Chapter 8

Washington

The Noblest Roman of Them All

THE PARADOX OF WASHINGTON IS THAT THIS LEAST CLASSICALLY educated of the first four presidents was also the most Roman of them in character, and was seen as such by his contemporaries. While Washington's peers threw themselves into ancient Rome, he had Rome thrown at him. It was his fate to become "the most thoroughly classicized figure of his generation," according to one specialist in American classicism. Indeed, there eventually would be not one but two biographies of Washington published in America that were written in Latin.

Washington would not have been able to read those accounts, because he never learned Latin. Nor is there a record of him reading many of the ancient works in translation. Even so, the history and characters of ancient Rome would shape Washington's life, partly through his own aspirations and partly through how his contemporaries viewed him. Because ancient history provided much of the political vocabulary of his times, he would use it even if he wasn't schooled in it.

In his youth, he had been interested in Caesar and had read a bit about him. Later, as an adult, he sought to model his public persona upon Cato—upright, honest, patriotic, self-sacrificing, and a bit remote. Then, fighting for American independence, Washington had a new Roman role thrust upon him, that of the celebrated general Fabius, who defeated an invader from overseas mainly by avoiding battle and wearing out his foe. Finally, after the war, he

would play his greatest role, the commander who relinquished power and returned to his farm, an American Cincinnatus.

Of all those Roman roles, the one that had the greatest effect on American history was the one with which he was least comfortable—that is, becoming the American Fabius during the War for Independence. It was not an easy adjustment. In 1776, George Washington still had a lot to learn. As a general he would suffer a terrible series of military setbacks in the second half of that year—but to his credit, he reacted by reflecting and then adjusting. If the best measure of a general is the ability to grasp the nature of the war he or she faces and then to make changes, Washington was among the greatest the United States ever had. This is not perceived even today because he would score few victories during the entire war. But it was not a war that would be won by battles. It was a different sort of conflict, as he came to understand while he slowly, almost grudgingly, learned to fight as a modified Fabian.

As with almost all things classical, the Roman general Fabius was better known to Washington and his peers than he is now. He was celebrated by Rome for defeating the shocking invasion of Hannibal by refusing to give battle. Hannibal of Carthage began from his base in Spain. In 218 BC he marched through today's France and then crossed the Alps into northern Italy, where he scored two overwhelming victories against Roman armies. Panicking, the Romans finally turned to Fabius, declaring him dictator for the period of the emergency. Born in 280 BC, Fabius was known even as a youth for his firm, low-key manner, but also for supposedly being slow in thought.

Hannibal desperately needed more victories to encourage non-Roman cities on the Italian peninsula to join his side. Understanding this imperative, Fabius denied him a decisive battle, instead attacking Hannibal's supply lines and foraging parties. Taking advantage of local knowledge, he tended to keep his force in the hills, where Hannibal's cavalry would be less effective than on the plains. Shadowing Hannibal's soldiers but not attacking, Plutarch writes, Fabius "gave them no rest, but kept them in continual

alarm." Hannibal ranged over Italy, even fighting to the walls of Rome, but never managed to win decisively. Hannibal finally left Italy in 203 BC, sailing back to Carthage empty-handed after nearly fifteen years of campaigning. Fabius died shortly afterward. Hannibal himself eventually went into exile from Carthage and died in around 180 in what is now Turkey, most likely committing suicide by poison to avoid being taken prisoner by a vengeful Rome.

We do not know how much Washington knew about Fabius. The three major sources of information on the Roman general are histories of Rome written by Livy and Polybius, plus a biography of him in *Plutarch's Lives*. There is no record of Washington's reading Livy or Polybius or of his even owning a copy of either. It is possible they were among those he catalogued vaguely as "Latin books—14 volumes."

All of the first four presidents possessed copies of *Plutarch's Lives*, as did most educated people of the time. Adams, Jefferson, and Madison cited him frequently. John Adams once mourned to a friend that "we are so bigoted to Thucidies Livy, Plutarch and Tacitus, Hume Robertson and Gibbon that we read little else." There is no equivalent book today with which familiarity would be assumed by all members of a political elite. Even Washington, not much of a reader except in a handful of topics that intrigued him—notably agricultural innovation and, late in his life, the abolition of slavery—owned a copy of *Plutarch's Lives*. However, there is no evidence that he ever read the book, as he never quotes Plutarch in his surviving writings—his diary, speeches, orders, and letters.

What his contemporaries read in Plutarch about Quintus Fabius Maximus was that he "set Forth to oppose Hannibal, not with intention to fight him, but with the purpose of wearing out and wasting the vigour of his arms by lapse of time." Plutarch concludes that, as best as he can determine, "Fabius never won any set battle but that against the Ligurians" (that is, the tribe in the area of today's Italian Riviera that Fabius drove northward into the Alps). Hannibal was certainly the more effective tactician—one of the greatest of all time—but Fabius must be counted the more successful strategist.

Historians Fumble Fabianism

THE NATURE OF WASHINGTON'S STRATEGY HAS BEEN A MESSY SUBJECT for students of the Revolutionary War. This may have occurred because most of them come to the war as political or social historians, rather than from a military perspective. For example, one otherwise knowledgeable writer, assessing Washington's powerful political position after the war, derogates his military record thusly: "Washington had not achieved this kind of adulation as a result of battlefield brilliance, having lost more fights than he won, sometimes quite badly, most notably in his incompetent failure to hold New York, where he squandered thousands of troops needlessly." He adds that, "during the war, he simply acted as if every defeat really was a victory." Such conclusions miss the point that wars are more than just a string of battles, and that battles sometimes are not the decisive factor in conflict.

