington to the Board of War, G.W., vol. XXII, pp. 169-170.
- 26 Metzger, The Prisoner in the Revolution, pp. 247-257.
- 27 Board of War meeting, October 20, 1778, PCC.
- 28 Pickering to Congress, August 27, 1779, PCC.
- 29 Thomas Jefferson to the Board of War, August 23, 1781, Julian B. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, (Princeton, N.J., 1952), vol. V, pp. 542-543.
- 30 Peters to Congress, January 6, 1779, PCC.
- 31 Peters to James Wood, March 24, 1781, Jefferson Papers, vol. V, pp. 239-240.

- 32 Pickering to Congress, September 27, 1779, PCC.
- 33 Pickering to Congress, August 27, 1779, PCC.
- 34 Board of War meeting, September 12, 1780, PCC
- 35 Board of War meeting, March 29, 1780, PCC.
- 36 Peters to Congress, March 23, 1780, PCC.
- 37 The Board of War to Congress, December 6, 1780, PCC.
- 38 Metzger, Prisoners in the Revolution, pp. 250-251;
JCC, vol. XX, p. 530; G.W., vol. XX, pp. 448-449;
XXI, p. 371.
- 39 Peters to Congress, February 24, 1781, PCC.
- 40 William Grayson to the Board of War, June 4, 1781, PCC.

Ch. VI

Dissolution and Conclusion

As 1780 drew to a close Congress again considered wholesale changes in the organization of the War Office. Many delegates now favored the appointment of a Secretary at War; preferably someone with military experience, who would supplant the Board of War. On February 7, 1781, after considerable debate, Congress at last set forth the duties of the still to be appointed secretary. The appointee would first examine into the present state of the War Office as well as the condition of the troops, ordnance, arms, ammunition, clothing, and supplies of the armies of the United States. The new secretary would be responsible for keeping exact and regular returns of all American forces in the field, and military stores, equipment, and supplies stored in the nation's magazines. He would also prepare estimates for paying and recruiting soldiers and report his findings to the Superintendent of Finance; transmit all orders and resolutions relative to the military land forces; make out, seal and countersign all military commissions, and annually public lists of appointments.¹

Plainly, the new secretary's responsibilities would vary insignificantly from those allotted to the fledgling Board of War in June, 1776. Nevertheless, a sufficient number of

congressman were convinced that a restructuring of the War Office was in order, even though the delegates were as unwilling to increase the powers of the new Secretary at War, as they had been previously reluctant to augment the authority of the commissioners on the Board of War.

Choosing a secretary proved to be as agonizing and time consuming a process for Congress as the reorganization of the Board of War had been in 1777-1778. Politics in the form of regionalism embittered the issue. In March, 1781, the choice of a new secretary was postponed until the following October. John Sullivan, now a delegate from New Hampshire, explained the delay, as he interpreted it, to Washington: "The choice of a Minister of War is postponed to the first of October. This was a manoeuvre of Sam Adams and others from the North, fearing that as I was in nomination, the Choice would fall on me who having apostatized from the true New England Faith, by sometimes voting with the Southern states, am not Eligible." But Sullivan also claimed that he had no desire to serve as Secretary at War, in any case.² James Mitchell Varnum, however, believed that Sullivan did indeed want the appointment. He, too, thought that the postponement in selecting a secretary was a ploy by the "northerners" to prevent the choice of

Sullivan, who was apparently supported by many southern delegates. The preferred choice among many northern congressmen, also known as "easterners", was Nathanael Greene. But Greene could hardly be spared from his duties with the Southern Army.³

Besides Sullivan, another potential nominee for secretary was Horatio Gates, the former president of the Board of War. But Gates was in command of the Southern Army during the campaign which culminated in the Camden fiasco of August, 1780. Gates' supporters desired that he be cleared of all fault for the defeat before declaring himself as a candidate for Secretary at War. Phillip Schuyler, like Sullivan a former general turned delegate, seethingly denounced the notion of Gates, his old adversary, becoming the new secretary:

Surely the gentlemen who intend him the office neither consult his reputation nor the public interest. Not the former, because his inability to discharge it will certainly draw disgrace on him, nor that for the latter, for even if he were competent, he ought to be precluded as the inveterate enmity which he bears you Washington, and will influence him the more for being groundless, will lead him without hesitation, to reject or thwart the most salutary measures you may propose.⁴

Finally, the moment for selecting the new secretary came around. Schuyler's fears were unfounded for Gates was not seriously considered. Greene and Henry Knox were acknowledged

by the delegates to represent the most highly qualified candidates, but neither could be spared from their command positions.⁵ A compromise was reached when General Benjamin Lincoln was chosen. Lincoln had been in command and surrendered Charlestown, South Carolina, to the British the previous year. Still, he had managed to remain clear of politics and was a safe if uninspiring selection. Because the delegates were determined to fill the position with a military man, this probably eliminated from consideration the person most experienced in dealing with the business of the War Office and the logical choice to be Secretary at War if Congress had indeed been sincerely interested in making that office truly efficient: Richard Peters.

