

A Speedy Death to General Washington!

By MICHAEL BESCHLOSS Published: May 20, 2007

In August 1795, at Mount Vernon, drenched by what he called a "violent Rain," George Washington nervously paced down a garden path, elegantly covered by crushed oyster shells.

He was desperate to return to the national capital of Philadelphia, but the biblical torrents had washed out roads and bridges. Adding to his frustration, his mail had been cut off.

Back inside, as the rains pelted his red shingle roof, spinning the dove-of-peace weathervane, the President bent over his candlelit desk, dipped a quill in black ink and tensely scratched out letter after letter. He was feeling "serious anxiety" in a time of "trouble and perplexities."

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."

As the public tempest had swelled, some wanted Washington impeached. Cartoons showed the President being marched to a guillotine. Even in the President's beloved Virginia, Revolutionary veterans raised glasses and cried, "A speedy Death to General Washington!"

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."

One still-friendly gazette moaned, "Washington has been classed with tyrants, and calumniated as the enemy of his country. Weep for the national character of America, for, in ingratitude to her Washington, it is sullied and debased throughout the globe!"

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.

In the spring of 1794, the British were arming Indians and spurring them to attack Americans trying to settle the new frontier lands that would one day include Ohio and Michigan. London was renegeing on its

pledge, made in the peace treaty ending the Revolutionary War, to vacate royal forts in the trans-Appalachian West - Oswego, Niagara, Detroit, Michilimackinac.

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.

The religious Martha Washington could not abide Hamilton's Byzantine intrigues or his infidelities to his wife, Elizabeth. When Martha adopted a tomcat, she named it "Hamilton."

But for the President, who knew his own shortcomings, Hamilton was an endless fount of provocative ideas, tactics and language.

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.

Privately Jay warned his wife that America might well have to battle England. But in May 1794, before sailing from lower Manhattan to London, he promised a cheering crowd he would do "everything" to "secure the blessings of peace." Soon after Jay's departure, the British reclaimed and fortified one of their old posts on American territory near Detroit.

Having jeopardized his prestige to talk with Britain, Washington was furious. He wrote Jay it was "the most open and daring act of British agents in America." Every "well informed" American knew that the British were instigating "all the difficulties that we encounter with the Indians ... the murders of helpless women and innocent children."

He noted that some wished him to turn the other cheek: "I answer NO! ... It will be impossible to keep this country in a state of amity with G. Britain long if the Posts are not surrendered."

Jay got the British to forgo such aggravations while they bargained. He assured Washington that Britain felt it was having a "family quarrel" with America, "and that it is Time it should be made up."

Jay reported that, excepting the King, the British respected no one more than George Washington. With such "perfect and universal Confidence" in Washington's "personal character," they had taken Jay's presence in London "as a strong Proof of your Desire to preserve Peace."

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. By stagecoach and horseback, a mud-caked, frostbitten messenger rushed them to Philadelphia, where Washington received them at the President's House at 190 High Street.

In 1790, when Washington and his government moved from New York City to the temporary capital of Philadelphia, there was no official mansion for the President.

Thus the great man paid three thousand dollars a year to rent the four-story red-brick house owned by Robert Morris, financier of the Revolution and Senator from Pennsylvania. Morris graciously moved next door to accommodate his old friend.

Washington found it "the best Single house in the City" but still "inadequate" for him. For instance, there were "good stables, but for twelve horses only."

During renovations, which Washington financed, a house painter allegedly attacked one of the President's housemaids, who shrieked. Face daubed with shaving cream, the half-dressed Washington was said to have kicked the painter down the stairs, crying, "I will have no woman insulted in my house!"

The President's servants included eight black slaves selected from the almost three hundred who lived at Mount Vernon. Knowing that Pennsylvania law freed any slave residing there for six months or more, Washington and Martha made sure that each of their slaves was quietly sent home to Virginia every five months or so.

"I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that I may deceive both them and the Public," the General wrote a trusted aide, insisting that the ruse "be known to none but yourself and Mrs. Washington."

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.