One persistent point of confusion in studies of the War for Independence dates back to the nineteenth century. This is the conflation of two distinctly different approaches: a war of posts and a Fabian strategy. In the former, one fights defensive battles from fortresses; in the latter, one avoids battle altogether and seeks to defeat an enemy by wearing him out. Washington's contemporaries understood the difference. "The idea, about this time, seems to have been taken up of making our resistance a war of posts," one American officer who was there in New York at the time wrote in a memoir. "This sort of war, however, . . . in a country without regular fortresses, appears to be scarcely practicable."

Yet some modern historians conflate these two distinct approaches into one. For example, Joseph Ellis writes that "Washington came to accept the fact that he must adapt a more defensive strategy and fight a 'War of Posts.' Also called a 'Fabian strategy' . . . it was a shift in thinking that did not come naturally to Washington." A second historian, Edward Lengel, states that "much has been made of Washington's supposedly 'Fabian' view of warfare. It has also been called a war of position, or posts." Lengel then argues

emphatically that "Washington's reputation as a Fabian . . . is unjustified." But such an argument disregards Washington's own words, as well as the writings of those around him and the record of how he acted in response to events and opportunities. It is odd because Washington's contemporaries clearly saw him as taking a Fabian approach—though not all of them endorsed it.

To be sure, leading an indirect campaign was not an instinctive step for Washington. He was naturally aggressive and inclined to be impatient. But like everyone else, generals are altered by the extravagant pressures of war, and Washington, relatively young at the age of forty-three when he took top command, could observe, reflect, and adjust more than most senior commanders. The George Washington of 1777 would not be the same man he had been in 1775. At the war's outset, he did not understand three of its key elements: the role of the militia in the fight, the kind of war he needed to pursue, and the allied intervention that would eventually reshape the war.

There were three stages in Washington's evolution. First, in 1775 and much of the following year, he was inclined to take the offensive. Second, after a string of stinging setbacks around New York City in the summer of 1776, he shifted to a war of posts. This interim step was, again, not a Fabian approach, but was rather a retreat into fortresses from which he would invite the enemy to bring the fight to him. American troops may not be able to meet British regulars on the open battlefield, Washington was calculating, but perhaps they could fight from behind barriers. The stunning American victory at Bunker Hill a year earlier was the model for this.

But when Washington tried it in the New York area later in 1776, this approach of entrenching failed miserably. So by early 1777 he was reluctantly figuring out a third approach—that is, what an indirect, Fabian strategy might look like. He would pursue this for years, only occasionally offering battle when politics forced him to or when the British left an opening.

Winning battles does not necessarily win wars. Indeed, losing a battle can sometimes be an advantage, because a tactical setback

can sometimes result in a strategic gain, if by engaging the enemy one slows his movement, distracts him from other targets, or just wears him down. For example, Benedict Arnold's confrontation of the British on Lake Champlain in October 1776 resulted in him being "defeated soundly, but the tactical defeat proved an immense strategic gain. The lengthy naval arms race prevented [Major General Sir Guy] Carleton [the British commander] from conquering upstate New York before the winter of 1776–77." That in turn gave the Americans time to rebuild their forces and go on to win the Battle of Saratoga in the same area a year later.

Astute chroniclers of military operations therefore focus not just on battles but on what actually wins wars. As Mark Kwasny describes it, the Revolutionary War began with a militia fight in Massachusetts. In the South, it mainly was a war of skirmishes. And even in the cockpit of the war, the middle colonies area surrounding New York City, more often than not it took the form of "partisan war"—that is, an irregular or guerrilla war waged in the shadows, often by part-time fighters operating in small, fluid units and then melting back into the civilian population. Part of Washington's education was recognizing that this was indeed the nature of the war in which he was engaged. The British persisted in perceiving the war as similar to the conventional eighteenth-century European dynastic fights they knew, writes R. Arthur Bowler. They were wrong, he finds: "It proved instead to be a popular war, a war in which the people were involved."

There is no question that Washington got off on the wrong foot at beginning of the war. Both his perceptions and instincts required modification. His aggressive nature did not serve him well, and neither did the urgings of Congress to attack. His military thinking early on was conventional, painfully so. He failed to see the big strategic picture; instead, his thinking was down in the weeds of tactics. Take, for example, his advice to a regimental commander he had known for decades:

> *In all your marches, at times, at least, even when there is no possible danger, move with front, rear, and flank guards, that they may*

be familiarized to the use; and be regular in your encampments, appointing necessary guards for the security of your camp. In short, whether you expect an enemy or not, this should be practised; otherwise your attempts will be confused and awkward, when necessary. Be plain and precise in your orders, and keep copies of them to refer to, that no mistakes may happen.

This was the sort of plodding tactical advice a major or lieutenant colonel might offer to an untried company commander, but it was not the stuff with which wars are won. Washington needed to elevate his gaze to a higher level of war. Effective tactics are helpful to have, but without a strategy, they can be useless, like a powerful car without a steering wheel.

When Washington wrote that letter, he had not yet developed a strategic understanding of the conflict. Lacking that, he in that note slipped back to tactical matters, as generals sometimes do when they are overwhelmed or new to the fight. Until he began to understand the war at the level of generalship, he would not know how to prosecute it and so would not grasp the effect the militias could have if used well. That understanding would come as he reflected on the nature of his war and began to adapt his operations to reflect those recognitions. He was better at this sort of observation and contemplation than were most of his contemporaries, and indeed than most generals are, both then and now. It was Washington's greatest military skill. It may not have been genius, but it was close.

