

Travis Fink

Sean Vitti

Newburgh Conspiracy

1782-1783

The Newburgh Conspiracy was a brief but tense occurrence in early American history. The main issue that brought about the conspiracy was the withholding of pay for the Continental Army. As stated, “[T]he Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, gave the Congress power to maintain a wartime army, but not the power to levy the taxes needed to pay it.”¹ At the same time Congress “was bankrupt.”² A third issue rested with The Articles of Confederation themselves, which put more power in the state government rather than the federal government. This led to some states disapproving of any plans to grant Congress the power to raise the money to pay the troops.³ These factors combined lead to a response of frustration and anger from the soldiers of the Continental Army. As a result, a conspiracy was hatched “to undertake a coup d’état and establish a military dictatorship for the young United States.”⁴

Upon the intervention of General Washington, a resolution was finally reached. His response, known as the Newburgh Address was made before a crowd of officers and soldiers on the morning of March 15th in the New Building in Newburgh. After making his speech and noticing the faces of “were still confused, uncertain, not quite appreciating or comprehending

¹ Marshall Jr., George L, “The Rise and Fall of the Newburgh Conspiracy: How General Washington and his Spectacles Saved the Republic,” *Early America*, accessed March 25, 2010, <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/fall97/wshngton.html>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

what he had tried to impart in his speech,” Washington improvised.⁵ Taking out a letter from a member of Congress and while putting on his glasses he uttered ““Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country.”⁶ That one line spoken by Washington managed to suppress any rebellious feelings within the Officer Corps. As stated by Marshall “the Newburgh incident did scare the Congress into adopting such actions as giving officers who were eligible for half-pay for life five years of full pay and enlisted men four months' pay upon separation.”⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.