

George Washington from Valley Forge on the urgent need for men and supplies, 1777

Introduction

George Washington's words in this letter represent a stirring plea for help at the darkest moment of the American Revolution. As few other documents do, this letter illustrates Valley Forge as an icon of American perseverance and resolve in the face of cruel fortune and overwhelming odds.

This circular letter, sent to all the states except Georgia, depicts Washington at his most impressive. In this version of the letter, which was sent to New Hampshire on December 29, 1777, Washington makes clear his urgency, gives a shocking but compassionate description of the plight of his troops, and issues his stern but considered warnings of the consequences of failure.

After ten days encamped at Valley Forge, Washington transmitted returns to the New Hampshire legislature. Noting "how deficient, – how exceedingly short they are of the complement of men, which . . . they ought to have," the commander in chief proceeded to detail the urgent need for additional troops and supplies. Washington importuned the New Hampshire legislature to take "early and vigorous measures" to raise more men. The outcome of the war, he stressed, depended on it.

The suffering of the soldiers at Valley Forge, and Washington's desperate attempts to rally Congress and the states to their aid, has become legend. This was the first large, prolonged winter encampment that the Continental Army endured—nine thousand men were quartered at Valley Forge for a six-month period. During that time, some two thousand American soldiers died from cold, hunger, and disease. The troops who survived emerged seasoned and disciplined, a far cry from the untrained men who had straggled into camp during the bitter December of 1777.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript in order to answer these questions.

1. Select a portion of Washington's letter to illustrate his mood in December 1777 as he and his army encamped at Valley Forge.
2. According to Washington, of the difficulties the Continental Army faced, which posed the most significant danger? Why?
3. George Washington's ability as a commander has frequently been questioned. How do his leadership qualities become evident in this communication?
4. What does Washington describe as the most crucial needs?
5. Provide an explanation as to why the Continental Army was so poorly provisioned.

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Image

Head Q^r Valley Forge Dec^r 29th 1777

Gent^l

Take the liberty of transmitting you the enclosed Return, which contains a state of the New Hampshire Regiments. By this you will discover how deficient—how exceedingly short they are of the complement of men, which of right according to the establishment they ought to have. This information I have thought it my duty to lay before you, that it may have that attention which it's importance demands; and in full hope, that the most early and vigorous measures will be adopted, not only to make the Regiments more respectable but compleat. The necessity and expediency of this procedure are too obvious to need arguments. Should we have a respectable force to commence an early Campaign with, before the Enemy are reinforced, I trust we shall have an opportunity of striking a favourable and a happy stroke; but if we should be obliged to defer it, I will not be easy to describe with any degree of precision, what disagreeable consequences may result from it. We may rest assured, that Britain will strain every nerve to send from Home and abroad,

George Washington to the New Hampshire legislature, December 29, 1777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03706 p. 1)

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as early as possible, All the Troops it shall be in
 his power to raise or procure. Her views and
 schemes for subjugating these States, and bringing
 them under her despotic rule will be unceasing
 and unremitting. Nor should we, in my opinion,
 turn our expectations to, or have the least depen-
 dence on the intervention of a Foreign War.
 Our wishes on this head have been disappointed
 hitherto and perhaps it may long be the case.
 However, be this as it may, our reliance should be
 wholly on our own strength and exertions. If in
 addition to these, there should be aid derived from
 a War between the Enemy and any of the European
 Powers, our situation will be so much the better.
 If not our Efforts & Sacrifices will have been the
 more necessary and indispensable. For my own
 part, I should be happy, if the idea of a Foreign
 rupture should be thrown entirely out of our
 system of politics, and that it may not have the least
 weight in our public measures. No bad effects
 could flow from it, but on the contrary many
 of a salutary nature. At the same time I do not
 mean, that such an Idea ought to be discouraged
 among the People at large, because the event is probable.

George Washington to the New Hampshire legislature, December 29, 1777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03706 p. 2)

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There is one thing more to which I would take the liberty of soliciting your most serious and constant attention; to wit, the cloathing of your Troops, and the procuring of every possible supply in your power from time to time for that end. If the several States cast themselves in future in this instance, and I trust they will, I hope that the Supplies they will be able to furnish in aid of those, which Congress may immediately impose them selves, will be equal and competent to every demand. If they do not, I fear - I am satisfied the Troops will never be in a situation to answer the Public expectation and perform the duties required of them. No pains - no efforts on the part of the States can be too great for this purpose. It is not easy to give you a just and accurate idea of the sufferings of the Army at large - of the loss of Men on this account. Were they to be minutely detailed, your feelings would be wounded, and the relation would probably be not received without a degree of doubt & discredit. We had in Camp, on the 23rd Inst by a Field Return then taken, not less than 2898 Men unfit for duty, by reason of their being barefoot and otherwise naked. Besides this number, sufficiently distrooping of itself,

George Washington to the New Hampshire legislature, December 29, 1777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03706 p. 3)

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There are many others detained in Hospitals and crowded in Farmers Houses for the same causes. In a most particular manner, I flatter myself the care and attention of the States will be directed to ^{the} supply of Shoes - Stockings and Blankets, as their expeditious from the common operations and accidents of war is far greater than of any other articles. In a word, the United and respective exertions of the States cannot be too great - too vigorous in this interesting work, and we shall never have a fair and just prospect for success, till our Troops - (Officers & Men) are better appointed and provided than they are or have been. We have taken Post here for the winter, as a place best calculated to cover the Country from the Ravages of the Enemy, and are now busily employed in erecting Huts for the Troops. This circumstance renders it the more material, that the Supplies should be greater and more immediate, than if the Men were in comfortable Quarters.

Before I conclude, I would also add, that it will be essential to inscute the Recruits or Levies, as fast as they are raised, that their earliest services may be had. Should this be postponed, the work

George Washington to the New Hampshire legislature, December 29, 1777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03706 p. 4)

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I have the Honor to be
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Yours
Your Most Obedt Servt
G. Washington

George Washington to the New Hampshire legislature, December 29, 1777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03706 p. 5)

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Transcript

Head Q^{rs}: Valley Forge Dec 29th: 1777

Gent^l:

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Before I conclude, I would also add, that it will be essential to inoculate the Recruits or Levies, as fast as they are raised, that their earliest services may be had. Should this be postponed, the work [5] the work will be to do most probably at an interesting and critical period, and when their aid may be very materially wanted.

I have the Honor to be
with great respect
Gentⁿ.
Your most Obed Servt

G^o: Washington