But that was yet to come. In 1775, at the war's outset, he understood neither the war nor his militiamen, the part-time citizen-soldiers who would prove key to his eventual strategy. He was contemptuous of the men he saw encamped near the Harvard campus, especially their leaders. "Their Officers generally speaking are the most indifferent kind of People I ever saw," he wrote in August 1775. "I have already broke one Colo. and five Captain's for Cowardice, & for drawing more Pay & Provision's than they had Men in their Companies. there is two more Colos. now under arrest, & to be tried for the same Offences." He confided to

his cousin that he thought the rank and file better, but still unimpressive. "I daresay the Men would fight very well (if properly Officered) although they are an exceeding dirty & nasty people." Washington may have been undergoing a bit of culture shock with those flinty, egalitarian New Englanders.

His first inclination in Boston, from the summer of 1775 into the following winter, was to throw his forces into a complex two-pronged attack, with some moving up the Roxbury Neck and others attacking by boat. "I was not only ready, but willing and desirous of making the Assault," he informed John Hancock, the president of the Second Continental Congress. For a variety of reasons, this plan never was implemented, which was fortunate, because it would have been difficult to execute even by disciplined troops led by seasoned commanders. Washington did not have either of those on hand, so it was foolhardy to concoct such an approach. Luckily for him and for the future of the United States, this attack was made unnecessary by the British withdrawal the following spring to Nova Scotia and their subsequent redeployment to New York.

In addition, the ill-considered American invasion of Canada, also launched in 1775, was initiated more at the behest of Congress than of Washington, but he supported it. During this time, Washington also faced down John Thomas, an unruly Massachusetts general who, disappointed over a relatively trivial issue of military precedence, had decided to resign. You cannot step down, Washington warned, "without relinquishing in some Degree" your "publick Virtue & Honour." In this case, deploying those classical values worked. When the American commander of the invasion of Canada died, Washington dispatched the sensitive General Thomas to replace him. Thomas also expired (of smallpox), and the entire misbegotten Canadian foray wound up costing the new Continental Army some five thousand troops, a loss it could barely afford.

Washington knew things were not going well and that his approach to the war was lacking. Indeed, at one point early in 1776 he allowed himself some private musings about what would happen if he lost the war, which many people thought would be decided in a year or two at most. In a letter to his brother-in-law

Burwell Bassett, he hinted at his plan for that. "Thank you heartily for the attention you have kindly paid to my landed affairs on the Ohio, my interest in which I shall be more Careful of as in the worst event, they will serve for an Asylum."

In August he plunged into direct combat against the British in and around New York City. He commanded 23,000 soldiers, not all of them seasoned; the British in turn had 32,000, plus 10,000 sailors who in a pinch could be thrown into a fight. The British flotilla was huge, amounting to some 430 vessels, enabling British commanders to move troops at will among Staten Island, Long Island, Manhattan, and the mainland. John Adams was eager for the confrontation: "We live in daily Expectation of hearing of some great Event. May God almighty grant it may be prosperous for America."

Adams' wish was not granted. The Americans first were driven off Long Island and then northward across Manhattan. Washington committed a series of blunders and was lucky to escape the two battles with as many men as he did. He wrote of the fight in Manhattan that he was stunned to see his men "running away in the most disgraceful and shamefull manner, nor could my utmost efforts rally them or prevent their flight." This is a general at odds with his troops, blaming them too much in order to avoid the hard fact that he had not led them well.

Others found it painful to watch Washington flailing, especially those under his command. John Haslet, commander of the 1st Delaware, one of the best regiments in the Army, privately was losing faith in Washington, and confided to a friend in Congress that his troops were as well. Washington could not seem to make up his mind, a situation always demoralizing for subordinate commanders. "The Genl I revere, his Character for Disinterestedness Patience & fortitude will be had in Everlasting Remembrances; but the Vast Burthen appears much too much his own," Haslet wrote to Caesar Rodney. "We have alarm upon alarm—Orders now issued, & the next moment reversed. Wd to heaven Genl [Charles] Lee were here is the Language of Officers and men."

The day after Haslet wrote that dejected letter, another smart

officer, Nathanael Greene, took the bold step of writing a harsh but realistic message to Washington. "Part of the Army already has met with a defeat, the Country is struck with a pannick, any Cappital loss at this time may ruin the cause," the Rhode Islander warned his commander. So, he advised, rather than attack British positions, the Americans should "avoid any considerable misfortune. And to take post where the Enemy will be Obligd to fight us and not we them." Writing this letter was an act of courage on the part of Greene. He was speaking truth to power, telling his far more seasoned commander that he was fighting the war the wrong way. Greene, who would go on to become Washington's most effective general, conducting his own Fabian campaign in the South, also was offering an imaginative military judgment and pointing the way toward an alternative approach.

Washington was impressed. Soon afterward, he notified Congress that he was changing his strategy and now would aim to fight a defensive "war of posts," though was still figuring out just what that would be: "On our side the War should be defensive, It has been even called a War of posts, that we should on all occasions avoid a general Action or put anything to the risque unless compelled by a necessity into which we ought never to be drawn."

He remained unsure of the way forward. "In confidence I tell you that I never was in such an unhappy, divided state since I was born," Washington confessed to his cousin Lund Washington, who was overseeing Mount Vernon, and with whom he shared some of his darkest thoughts. He was in a moment of transition. People like to talk about how change is good, but they often forget how awkward, even exhausting and painful, it can be.

He would try this fortress approach in the following months, making the enemy come to him. Yet again he would fail, with the losses in November of Fort Washington, at the northern tip of Manhattan, and Fort Lee, directly west across the Hudson River. This time his unseasoned troops did not run away when they were in forts. Instead, they quickly surrendered. These were expensive setbacks, with more than 3,000 troops lost or captured at Fort Washington alone. "This is a most unfortunate affair and has

given me great Mortification as we have lost not only two thousand Men that were there, but a good deal of Artillery, & some of the best Arms we had," Washington wrote in a private letter that understated his losses. "I am wearied almost to death with the retrograde Motions of things."