Vice President John Adams feared the pact would be political trouble. "A Battle Royal I expect at its Ratification, and snarling enough afterwards," he wrote his wife, Abigail. "I am very much afraid of this Treaty! ... Be very carefull, my dearest Friend, of what you say.... The Times are perilous."

On Monday morning, June 8, 1795, two dozen U.S. Senators in powdered wigs and ruffled shirts sat down in Philadelphia's Congress Hall for a special closed-door session on Jay's Treaty.

Washington had insisted that the men in the emerald green Senate chamber discuss the treaty in absolute secrecy.

The *Aurora*, published in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin Bache, the Francophile, anti-Washington grandson of the famous Founder, howled that "the secrecy of the Senate" was an insult to "THE SOVEREIGNTY of the people."

With no desire to pay for Bache's "daily outrages" against decency, the President had long ago canceled his *Aurora* subscription.

During two weeks of debate, Republican Aaron Burr of New York tried to pit Southern Senators against Jay's Treaty by demanding that Britain pay up for the "Negroes and other property" it had stolen - mainly from the American South.

But Southerners were far more aggrieved by Article Twelve's threat to their exports. Alexander Hamilton, by now a private citizen in New York City, advised Washington to scrap the article in order to save the treaty in the Senate.

The President did so, and by a bare two-thirds vote along party lines, the Senate sent Jay's Treaty to the President's House for Washington to sign.

To Washington's exasperation, the treaty's contents were no longer secret. A Virginia Republican Senator who reviled it passed a copy to the French minister in Philadelphia, who gave it to Ben Bache.

Flamboyantly, the *Aurora* ripped the veil off what it called Jay's "illegitimately begotten" treaty, that "imp of darkness" approved by a "secret lodge" of Senators.

Bache published the entire text in a pamphlet, which he sold up and down the Eastern Seaboard for twenty-five cents. His wife, Peggy, had no opinion about Jay's Treaty. She simply hoped the proceeds would buy her family a new house.

Fulminating that Jay's Treaty had "made its public entry into the Gazettes," Washington knew that Bache's attacks were just the start of a national onslaught.

At midnight of Independence Day 1795, a Philadelphia throng burned a copy of the treaty and an effigy of John Jay.

Crowds in other cities followed suit. Jay mordantly joked that soon he could walk through all of the fifteen United States by night, illuminated only by the glow of all of his effigies burning.

Bitter doggerel described the President's envoy crawling on his belly to King George:

May it please your Highness, I, John Jay Have traveled all this mighty way.... To show all others I surpass In love, by kissing of your...

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."

With steam rising from Philadelphia's gravel streets, Washington pondered whether to sign the treaty.

From New York, Hamilton wrote the President that his decision should be "simple and plain." Except for Article Twelve, Jay's pact was "in no way inconsistent with national honor" and would avert a ruinous war.

Then in early July, a new British insult - a "Provision Order" that U.S. grain ships sailing toward France be stopped, their cargo confiscated.

Edmund Randolph advised the President not to sign the treaty until Britain canceled the Provision Order. Washington asked him to so inform the British minister, George Hammond.

Hammond asked Randolph whether Britain could suspend the order long enough to relieve the President's political problems in signing the treaty, then reinstate it. Randolph gave him no answer.

When the Secretary of State reported the conversation, Washington sharply told him that he should have told Hammond that the President would "never" sign the treaty unless the Provision Order was permanently revoked.

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."

In Boston Harbor, mobs set a British ship aflame. In Philadelphia, they cried, "Kick this damned treaty to hell!"

Spearing a copy of Jay's pact with a sharp pole, the revelers marched it to Minister Hammond's house, burned it on his doorstep and broke his windows, with Hammond and his family cowering inside.

Thomas Jefferson had not seen the American "public pulse beat so full" on "any subject since the Declaration of Independence."

The new Treasury Secretary, Oliver Wolcott, feared the demonstrations might signal the British that Americans sought war. He wrote his mentor Hamilton, "The country rising into flame, their Minister's house insulted by a Mob - their flag dragged through the Streets ... & burnt.... Can they believe that we desire peace?"

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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