While Congress bickered over the choice of a Secretary at War, the Board of War continued to perform its legion of duties. Of course, in over five years of operation, the personnel assigned to the War Office experienced endless turnovers. Some were more diligent than others in their efforts but, as Peters reminded Pickering in 1823, "They were for the most part solemn witnesses."⁶ Pickering himself was a dedicated commissioner, but he left Peters alone in the War Office for a period in October, 1778, when he returned home

to visit his family for the first time in sixteen months.⁷ In the same month that Pickering temporarily departed, the structure of the Board was reorganized in a manner that was to become the pattern for the other administrative boards. Congress decreed that two of the five members who made up the Board of War would now be congressional delegates as well.⁸

In Congress, regional animosities were not restricted to the selection of a Secretary at War. H. James Henderson, who explored the political role of regionalism in Congress, has asserted that despite the inclusion of two Virginians on the Board of War in 1779, William Grayson and F.L. Lee as a congressional representative, the Board continued to reflect an effective northern orientation.⁹ By this characterization, Henderson proposes that the Board was directly or indirectly controlled by the "eastern" party, essentially radical and states rights inclined. But Pickering, who left the Board to serve as Quartermaster General in 1780, was a northerner; at least he considered New England his home at the time. And Pickering's subsequent career in government marks him as a Federalist. Peters, meanwhile, came from a middle state, Pennsylvania, and his experience on the Board in dealing with the recalcitrant states, made him a life-time

proponent of a strong central government. The only commissioner who served on the Board of War for any appreciable time and, by the course of his ensuing career could still be considered an anti-Federalist, was the Virginian, Grayson. In fact, after Gates left the War Office in April, 1778, the Board of War was really an apolitical body, and was not involved in the internecine warfare between the different congressional factions.

Other commissioners to sit on the Board under the new arrangement who deserve mention for their efforts are Jesse Root of Connecticut, who served as a congressional representative, and Ezekiel Cornell of Rhode Island, who served on separate occasions as a congressional and a non-congressional member. Others came and went acting as the "solemn witnesses" described by Peters. Cornell and William Grayson, however, did take a considerable burden from Peters' shoulders if their regular attendance at Board meetings and involvement in the proceedings and correspondence of the War Office is a reliable indication. Cornell, a self-educated mechanic and veteran soldier, attended the Board from December, 1780, to its dissolution in November, 1781. As evidenced by the surviving War Office records, he diligently carried out his

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duties, relieving Peters of part of the great load of official correspondence the Board had to deal with.¹⁰ Equal credit is deserved by Grayson who, like Cornell, had earlier served as an officer in Washington's army. Grayson, who possessed a fine intellect, became a commissioner in December, 1779, and served until September, 1781.¹¹ Grayson and Cornell effectively handled War Office business when Peters, along with Robert Morris the Superintendent of Finance, were called to Washington's headquarters in August, 1781, to make preparations for meeting the army's requirements in the following year.¹²

In the last year and a half of its existence, the Board rarely received important assignments from Congress. Peters' visit to headquarters with Robert Morris can be considered an exception since the formation of special committees to investigate the needs of the Army usually did not include Board of War members. Also out of the ordinary was Congress's directive that the Board devise a plan for reforming the Hospital and Medical Departments of the Army in June, 1781. Thus, for a few short months, the War Office was involved in the administration of the Medical Department, under the heading of its general supervisory powers over the civil departments.¹³

At times, Congress allocated to the Board trivial chores. A prime example was in July, 1781, when the War Office was ordered to "furnish the table" of the Commander-in-Chief. Peters and his colleagues handled this task gracefully in the midst of their more important duties. In cooperation with Commissary General Ephraim Blaine, the Board made certain that Washington was comfortably supplied with red wine, silver tumblers and spoons, a caterer, and other such "necessities."¹⁴