Following this dual reverse, he retreated with his surviving troops across the Hudson and into New Jersey. Washington's perceptions were changing. So was his vocabulary. At this point, the word "assault" disappears for months from Washington's orders to his subordinates and his reports to Congress. By contrast, he used the word "misfortune" a lot that year, including three times in one three-paragraph report to John Hancock. In late 1776 he also leaned heavily on the word "mortification" to describe his feelings, using it some seven times in his official correspondence of that period.

Still unsure of how to fight and whether to stick with this new defensive "posts" approach, Washington appeared to some around him as painfully indecisive. This was natural—he was in an intermediate stage—but it further undercut confidence in him. This is how Douglas Southall Freeman, a sympathetic biographer of Washington, summarizes this period: "The defence of Long Island had been worse than futile; Kip's Bay had been a disgrace, and October 28 at White Plains a humiliation; the surrender of Fort Washington had been a major disaster; the retreat through Jersey had involved a threat to Philadelphia and, indeed, to the very life of the United States."

What Washington's critics did not see then, and sometimes not even now, was that being indecisive was decidedly preferable to being decisively wrong.

Joseph Reed's Unfaithful Letter

ONE OF THE MOST PAINFUL MOMENTS IN WASHINGTON'S MILITARY CAreer came at this anguished time. On November 30, 1776, he was

handed a note written by General Charles Lee, who was commanding a separate force and who had seemed wary of moving it to support Washington's. The letter was addressed to Washington's military secretary, Colonel Joseph Reed (Princeton, 1757), but Reed was absent, and Washington, eager to learn Lee's military plans and assuming it was an official dispatch, opened it.

As he read it, he must have been horrified. What he held in his hand was a personal note from General Lee to Reed, and a highly indiscreet one. Reed, it would develop, nine days earlier had dispatched a letter to Lee that detailed the British amusement over Washington's inept handling of Forts Lee and Washington. They "hold us very cheap in Consequence of the late Affair at Mount Washington where both the Plan of Defence & Execution were contemptible," he wrote. And Reed knew exactly whom to blame: "An indecisive Mind is one of the greatest Misfortunes that can befall an Army—how often have I lamented it this Campaign." You, General Lee, would not have left those troops to be captured at Fort Washington, Reed had added: "I have no Doubt had you been here the Garrison at Mount Washington would now have composed a Part of this Army"—rather than being held as prisoners of war.

Reed's note was the opposite of the candid letter Greene had written to Washington three months earlier. Here, one of Washington's closest aides seemed to have concluded that Washington had failed and was telling that to the man he hoped would replace Washington, effectively offering to transfer his loyalty. And he was quick to inform Lee that he was hardly alone in this view. "Nor am I singular in my Opinion—every Gentleman of the Family the Officers & soldiers generally have a Confidence in you." It was deeply unprofessional: As a matter of military discipline, Reed owed it to express such disturbing thoughts to Washington first, before taking them elsewhere.

Washington did not have Reed's letter in front of him, but he could guess at it well enough, from Lee's brief response. He was mortified, he later would recall. Lee's own note began with a hearty endorsement of Reed's negative view of Washington's recent performance as a commander. "I receiv'd your most obliging flatter-

ing letter—lament with you that fatal indecision of mind which in war is a much greater disqualification than stupidity or even want of personal courage— . . . but eternal defeat and miscarriage must attend the man of the best parts if curs'd with indecision."

"Fatal indecision of mind"—what a slam. Washington showed his most tightly wound sense of honor in forwarding Lee's letter to Reed. "The inclosed was put into my hands by an Express from the White Plains," he explained in a three-paragraph cover note. "Having no Idea of its being a Private Letter, much less Suspecting the tendency of the Correspondence, I opened it, as I had done all other Letters to you, from the Same place and Peekskill, upon the business of your office." In this Olympian response, Washington was saying, You have been found out. I thought you a better man than this. But rather than take you to task, I am explaining to you why I, as a man of honor, happened to open your mail. Washington would distance himself emotionally from Reed, yet continued to work with him—a sign of his understanding that, given the stakes in the war, he could not let personal feelings, no matter how well founded, interfere with the task at hand. This was Washington the stoic.

Several months later, Reed, perhaps thinking enough time had elapsed for Washington to cool down, wrote to ask for a private conversation with Washington about the matter. Washington ignored that request, but months after that, in June, took a moment in a letter to respond. "True it is, I felt myself hurt by a certain Letter. . . . I was hurt, not because I thought my judgment wrong'd by the expressions containd in it, but because the same Sentiments were not communicated immediately to my self." In other words, it wasn't my emotions that mattered as much as your lack of military virtue. You failed in your duty to me and to the Army. He said he had always been open with Reed and welcomed his views, which

> *entitled me, I thought, to your advice upon any point in which I appeard to be wanting—to meet with any thing then, that carried with it a complexion of witholding that advice from me, and*

censuring my Conduct to another was such an argument of disengenuity that I was not a little mortified at it.

He was absolutely right in these words. The good of the country came before his own personal feelings, but Reed had helped neither with his underhanded letter to Lee.

Washington's Low Point

LIFE GREW STEADILY GLOOMIER FOR WASHINGTON. ON THE SAME DAY that he learned of Reed's lack of faith in him, the British issued an amnesty offer to the people of New Jersey. Some 3,000 would accept, signing oaths of loyalty to the king. Among them was Richard Stockton (Princeton, 1748), who thus became the only signer of the Declaration of Independence to abjure it. (To make matters worse, the malleable Stockton, who was in poor health, later would reverse his reversal and sign an oath supporting the rebels.) "Many a disguised tory has lately shewn his head," noted Thomas Paine.

