

## A Speedy Death to General Washington!

By MICHAEL BESCHLOSS Published: May 20, 2007

...For twenty years, since the start of the Revolution, he had taken as his due the bands playing "The Hero Comes!" and the lightstruck Americans cheering "the man who unites all hearts." His anointment as President by the Electoral College in 1788 and 1792 had been unanimous. But now the national adoration for Washington was fading. Americans had learned that a secret treaty negotiated by his envoy John Jay made demands that many found humiliating. One member of Congress said the fury against "that damned treaty" was moving "like an electric velocity to every state in the Union."...

With the national surge of anger toward Washington, some Americans complained that he was living as luxuriously as George III, the monarch they had fought a revolution to escape. Using old forgeries, several columnists insisted that Washington had been secretly bribed during the war by British agents. Still others charged that the President stole military credit from soldiers who had bled and died: "With what justice do you monopolize the glories of the American Revolution?" Reeling from the blows, the sixty-three-year-old Washington wrote that the "infamous scribblers" were calling him "a common pickpocket" in "such exaggerated and indecent terms as could scarcely be applied to a Nero."...

President Washington had brought the national furor upon himself by trying to avert a new war with Great Britain that threatened to strangle his infant nation in its cradle... Since Britain was at war with France, British captains seized U.S. ships trading with the French West Indies. Renouncing the agreed-upon border between the U.S. and Canada, Britain's governor in Quebec predicted a new Anglo-American war "within a year." Former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who hated England and adored France, demanded retaliation against the British. But Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton warned the President not to plunge into a war that America could not win...

During his first term, Washington had told Hamilton and Jefferson that their gladiatorial clashes over foreign policy, economics and personalities were "tearing our vitals" and had to stop. Instead, Jefferson quit in 1793 and organized an opposition. The new political chasm between Federalists and Jefferson's Republicans killed Washington's old dream of eternal national unity with no need for political parties. Retaining the President's ear, Hamilton urged him to send an "envoy extraordinary" to London. A new Anglo-American treaty could secure U.S. trade on the Atlantic and the Great Lakes, giving their country time to build its economy and defenses and settle its frontier. Then if America one day had to fight off Britain, it would be far better prepared. Washington agreed, but he knew Hamilton must not be the envoy. That would inflame the Jeffersonians. Instead, at Hamilton's suggestion, he chose the aristocratic Chief Justice, John Jay of New York...

By the start of 1795, Washington heard rumors that Jay had managed to broker a treaty, but the expected dispatch case never arrived. As it turned out, after making a deal in November, Jay had sent the President two copies of the treaty documents by a British ship that was seized by the French on the Atlantic. British sailors had thrown the papers overboard to keep them from French hands. That spring, another ship brought duplicates to Norfolk, Virginia...

Upstairs at his mansion, Washington frowned at Jay's "Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation." He knew that if he approved it, Americans would excoriate him for truckling to their old oppressor across the sea. Most inflammatory was Article Twelve: America could trade with the West Indies, but not with large vessels. Nor could the U.S. export any products natural to those islands. Jay's deal would also cosset the lucrative British fur trade in the American Northwest. The U.S. would pledge never to seize British assets in America, surrendering an important potential weapon for America's defense. The treaty would also

allow the British to keep on halting U.S. exports to France - and to escape paying reparations for American slaves they had carried off during the Revolutionary War.

To keep public indignation from building against the treaty before he sent it to the Senate, Washington ordered Secretary of State Edmund Randolph to keep its contents "rigidly" secret "from every person on earth" - even the rest of his Cabinet.

Unlike his successors, Washington took literally the Constitution's demand that a President ask the Senate's "advice and consent" on treaties. He would not finally decide whether to approve Jay's Treaty until the Senate voted...

Girding himself for battle from his home seat of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson found Jay's Treaty an "execrable ... infamous act" by the "Anglomen of this country." He warned, "Acquiescence under insult is not the way to escape war."...The protest was spreading. When Hamilton defended Jay's Treaty in front of New York's City Hall, people threw rocks, leaving his face bloody. Someone joked that the crowd had "tried to knock out Hamilton's brains to reduce him to equality with themselves."...

Washington found it "extremely embarrassing" for the British to "see the people of this country divided," with such "violent opposition" to "their own government." He told John Adams he suspected the demonstrations had been inspired by some sinister "pre-concerted plan" to ignite an "explosion in all parts" of the fifteen states. As the man who had sent Jay to London, the President knew that he could be immolated by the firestorm. One Federalist gazette mourned that "to follow Washington is now to be a Tory, and to deserve tar and feathers." . . .

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