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Red Sky at Morning

The battle of Lexington on the 19th of April changed the instruments of warfare from the pen to the sword.

—*John Adams*

The man who would be eulogized as “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen” considered himself a proper Englishman until the age of forty-three.¹ His metamorphosis began when Britain’s barrage of revenue policies hit Virginia hard, infuriating planters, businessmen, and land speculators, all hoping for a peace dividend following the French and Indian War.² But it was not until the winter of 1768–1769, when Parliament threatened to arrest the ringleaders of the growing resistance and bring them to England to be tried for treason, that George Washington countenanced active protest, although not yet revolution.

He supported an embargo of British goods, explaining his position in a letter to George Mason, a friend and Virginia politician who would be a major figure in debates, nation building, and governing:

At a time when our lordly Masters in Great Britain will be satisfied with nothing less than the deprivation of American freedom, it seems highly necessary that something shou’d be

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done to avert the stroke and maintain the liberty which we have derived from our Ancestors; but the manner of doing it to answer the purpose effectually is the point in question.

That no man shou'd scruple, or hesitate a moment to use a—ms in defence of so valuable a blessing, on which all the good and evil of life depends; is clearly my opinion; Yet A—ms I wou'd beg leave to add, should be the last resource; the de[r]nier resort. Addresses to the Throne, and remonstrances to parliament, we have already, it is said, proved the inefficacy of; how far then their attention to our rights & priviledges is to be awakened or alarmed by starving their Trade & manufactures, remains to be tried.³

Here was a loyal Briton, well past the midpoint of his life—a professional soldier for whom war was not a glorious abstraction—invoking Enlightenment ideals of freedom and liberty, suggesting he was now being pulled in two directions.

By the fall of 1774, after the British navy blockaded Boston Harbor, Washington agreed to attend the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Parliament had slapped a new battery of reprisals to punish Massachusetts and warn other colonies. London called the set of measures the Coercive Acts; the colonials renamed them the Intolerable Acts. Once again, Great Britain's heavy-handed approach had backfired. Congress convened to decide the next steps, with some delegations (notably

Pennsylvania and New York) pushing for compromise while others favored revolution.

Shortly after his arrival with the Virginia delegation, Washington met John Adams in a pub, where they struck up a conversation.⁴ It was the first encounter between the future first and second presidents. Their ensuing partnership would have its strains—Washington was taciturn, Adams voluble—but they shared basic convictions. One was a crucial ideal in their times and ours: Americans' right to choose any religion or none. Both embraced the Enlightenment principle that a person's spiritual belief was no one else's business.

Adams referred to himself as a “church going animal,” a member of the Congregational church, who spent many Sundays sampling Philadelphia's diverse houses of worship: Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Quaker, and German Moravian. He sometimes attended three services in a day, comparing and grading the services and preachers.⁵

Washington joined him on one of these Sabbath outings to observe a mass at St. Mary's Catholic Church. The two visitors—one a short, portly, loquacious Boston lawyer, the other tall, ramrod-straight, reserved Virginian—must have aroused a curiosity among the parishioners.⁶ Adams wrote to his wife, “The Musick consisting of an organ, and a Choir of singers, went all the Afternoon, excepting sermon Time, and the Assembly chanted—most sweetly and exquisitely. Here is every Thing which can lay hold of the Eye, Ear, and Imagination. Every Thing which can charm and bewitch the simple and ignorant. I wonder how Luther ever broke the spell.”⁷

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Adams and Washington, neither simple nor ignorant, were breaking yet another spell of Britannia in all her helmeted majesty. Unlike the protectors of the Church of England, the two Americans had no interest in suppressing “popery.” Now that they were standing up to the British Empire, they certainly had no fear of the Holy Roman Empire, then in its dotage.

As delegates waited for other out-of-towners to arrive for the Congress, they had a wide choice of books at their lodgings, compliments of Benjamin Franklin’s Library Company. Among those works was *The Spirit of the Law*, by Montesquieu, who was one of the most influential of *les Lumières* and who popularized the word *despotisme*. Like Locke, Montesquieu advocated for the separation of powers, along with strong procedural due process—the right to a fair trial, presumption of innocence, and proportionality in severity of punishment—abetted by freedom of thought, speech, and assembly. Montesquieu also promoted free trade, not just for economic efficiencies but as a curb on a bellicosity among nations: “Wherever there is commerce, there we meet with agreeable manners.”⁸

While Congress was underway, Thomas Jefferson was in Virginia working on a tract called “A Summary View of the Rights of British America.” (The title made clear that some colonials,

while increasingly impatient, were prepared to reconcile with the Crown if Parliament would concede to or at least compromise on a growing list of demands.) In closing, Jefferson addressed King George directly, respectfully but candidly (one of his favorite words):

That these are our grievances which we have thus laid before his majesty with that freedom of language and sentiment which becomes a free people, claiming their rights as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate. . . . Open your breast Sire, to liberal and expanded thought. Let not the name of George the third be a blot in the page of history. . . . The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest.⁹

Jefferson's offering of an olive branch elevated him in the eyes of those Virginians who wanted to avoid separation. Washington, who was among them, distributed copies of "Mr. Jefferson's Bill of Rights" to his friends, making it clear that war should be averted. No "thinking man in all North America"¹⁰ would disagree.