Northern New Jersey was the population center of the thirteen rebellious colonies, which was significant in a war that was fought not to take land but to win the allegiance of the people. The wavering spirit of the public was reflected in the lack of support that Washington was receiving from the local militias. He was becoming both dismayed and worried. On December 14, he noted in a letter that "the spirits of the People . . . are quite sunk by our late misfortunes."

Four days later he seemed almost in despair as he wrote to his brother Samuel. He had roughly 3,000 men fit for duty, according to a careful count made by Lieutenant James Monroe, the future president. "If every nerve is not straind to recruit the New Army with all possible Expedition I think the game is pretty near up," he wrote. "You can form no Idea of the perplexity of my Situation. No Man, I believe, ever had a greater choice of difficulties & less means to extricate himself from them."

Washington had tried to fight the British in two different ways, and both had failed. His army was melting way. His senior subordinates doubted him. The people were losing heart.

He needed a win, something to rally his men and deter fence-sitters from joining the Loyalists. Truth be told, he also needed it to shore up his own position. Reed's faithless letter to General Lee highlighted Washington's need for something to show he was the right general to lead the American army. It was at this time that the conspiratorial General Lee confided to another general, Horatio Gates, that "entre nous, a certain great man is most damnably deficient. . . . In short unless something which I do not expect turns up we are lost."

And so the war came to Princeton. On November 29, 1776, Witherspoon suspended operations at the college. He acted just in time. On December 7, British troops occupied the campus. The basement of Nassau Hall, the college's building, was made a jail for locals suspected of rebel leanings. Even worse, the female camp followers of the British army had learned in New York City that books could be traded for gin or fine clothes, so they descended upon the college's collection. Between them and some of the Hessians (German soldiers hired by the British), "they soon gutted the library, the museum, and the lecture-rooms; carried off or destroyed every volume upon the shelves; and broke up all the philosophical and mathematical instruments for the sake of the brass fittings." They then pillaged Witherspoon's house. A friend reported to Thomas Jefferson that "Old Weatherspoon has not escap'd their fury. They have burnt his library. It grieves him much that he has lost his controversial Tracts. He would lay aside the Cloth to take revenge of them."

A Much-Needed Victory

IN MID-DECEMBER, WASHINGTON STEPPED UP HIS USE OF THE NEW Jersey militias, dispatching a veteran officer, the hard-drinking,

hard-fighting Brigadier General "Scotch Willie" Maxwell, to stiffen them with a forward force of Continental soldiers. Washington's orders to Maxwell are instructive, revealing his growing understanding of the militias and how to use them effectively. He tasked them to gather intelligence and to nibble at the foe's extremities, tiring and distracting the British:

> *You are to be extreamely vigilant & watchful to guard against surprizes, & to use every means in your power to obtain a knowledge of the Enemys Numbers—Situation—and designs. If at any time you should discover that they are moving from Brunswick and that Quarter towards Trenton, or the Delaware in other parts, endeavour, if it can be attempted with a probability of success, to fall upon their Rear, & if nothing more can be done, annoy them in their March.*
>
> *Every piece of Intelligence wch you may think of Importance for me to know, communicate it without loss of time.*

This is a commander who is learning. Washington was not just consuming intelligence, but also generating it with how he used forces in the field.

Washington finally got the victory he so badly needed at the end of December 1776, when he crossed the Delaware River, surprised the isolated Hessian garrison at Trenton, and took some 948 prisoners. Congress was so relieved by his report of the victory that it printed his letter about it. In early January, after a second fight on the south side of Trenton, Washington attacked the British forces at Princeton. At that battle on the campus, Alexander Hamilton by many accounts directed his battery of cannon to fire at the college chapel, with one six-pound shot hitting a portrait hanging there of King George II. Hamilton might have happily blasted any part of the college, given that it had rejected his application to matriculate there as an advanced student.

The shock waves of these victories crossed the Atlantic to hit tobacco merchants in London. "The unhappy capture of the Hessian

detachment at Trent Town and the subsequent skirmishes in the Jersey . . . blasted the agreeable prospect of a speedy settlement," one tobacco agent reported to his home office. What's more, he added, Washington's successes had boosted recruitment of soldiers by the Americans and also bolstered the credit of American-issued paper money. All politics being local, he fretted that this series of events would drive up the price of American tobacco.

Washington vs. Adams on Strategy

IT IS A CLICHÉ, AND A BAD ONE, THAT GENERALS TRY TO "FIGHT THE last war"—that is, do what worked the last time out. That does not give them enough credit. Rather, they tend to fight the war they would like to fight or the one that they expected to fight. But neither of those responses is usually sufficient. The foremost task of a general is to understand the nature of the war he or she faces—which often turns out to be a third way, neither the one preferred nor the one expected. This sort of discernment is especially difficult at the foggy, uncertain, unpredictable opening phase of a conflict.

Once a commander feels he or she grasps the nature of the war, the next job is to assess the tools at hand to fight it:

- What resources are available, and how might they be employed to address the task at hand?
- What can I ask my troops to do, and what should I recognize as exceeding their capabilities?
- Which of my subordinate commanders are true wartime leaders, and which of them just looks good?

Answering these questions is the hard work at the core of generalship. It is a sign of the difficulty of top command that most people in it fail, especially because the answers change—what was effective last week may not be effective next week, because an adept

enemy also learns and changes. Sometimes victory goes simply to the commander who fails least.

Addressing the third of these questions, sorting out subordinate commanders, was a particularly onerous task for Washington. He would be horribly disappointed in different ways by three of the generals who early in the war appeared most promising: Horatio Gates and Charles Lee, who undercut him, and Benedict Arnold, who betrayed the entire cause.