On November 29, 1781, Richard Peters left the War Office permanently in favor of the newly appointed Secretary at War, Benjamin Lincoln. At this time, the American armies, with the indispensable support of their French allies, had earned a pivotal victory at Yorktown, and final victory was at last in sight. Peters delivered his final report to Congress, having handed over to Lincoln "The powers entrusted to my care and the powers with which I was honoured ceasing, I have delivered to him the books and papers of the department and beg to take my most respectful leave of Congress as a Public Officer." Peters had served in an "arduous employment" for over five years. At the start, as the Board's first secretary, he had to arrange and organize the affairs of the

War Office and

in its progress always to share and for no incondierable portion of the time solely to support its difficulties.... it gives me pleasure that the situation of public affairs has in a considerable degree abated the embarrassments attending the Department, and the Gentleman who succeeds to it will have to travel a path, tho not without it impediments, yet less thorney than that trodden by his predecessors. Far from being greedy after fame, I shall deem myself fortunate if thro the Vicissitudes of the war and in the various scenes of Business I have been engaged, I have conducted myself irreproachably. I am happy that the time I leave the public Business is one of the most prosperous period of the war and that it can be so agreeably contrasted with that in which I was called ot it.

Finally, Peters hoped that independence would compensate him "for the loss of private Ease and Fortune and all the perplexities and distress I had continually to encounter in the deparment I had the Honour to serve."¹⁵ On December 17, Congress resolved to commend Peters for his services on the Board of War. Four days later, Peters formally thanked Congress, and closed out that part of his career in government service.¹⁶

Today, Richard Peters is largely a forgotten figure, despite the important role he played in the administrative history of the Revolution. After leaving the Board of War, he continued to take an active part in public affairs. In November, 1782, he was elected to Congress for one year. From 1787-1790, Peters was a member of the Pennsylvania

Assembly, serving as Speaker for the last two years of his term. From 1791-1792, Peters was a member of the Pennsylvania State Senate. On April 11, 1792, Peters was commissioned Judge of the United States District Court of Pennsylvania, an office he held for the remainder of his life. Peters became an expert on maritime law and earned high praise from the eminent justice, Joseph Store. Foremost perhaps, he was a practical farmer who exchanged ideas with Washington on the most efficient methods for growing various crops. He became the first president of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, and an honorary foreign member of the English Board of Agriculture.¹⁷

Peters' experiences in the Revolution colored his subsequent views on war and politics. Although having served in a righteous cause, Peters was saddened that the five years he spent in the War Office devoting himself to the rigors of military administration, left little time for other, more personally constructive pursuits. As the years progressed, he increasingly espoused pacifist sentiments to his many friends and acquaintances. This was especially true as British-American relations deteriorated in the early part of the year 1812. Peters felt no personal animosity towards

Britain and in letters to his English friends, he denounced war as "the destroyer of all the Comforts and Happiness of Mankind, its ravages in its rapid March of Desolation."¹⁸

In another letter, written later in the year as war seemed inevitable, Peters expressed these thoughts:

History employs the Pen in Recording the Ravages of Conquerors who desolate the most fertile regions of the Earth and the Events produced by wily politicians, which entangle nations in difficulties and embarrassments. Seldome indeed do we meet in her pages with any notices of the Publik or Private individuals who cultivating the arts of peace become more commendable and extensive Benefactors to Mankind.¹⁹

War between Britain and the United States broke out once more, but Peters refused to become embittered. He pursued his interests in agriculture and law for sixteen more years, dying on August 22, 1828, at the age of eighty-four.

Conclusion

As difficult as it might be to perceive, the American Board of War can be considered, indirectly, the progenitor of the modern United States Department of Defense. Unlike the Board of War, however, the Defense Department's mission is by and large unquestioned. It receives the support of the law-making bodies, the commanders of the armed forces, and the public. This is far different from the situation the Board of War was involved in. Of course, comparisons between eighteenth century and late twentieth century military administration are bound to be startling. Still, the evolution of American defense administration had to base its development from some starting point, and the Board of War provided the necessary foundation.