By the following spring Washington had accepted that the undesirable must bend to the inevitable. On April 16, 1775, the Royal Navy sloop *Falcon* arrived in Boston harbor carrying General Thomas Gage, with orders to lay the ground to reestablish British control and "arrest and imprison the principal

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actors and abettors in the Provincial Congress (whose proceedings appear in every light to be acts of treason and rebellion)."¹¹ Gage's first action was to secure two bridges over the Concord River. Loyalist spies had reported that there would be little opposition other than "parties of bushmen."¹²

Five days later, British and American soldiers first engaged on the Lexington Green, then at Concord. The "bushmen"—Minute Men (armed farmers)—attacked the redcoats on their way to Concord and as they tried orderly to march in retreat to the safety of Boston. As Rick Atkinson relates in *The British Are Coming*, "The butcher's bill was grim indeed. British casualties totaled 273, nearly 15 percent of the total force that marched into Middlesex on April 19; of those, 73 men were killed or would die of their wounds. American casualties numbered 95, over half of them—49—dead."¹³

Great Britain had found its Rubicon, and so had America.

In June 1775, when the Second Continental Congress convened, with all thirteen colonies represented, Adams navigated Washington's candidacy for command of the Continental Army. He had a record for bravery during the French and Indian War, political experience starting in the Virginia House of Burgesses, a reputation for probity, and a commanding bearing. While often laconic, he was judicious and authoritative when he spoke, and—a clincher—he was a veteran warrior and politician from the most populous, largest, and wealthiest of the colonies.

The vote was unanimous. The newly promoted general's immediate challenge was to knit a collage of militias into a single, coordinated force, just as he would, in due course, lead a united nation.¹⁴

On his way from Philadelphia to Massachusetts to take up his duties in a region that was already at war, Washington gave a speech to the New York Provincial Congress. "When we assume the soldier," he said, "we did not lay aside the citizen."¹⁵ Dispensing with the royal "we," he took up the republican one, foreshadowing "We the People" when the Constitution was ratified a dozen years later. For the next eight years, roughly a quarter of a million citizen-soldiers would be under his command, and at least twenty-five thousand would lay down their lives for their country, the greatest proportion of the population to die in any conflict other than the Civil War.¹⁶

The carnage would have been worse if Washington had not dealt with a silent and invisible peril. As a nineteen-year-old, he had visited Barbados. This was the only journey in his life that took him from the American mainland. He was there long enough to contract smallpox and returned to Virginia with minor but permanent scarring and a lifelong respect for medical science.

Nearly a quarter-century later, when Washington was mustering the Continental Army, he immediately dealt with an outbreak of the disease. Among his first decrees in the summer of 1775 was to quarantine anyone with symptoms. He knew that the virus could be more lethal than "the Sword of the Enemy."¹⁷ Later in the war, he ordered new recruits to be inoculated as part of their enlistment.

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Washington's actions were critical. Many British and German soldiers coming from Europe, where the disease was widespread, were now occupiers. Hence, they had already been exposed to the virus and were immune, while the Americans, both civilians and soldiers, would not have that advantage.¹⁸

In May 1775, while combat raged in the North, Thomas Jefferson, on his hill in the Blue Ridge Mountains, wrote two letters to intimates. One looked back with nostalgia and affection, the other was thinly threatening.

The first was to William Small, Jefferson's cherished teacher. Not long after Jefferson graduated from William and Mary, Small was refused the presidency of the college. He gave up teaching, returned to England, and became a doctor in Birmingham.

Accompanying the letter were three dozen bottles of Madeira, aged for eight years in Jefferson's Monticello cellar. Now that the American and British armies were spilling blood, he wanted to assure Small that nothing in the world would rupture their relationship, not even a break between Britain and the colonies.

His letter regretted "the unhappy news of an action of considerable magnitude between the king's troops and our brethren of Boston. . . . That such an action has happened is undoubted, tho' perhaps the circumstances may not yet have reached us with

truth. This accident has cut off our last hopes of reconciliation, and a phrenzy of revenge seems to have seized all ranks of people.”¹⁹

Small would never receive the gift or letter. He had contracted malaria in Virginia a decade earlier and succumbed at the age of forty, three months before his protégé reached out to him.²⁰

A committed and influential American child of the Enlightenment had lost his intellectual mentor, one who had led Jefferson to forsake allegiance to Britain and commit to a union of sovereign states.

The second letter was to a Loyalist cousin, John Randolph, who was on his way to London. Jefferson’s tone was more sorrowful than angry, but the message was stark:

I hope the returning wisdom of Great Britain will e’er long put an end to this unnatural contest. . . . My first wish is a restoration of our just rights; my second a return of the happy period when, consistently with duty, I may withdraw myself totally from the public stage and pass the rest of my days in domestic ease and tranquillity, banishing every desire of afterwards even hearing what passes in the world. . . . But this was before blood was spilt. I cannot affirm, but have reason to think, these terms [compromises] would not now be accepted.²¹

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He warned that if the spiral continued on its course, the “parent country” would find itself at war not just with its erst-while colonies but with major powers that would come to America’s aid: “If indeed Great Britain, disjoined from her colonies, be a match for the most potent nations of Europe with the colonies thrown into their scale, they may go on securely. But if they are not assured of this, it would be certainly unwise, by trying the event of another campaign, to risque our accepting a foreign aid which perhaps may not be obtainable but on a condition of everlasting avulsion from Great Britain.”

He concluded with an uncharacteristic, brutal blow: “I am one of those too who rather than submit to the right of legislating for us assumed by the British parliament, and which late experience has shewn they will so cruelly exercise, would lend my hand to sink the whole island in the ocean.”

While Washington was trying to stem wave after wave of British frigates crammed with redcoats and Hessian auxiliaries in New England, his fellow founders, mostly civilians, were looking ahead to sending their imperial armies back across the sea. To achieve that, they would need to proclaim their motives and resolve to their foes, their countrymen, and their world.