Washington, to his everlasting credit, did not fail. By early in 1777, writes Kwasny, in one of the best studies of Washington's generalship, "he clearly had abandoned the strategy of a war of posts." Rather, he became a modified Fabian, pursuing "a more fluid war of maneuver, skirmish, and occasionally full-scale battle. As long as the British kept coming out of their camps and fighting, he could use the militia and detached regulars to inflict damage while protecting the main army."

Most important, he had learned how to use the soldiers he had. Yes, militiamen were not regulars. They tended to scatter and run in set-piece battles, especially when hit in the open by volleys from well-drilled British troops, sometimes followed by a terrifying bayonet charge. Yet condemning such troops was like criticizing a saw for not being a hammer. At first Washington seemed exasperated by the nature of the militias, writing in January 1777 that "if the Militia cannot be prevaild upon to restrain the Foraging parties & to annoy and Harrass the Enemy in their excursions & upon a March they will be of very little use to us, as I am sure they can never be brought fairly up to an attack in any serious matter." Adding to his annoyance at the time, he had been told that militia commanders had absconded with a good deal of the British supplies captured at Princeton.

But with time, he learned better how to use them for what they were, and to avoid misusing them. "It is of the greatest importance we should learn to estimate them rightly," Washington later instructed. "We may expect every thing from ours, that Militia is capable of; but we must not expect from any, services for which Regulars alone are fit."

In other words, these men could be militarily effective when used in a manner that played to their strengths. Let them fight near their own towns, amid familiar fields, forests, and hills, and they would prove more resilient. Encourage them to take on isolated British patrols. And when the situation was quiet, let them slip home to tend to their farms. It was not a recipe for conventional military glory, but it did point the way toward a strategy for possibly defeating the British.

Attacking British foraging parties and supply convoys had more military impact than one might think. While battles happen only occasionally, an army must eat every day. For much of the time, on any given day, the real war was these small skirmishes with isolated British units. "We have had a pretty amusement known by the name of foraging or fighting for our daily bread," a Scottish redcoat named James Murray reported in a letter. "As the rascals are skulking about the whole country, it is impossible to move with any degree of safety without a pretty large escort." One militia tactic was to leave cattle out in the open and then ambush the British as they tried to capture the herd.

There also were side benefits: The more the British foraging parties were harassed, the less they were able to scavenge food and supplies from the local Americans. Also, the British forces, rather than resting and recovering during the winter, were fatigued by the need for constant patrols, usually in large numbers. Most eighteenth-century armies tried to avoid fighting in winter, when it was difficult to keep animals fed. But the American militias were unusually effective in the cold season, for two reasons: Farmers serving in the militias were not as busy tending their crops, and supplies were harder for the British to come by, forcing enemy foraging parties to march further afield even as the days grew short. The American irregulars were so successful in New Jersey that eventually the British had most of their supplies shipped in from New York City. There was an additional political side benefit in that the militias could regulate the people, keeping an eye on Tories and fence-sitters in their midst. If a man did not show up for his local militia muster, he

knew he might face hard questions, formal or not, from friends and neighbors.

The longer such skirmishing lasted, the more the British would falter. They might lose two men one day, ten the next, and then see forty taken prisoner in an ambush on the third. When the British ejected the American army from New York City in August and September of 1776, they had fielded 31,600 soldiers. By February of 1777 they had just 14,000, with the rest simply gone—killed, badly wounded, seriously ill, captured, or deserted.

The British became painfully conscious of this new American approach. "Though it was once the fashion of this army to treat them in the most contemptible light, they are now become a formidable enemy," a British colonel in New Jersey reported to his father in England. The key for the Americans was finding ways to ensure that such small-scale fighting *did* continue.

By March of 1777, Washington's revised mode of fighting was becoming clearer to all. "General How has invareably pursued the Maxims of an invader this Campaign, by indeavoring to bring us to a General Action, and avoid skirmishing," Nathanael Greene, who would go on to become Washington's best general, tried to explain to John Adams. "General Washington as every defender ought has followed directly the contrary conduct, by indeavoring to Skirmish with the Enemy at all times, and avoid a general engagement."

This emerging shape of the war was even recognized thousands of miles away in England. Horace Walpole, the son of a former prime minister and himself a politician, wrote to a friend that "the provincials . . . seem to have been apprised that protraction of the war would be more advantageous to them than heroism. Washington, the dictator, has shown himself both a Fabius and a Camillus [an early Roman general]. His march through our lines is allowed to have been a prodigy of generalship."

Adams, who for unknown reasons seemed to believe he was an expert on military affairs, was having none of it. He responded to all this Fabianism with a blast:

It is high Time for Us to abandon this execrable defensive Plan. It will be our Ruin if We do not. Long Lines, and defensive Systems have very near, undone Us. . . . Our Army has ever been such an hugh enormous Mass of Deadness and Torpor, that I dont wonder their Inactivity has bred the Plague among them. We must have a fighting enterprizing Spirit conjured up in our Army. The Army that Attacks has an infinite Advantage, and ever has had from the Plains of Pharsalia to the Plains of Abraham, the Plains of Trenton and Princeton.

(Pharsalia, the field in Greece where Caesar defeated Pompey, is mentioned in the first speech given by Cato in Joseph Addison's play.) This letter was drafted but not sent, as even Adams realized that it was too insulting and, as he put it, "unpolite" in its tone.

But he was hardly finished. Later that spring, Adams wrote and sent to Greene an 800-word missive relating at great length the wiles of Sulla during the Roman Civil Wars, and warning that the Americans not be similarly hoodwinked into deserting by British commander Howe. "Howe is no Sylla, but he is manifestly aping two of Syllas Tricks, holding out Proposals of Truces and bribing Soldiers to desert," he admonished. But even as Adams griped, Washington's third approach was becoming more distinct and better understood. He was becoming a Fabian.