Congress had large intentions, shared by Washington, when forming the Board of War in the spring of 1776. By taking over many of the wearisome detailed duties of military administration, the War Office would hopefully decrease the workload of Congress as a whole and the Commander-in-Chief. But jealous of its own preeminence in military matters, Congress ruled that only delegates would be eligible to sit on the Board. This arrangement was unwise for while the

congressional Board members were usually men of intelligence and determination like the Board's first president, John Adams, they usually possessed little or no experience in military affairs. The delegates were overwhelmed with responsibilities, attending the regular sessions of Congress and participating on diverse committees, in addition to serving on the Board of War. By the end of 1776, astute congressmen were aware that if the Board was ever to become an efficient administrative committee, a restructuring would be in order, with noncongressional representatives, particularly men with military experience, included in its membership. The urgency which prompted this view was temporarily stilled by heartening, though small-scale successes in the field at the close of 1776 and the beginning of 1777. The impetus to reform the Board was lost for many months as Congress concentrated on what were thought to be more pressing matters. When the issue came to the forefront once again, political and personality disputes among diverse congressional and military cliques hampered the selection process for new Board commissioners. Finally, the new Board members were chosen, with Horatio Gates, America's most recent hero, agreeing to serve as president of the Board.

It was at this point that the Board of War was offered its best opportunity to develop as an important administrative committee, with a unique role in military concerns. Clearly, Congress and high-ranking officers understood the need for a smoothly functioning War Office. Proof of this was Congress choosing to take America's currently most successful military commander out of the line, and place him in the War Office, followed by Gates' accepting the post.

Unfortunately, concurrent with these events, Washington and some of his lieutenants became suspicious that Gates was involved in a plot against the Commander-in-Chief. Supposedly scheming with Gates were General Thomas Conway, an officer who had previously served in the French army, and who had recently been appointed Inspector General, along with Thomas Mifflin, formerly Quartermaster General and one of the newly selected commissioners to sit on the reorganized Board of War. The plotters were thought to desire the overthrow of Washington who would be replaced by Gates, lauded by his supporters as the more competent commander. Since Gates and Mifflin were members of the Board of War, some suspected the War Office was determined to instigate the downfall of Washington. Under these unpropitious circumstances, no Board

of War commissioner could proceed to Washington's camp in order to assess the army's needs in the forthcoming campaign season; certainly a basic duty for the War Office.

Encouraged by Congress, Gates and the Board prepared a plan for a military expedition into Canada. The plan was ill-defined and its goals unclear. To make matters worse, the commander of the invading force, General Marquis de Lafayette, distrusted the Board's intentions. He somehow became convinced that the Board of War was using him in a scheme designed to discredit his patron, Washington. Lafayette refused to follow orders issued by the Board. Not unnaturally, the expedition proved to be a fiasco, never leaving Albany, New York, the jumping-off point. This was due largely to the inexperience, obstinacy, and unwarranted suspicions of Lafayette. Equally responsible for this unhappy episode, however, was the Board of War. Gates and company mismanaged the supply side of the campaign and fueled Lafayette's suspicions of the Board's objectives in planning the expedition. This failed adventure proved damaging to Gates' reputation and the over-all credibility of the reorganized Board of War.

A few months thereafter, Gates, was transferred from the Board to a command in the northern department. In the summer

of that same year, 1778, Peters and Pickering earned the wrath of Congress by supposedly disobeying a congressional directive stipulating the Board arrange for the arrest of Benjamin Flower, the commissary general of military stores. Pickering claimed that the Board desired to obey Congress's orders, but was uncertain as to how Flower was to be secured. Congress demanded that Pickering and Peters appear before the bar of Congress to answer charges relative to their purposely ignoring congressional commands. But before this could occur, Pickering wrote a note apologizing for any improper actions the Board might have inadvertently taken in connection with the Flower case. The delegates were sufficiently mollified and relations between the Board and Congress were amiable from that time forward.

A change in the structure of the Board was made in October, 1778, when Congress decreed that two congressional representatives should always be included in the Board's membership. In fact, the records of Board proceedings indicate that, with short-term exceptions, Peters and Pickering were the only commissioners to attend to the affairs of the War Office on anything like a permanent basis. Pickering, of course, left the War Office in 1780 to assume the position of Quartermaster

General. Peters, meanwhile, remained the mainstay on the Board of War from when he was appointed its first secretary in June, 1776, until the dissolution of the Board in November, 1781, in favor of the newly assigned Benjamin Lincoln as secretary at war.

The Board's assigned duties, which included keeping regular returns of all American forces in the field, supervising prisoner affairs, transmitting congressional orders and resolutions to the military forces, countersigning commissions and responsibility for military stores, remained constant throughout. On occasion, Congress burdened the Board with supplementary obligations, including superintendancy of the civil departments, and virtual total responsibility for the welfare of the clothing department. These additional duties multiplied as time passed. Congress used the War Office to palm off problems the larger body despaired of finding a remedy for, or were too trifling to merit serious congressional study, but still demanded some attention.