Hamilton Explains Washington's Strategy

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, AS ARTICULATE AS HE WAS BRASH, JOINED Washington's staff in March 1777. As part of his new post, he often was sent on missions to elucidate war plans to Washington's subordinate commanders and others. In one letter that year, he explained why rolling the dice on a major battle was an unwise gamble. In doing so he laid out the logic of waging indirect war:

I know the comments that some people will make on our Fabian conduct. It will be imputed either to cowardice or to weakness: But the more discerning, I trust, will not find it difficult to conceive that it proceeds from the truest policy, and is an argument neither of the one nor the other. The liberties of America are an infinite stake. We should not play a desperate game for it or put it upon the issue of a single cast of the die. The loss of one general engagement may effectually ruin us, and it would certainly be folly to hazard it, unless our resources for keeping up an army were at an end, and some decisive blow was absolutely necessary; or unless our strength was so great as to give certainty of success. Neither is the case. America can in all probability maintain its army for years, and our numbers though such as would give a reasonable hope of success are not such as should make us intirely sanguine.

Hamilton concluded with a marvelously succinct summary of American strategy: "Our business then is to avoid a General engagement and waste the enemy away by constantly goading their sides, in a desultory teazing way."

Hamilton wrote that at the age of just twenty, if he was indeed born in 1757, as he told people. (The evidence nowadays indicates that he probably was born in 1755, so he may have been writing at the slightly riper age of twenty-two.) His letter certainly reflects the thinking of Washington, Greene, and others, but nonetheless it is noteworthy because of the clarity and energy of its prose.

Hamilton had an odd kind of genius about waging war. In this, as in so many other ways, good and bad, he was the opposite of John Adams. Two years earlier, when the war was barely underway, he had foreseen how the Americans should fight. Hamilton wrote in an essay that

The circumstances of our country put it in our power, to evade a pitched battle. It will be better policy, to harass and exhaust the soldiery, by frequent skirmishes and incursions, than to take the open field with them, by which means, they would have the full benefit of their superior regularity and skill.

This was a fair prediction of the strategy Washington eventually would pursue. The surprise is that such a young man should have had such depth of understanding. Some experts think that despite his relative lack of education, Hamilton had been influenced by the skeptical new thinking coming out of Edinburgh and Glasgow. "Perhaps the most pervasive feature of Hamilton's *Farmer Refuted* . . . is the way in which those habits of mind most characteristic of the Enlightenment—especially the Scottish—are reflected throughout most of its pages," write Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. "There is a conviction, at once hard and utopian, that both one's learning and one's experience may be used instrumentally, to lay hold of the future and shape it."

By mid-1777 Washington had settled into this new "desultory teazing" way of war, in the process developing—and expressing—a new appreciation of his militiamen. In June 1777 he wrote: "I must observe, and with peculiar satisfaction I do it, that on the first notice of the Enemy's movements, the Militia assembled in the most spirited manner, firmly determined to give them every Annoyance in their power and to afford us every possible aid."

Washington now would attack at times of opportunity, but not seek to decide the war through big battles. When some of his generals counseled him to consolidate all American troops—regulars and militias—in one spot, he reacted with horror. "If this is really the intention I should think it a very ineligible Plan," he admonished one of his generals. Rather, he said, the militias being raised in New Hampshire and Massachusetts might best aid his main force by harassing British lines of communication and supply, and also cutting off possible lines of retreat: "A tolerable Body of Men once collected there would make Mr Bourgoigne anxious for his Rear—oblige him to advance circumspectly and to leave such strong Posts behind, as must make his main body very weak, and extremely capable of being repulsed by the force we shall have in front." This more subtle use of militias had the added advantage of helping them to compensate for their lack of military skills and discipline.

Professor Ellis summarizes Washington's next step well:

The strategic key was the Continental Army. If it remained intact as an effective fighting force, the American Revolution remained alive. The British army could occupy Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and it did. The British navy could blockade and bombard American seaports with impunity, and it did. The Continental Congress could be driven from one location to another like a covey of pigeons, and it was. But as long as Washington held the Continental Army together, the British could not win the war, which in turn meant that they would eventually lose it.

Even now, not all historians understand this. One recent work offered a summary that ignores the approach laid out explicitly by Hamilton, stating that "most of the campaigning season of 1777 had been consumed in fruitless maneuverings, marches and countermarches." Had Hamilton been able to read that, he might well have responded, *Precisely so! And the point is that at the end of that year, we still had an army.*

In fact, Washington was implementing a smart variation on the Fabian strategy. With hindsight it is clear that there existed a strong strategic parallel between the circumstances of the ancient Roman situation and the American Revolution. In both cases, the defender was facing an invader from overseas who had to cross land and sea barriers in order to bring in additional supplies and troops. Those hurdles made attacking the invader's supply lines and exhausting his troops an especially productive approach. Supplies were harder for him to find, and replacements had to come from afar. That point was made repeatedly in the small bookshelf of the military instruction manuals that became part of Washington's traveling headquarters.

But John Adams did not understand this. The more seriously Adams was in error, the more emphatically he raged against the Fabian approach, telling his wife that "I am sick of Fabian Systems in all Quarters. The Officers drink a long and moderate War. My Toast is a short and violent War. They would call me mad and rash &c. but I know better." Alas, he did not.

Adams was no more reliable in his assessment of the British military leadership. "Howe is a wild General," he wrote, a view not shared by many, then or now. Washington more accurately assessed Howe as "a Man of no enterprize"—that is, someone who would not show initiative.

Adams also was 180 degrees off in judging the benefits of foreign military assistance. He advocated that the United States have "no military Connection" with France and "receive no Troops from her." Had his advice been followed, the decisive Battle of Yorktown—at which French ships proved essential and French troops helpful—might have turned out differently or never happened at all.

The Political Risk of the Fabian Strategy

AS ADAMS' ATTACKS SHOW, A CONSTANT RISK OF THE FABIAN STRATEGY was how it was perceived. Others could depict Washington as slow or indecisive. Indeed, Thomas Paine, who should have known better, having traveled as an embedded writer with the Americans during their 1776 retreat across New Jersey, would never forgive Washington for pursuing this strategy of "doing nothing." "You slept away your time in the field," he charged years later in an open letter denouncing Washington. "Nothing was done in the campaigns of 1778, 1779, 1780, in the part where General Washington commanded, except the taking of Stony Point by Anthony Wayne. . . . The Fabian system of war, followed by him, began now to unfold itself with all its evils; but what is Fabian war without Fabian means to support it?" It isn't clear what Paine meant by that question, except that he seemed to doubt Washington that had the skills to execute such a strategy.

Washington certainly was aware of such sentiments, and may have shared some of them himself. A naturally aggressive commander, he would always be a reluctant Fabian. "He was a fighter,"

states the British scholar Marcus Cunliffe. "He erred not through timidity, which would have proved fatal in the long run, but through pugnacity."

As a modified Fabian, he knew there were also times when he would be compelled to give battle. Sometimes the reason was to build up morale or to rally the militias. Sometimes it was political. For example, in mid-September 1777, Washington had to show the American people that he would not give up their capital of Philadelphia without a fight, so he engaged in a pitched battle at Brandywine Creek, a few miles west of the city. "It was incumbent upon him to risk a battle, to preserve that capital," General Howe later observed. It was the single largest engagement of the war, and one of the worst for the Americans, who seemed not to have scouted the ground on which they fought, an inexplicable military blunder. Washington was badly defeated. Among the dead lay James Witherspoon, the son of the president of Princeton who at his graduation seven years earlier had given an eloquent address on the need to resist bad kings. Later that month the British marched into Philadelphia.

Three weeks after Brandywine, Washington attacked the British again, this time on the northern outskirts of Philadelphia, at Germantown. Again, he was tactically unsuccessful. Benjamin Rush sourly wrote to John Adams that Washington has been "outgenerald and twice beated."

Yet again: Battles won are not wars won. In the Germantown fight Washington suffered a tactical setback but maintained his strategic advantage by steadily wearing down his foe. General Howe, more conscious of the trend of the war than either Rush or Adams, said later in his testimony to the House of Commons that "the most essential duty I had was, not wantonly to commit his Majesty's troops, where the object was inadequate. I knew well that any considerable loss sustained by the army could not speedily, or easily be repaired."

And sometimes battles can be very important indeed. In the fall of 1777, Generals Gates and Arnold (the latter had not yet defected) scored a major victory far to the north, in Saratoga, New

York. This proved to be the most significant fight of the war, because it led a few months later to the formal American alliance with France. Thereafter, the British would not just be facing American rebels, but also a major European power, not just in America, but also at sea and around the world. British commanders contemplating troop movements would always be looking over their shoulders for French warships. After Saratoga, writes Piers Mackesy, in the most insightful analysis of British strategy in the war, "the centre of gravity was no longer in Philadelphia, but in Paris."

Some of those around Washington feared that after Brandywine and Germantown, and perhaps with the contrast of Saratoga in mind, Washington might abandon the Fabian approach and seek that elusive rousing victory. "A General Action is by all means to be avoided by us at present," cautioned Major General John Sullivan of New Hampshire, who had commanded the American right wing, hard against the bank of the Delaware, during the first battle of Trenton, and then, a week later, the same wing at the battle of Princeton. He also counseled Washington to ignore the recommendations of the naysayers: "Had Fabius attended to the Advice given him by the Roman youth[,] Hannibal would have found Little Difficulty in possessing himself of Italy."

The Marquis de Lafayette, the young Frenchman who advised Washington and rose to high position in the American Army, also grew concerned by the critics. He wrote to Washington later that year denouncing, in a palpably French accent, those "Stupid men who without knowing a Single word about war undertake to judge You, to make Ridiculous Comparisons; they are infatuated with [General Horatio] Gates without thinking of the different Circumstances, and Believe that attaking is the only thing Necessary to Conquer. . . . who want to push You in a moment of ill Humour to Some Rash enterprise Upon the lines or Against a much stronger army." A week later, Major General Arthur St. Clair (attended University of Edinburgh) offered similar counsel, telling him to stick to the path of "the less Shewy but regulated Conduct of Fabius."

Stringing the British along was, in fact, precisely the right strategy. It took advantage of the abilities of American forces and minimized their weaknesses. Moreover, the British could not figure out an effective way to counter the Fabian approach. Washington faced down four British commanders during the war. As Nathaniel Philbrick puts it, "As one after the other of his British opponents, from Thomas Gage to William Howe (with Clinton and Cornwallis soon to follow), returned to England in disgrace, he had found a way, despite having lost more battles than he had won, to keep his army, and by extension his country, together." Time was on Washington's side, if he could hold the army together and not lose it in the field.

Americans generally endorsed the approach. In the popular view, Washington had done the right thing the right way. One American composed a poem to Washington thus commending him: "I Saw great Fabius Come in state/ I Saw the british Lions fate." To the French, Washington became "Le Fabius de l'amérique." John Adams may have never gotten on board, but his son John Quincy Adams (Harvard, 1787) eventually did, concluding decades later that the Fabian strategy had "succeeded in our Revolutionary War."

Long after the war, Washington, in a note to a subordinate, seemed to summarize the change his personality had undergone during those difficult years. "In all important matters," he advised, "deliberate maturely, but. . . . execute promptly & vigorously." Through the crucible of war he had proven himself to be the noblest Roman of them all.