In approaching its business, the Board of War was beset with enormous difficulties. Overloaded by the weight of heavy responsibilities, the "Board" at times consisted of but one man, Richard Peters. On those rare occasions when

three or more commissioners were available for duty at the War Office, they frequently found themselves without a competent secretary who could handle the heavy flow of paperwork. The records clearly indicate that much of the commissioners' time was poorly spent dealing with secretarial chores.

Cooperation between the Board and the different state governments was, at best, uneven. This was a reflection, of course, of the larger problems suffered by Congress in attempting to synchronize its own methods and policies with those of the states. Short of personnel, the Board could rarely afford to send a commissioner directly to the scene where a problem had arisen. State and local authorities, therefore, could ignore or overturn instructions from the Continental government as represented by the Board of War. This was especially true in the supply area. The states were often quick to acquire locally manufactured goods, or those shipped to local ports for use by militia troops, even when such supplies were earmarked for Continental use. Problems were exacerbated by the slowness of eighteenth century communications. When the Board's deputies in the various states finally received written orders from the War Office, the

orders were often inappropriate due to changed conditions. Perhaps most importantly, the lack of money rendered vain the Board's attempts to pay agents and contractors, who were needed to obtain and move commodities wanted by the American forces in the field.

The story of the American Board of War was largely a tale of despair and flawed performance. This was, however, not the result of inefficiency on the part of the Board representatives. Indeed, most of the commissioners who sat on the Board were men of exceptional ability. But Congress, which periodically instituted structural reorganizations of the Board to promote greater efficiency, was never really able to come to terms with what it expected from the War Office. In the end, Congress never granted the Board the autonomy or resources that would have enabled it to serve as a truly useful mechanism in the military scheme of things.

What of the Board of War's contributions to the American effort? The truth is that the Board was able to overcome numerous difficulties and make a small but nevertheless important contribution to the cause. This was not produced entirely by way of devising strategy, finding means to increase the manufacture of armaments, or through especially

effective supervision of the supply departments. The Board, in the persons of Timothy Pickering and Richard Peters, did cooperate with Baron von Steuben in drawing up and distributing important army regulations, the so-called "Blue Book." But the Board was, considering its diminutive membership and the meager means at its disposal, best suited to help America achieve independence through more mundane channels.

These included reading and judging the merits of countless petitions that were directed to the War Office; evaluating foreigners requesting commissions in the American army; evaluating soldiers asking for leaves, transfers, pay and promotions; evaluating the pleas of enemy prisoners decrying their dismal living conditions, and considering the demands of skilled military artisans employed by the Board, demanding decent wages. Sometimes, the Board found itself unable to take action in response to these requests and demands. In many cases, however, the Board was prepared to act as a supreme court, render a verdict, and see its decision carried out.

When all is finally said, the Board of War performed those small, detailed assignments that left Congress free to concentrate on weightier matters. The Board thus fell short of

living up to some patriots' expectations at its inception and subsequent reorganizations. It was, nevertheless, able to make a limited but worthwhile contribution toward the final American victory.

Notes

- 1 JCC, vol. XIX, February 7, 1781, pp. 126-127.
- 2 John Sullivan to Washington, March 6, 1781, LMCC, Vol. VI, pp. 11-12.
- 3 James Mitchell Varnum to Washington, August 20, 1781, LMCC, vol. VI, p. 191.
- 4 Philip Schuyler to Washington, N.D., Sparks ed., Writings of Washington, vol. III, p. 280.
- 5 Varnum to Washington, October 2, 1781, LMCC, vol. VI, p. 231.
- 6 Peters to Pickering, September 17, 1823, Upham and Pickering, The Life of Pickering, p. 229.
- 7 Pickering to Congress, October 8, 1778, Pickering Papers, MHS.
- 8 JCC, vol. XII, pp. 1076-1077.
- 9 H. James Henderson, Party Politics in the Continental Congress, p. 265.
- 10 On Cornell see DAB vol. X, p. 444.
- 11 On Grayson see DAB vol. VII, pp. 525-526.
- 12 The President of Congress to Washington, August 7, 1781, LMCC, vol. VI, pp. 164-165.
- 13 Board of War Proceedings, June 19, 1781, LMCC, vol. VI, p. 123.
- 14 The Board of War to Washington, July 26, 1781, Board of War Proceedings, July 31, 1781, Ibid., pp. 159-160, p. 136, n. 2.
- 15 Peters to Congress, November 29, 1781, Item 78, "Letters Addressed to Congress", PCC.

- 16 Peters to Congress, December 21, 1781, Ibid.
- 17 DAB, vol. XIV, p. 205. John Sinclair, President of the English Board of Agriculture, to Peters, April 22, 1812, Peters Papers, HSP.
- 18 Peters to Dr. J. Mease, February 12, 1812, Peters Papers, HSP.
- 19 Peters to Benjamin Hobhouse, May 22, 1812, Peters Papers, HSP.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTEManuscript Collections

Major sources for this account are the Papers of the Continental Congress, stored in the National Archives and available on microfilm copies at the New York Public Library. The "Papers and Letters of the Board of War," items 147 and 148, are a collection of the minutes of Board meetings as well as the Board's correspondence with the Continental Congress, various state officials, military leaders, and countless others who in one form or another entered into dealings with the Board of War. At Board meetings, the commissioners acted on petitions forwarded to the War Office, whereupon the Board reached resolutions which were then sent on to Congress for final concurrence. Of course, Congress followed a similar pattern in passing business along to the Board of War. Thus by following the minutes of Board meetings in conjunction with the congressional journals, a portrayal of the Board's daily activities can be gleaned.

Apart from items 147 and 148, the Papers of the Continental Congress contain numerous other documents which provide insight into the Board's administrative links with the Quartermaster,

clothing, commissary, treasury and marine departments. As cited in the notes, the small collections of personal letters of such actors as Gates and Greene pertain to this study as well.

In recent years researchers have made a special attempt to decipher and evaluate the information in record groups 92, 93 and 94 in the National Archives. The miscellaneous documents available in record group 93 in particular, containing supply records concerning weapons and military stores, added light to the Board's part in the administrative tangle of supplying the American armies.

The manuscript collections of the Library of Congress that apply to this study include the George Washington, George Morgan, and Daniel Brodhead papers.

The collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society are valuable for the Timothy Pickering and Henry Knox papers. The use made of the Pickering papers is evident from the notes. Somewhat surprisingly, Knox's correspondence with the Board is limited mostly to the late 1780-1781 period. This is unusual considering the Board's involvement repairing and producing artillery.

Material available in the New York Historical Society was

used in preparing the chapter on the Board's involvement in the Conway Cabal. The Society holds the letters of Horatio Gates, a central character in our story, as well as the papers of Alexander McDougall, the Baron von Steuben, and Elias Boudinot, the Board's contact with the prisoners of war.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania provided the reports of the Pennsylvania Board of War as well as the personal papers of Richard Peters, Anthony Wayne, and another section of Boudinot papers. The Peters papers are disappointing as most are dated after the Revolution. Wayne and Peters, meanwhile, carried on a frequent correspondence that is contained in the Wayne collection. The bulk of the pertinent material reflect Wayne's distress over the failure of Congress and the administrative board to supply the armies with needed weapons, clothing, and food.

Secondary Sources: journals and dissertations, printed
primary sources.

Printed primary sources concerned with the American Revolution and connected by one or more facets with the Board of War are multitudinous. Of particular significance are two older works: The Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789,

edited by Worthington C. Ford, and Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, edited by Edmund C. Burnett. Burnett's work is currently being revised and supplemented by way of Letters of Delegates to Congress, being edited by Paul H. Smith. In the same vein, Robert Taylor is editing The Papers of John Adams, extending the efforts of Charles Francis Adams and L.H. Butterfield.

As noted in the introduction, historians are just starting to undertake the first tentative work in the administrative area of the war. A good start has been made on the British side through the work of Piers Macksey, R. Arthur Bowler, and David Syrett. For the American story, modern works are sparse. Official army histories like James A. Huston's The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1945, and Quartermaster Support of the Army: A History of the Corps, 1775-1939, and Supplying Washington's Army by Erna Risch are helpful as is Bowler's essay, "Logistics and Operations in the American Revolution", in Reconsiderations on the Revolutionary War, edited by Don Higginbotham. Higginbotham's The War for American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789 suggests new perspectives from which to view the struggle, including the areas of administration and

logistics. H. James Henderson's Party Politics in the Continental Congress, and Jack N. Rakove's The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress, are usually insightful when examining congressional administration of military affairs, although Henderson's assertion that the Board of War was tinged with a "southern" political bias cannot be upheld.

Finally, this work has benefited from articles in a number of journals, particularly The William and Mary Quarterly, The American Historical Review, and The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography.