

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

**Did the Continental Army try and stage a coup after the
Revolutionary War?**

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“Our Friends find a change necessary in the Constitution, & as I endeavoured formerly to shew have created this political Wolf & presented it in Sheeps Cloathing & to recommend the harmless Creature they have Christined it with the venerable Name of Cincinnatus.” ---Massachusetts Congressman Elbridge Gerry, May 13, 1784.¹

Congressman Gerry was clearly distressed over the founding of the Society of the Cincinnati. His outrage seems to be an overreaction when viewed against the reality of the largely historical and charitable organization as it exists today. However, at the time, during a period historians refer to as the Critical Period because of the fragile and uncertain future of the United States, his concern over the Society was shared by notable Americans like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, and John Jay. Why were Gerry and these founders so concerned?

The Society is Formed

As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, leaders struggled with numerous issues concerning the founding of a new country. One of these issues was resolving the unfulfilled promises made to the military during the war. Troubles with pay and lack of supplies were big problems and soldiers distrusted Congress as a result. There was a lack of faith in the military from some on the civilian side because of confiscation during the war and a few minor mutinies which fueled fears of a military coup. This fear was heightened over events at Newburg, New York, in 1783.

After the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 and a few minor battles in the two years after that defeat, the bulk of the Continental Army moved to Newburg, New York, where it encamped, awaiting the official end of the war. As previously discussed, the military had grievances in regards to pay and pensions promised to them

¹ Gerry, Elbridge. Letter from Eldridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, May 13, 1784.

by Congress. There were several factions that emerged, disagreeing over how to handle their complaints. Some wanted to plead and argue with Congress while others wanted to threaten Congress. The latter group put out the “Newburg Address” in 1783 which was written by Major John Armstrong, an aide to General Horatio Gates. It was circulated in the camp and it argued that if Congress did not make good on its promises to the military then the military should not disband until its members received what they were owed. While General George Washington was able to calm this turmoil by meeting with the angry soldiers, the crisis at Newburg confirmed the worst suspicions of civilians who were concerned about the role of the military in the new country.

It was in this context of mutual distrust between some soldiers and civilians, and with uncertainty over what type of country would be formed in the Colonies, that the Society of the Cincinnati was founded on May 13, 1783. It was started, as stated in its founding document, the *Institution*, to preserve the “exalted rights and liberties of human nature” that the soldiers had fought for, to promote “union and national honor” between the states, to maintain friendships formed during the war, and to look after other officers and their families who needed assistance.² Membership was open to all officers of the “American army”³ who served for three years, died in service, or who served until the end of the war, as well as foreign officers who served. Membership was to be passed down through the oldest son and honorary memberships could be bestowed. The Society would form chapters in each state with a meeting of the entire society, the General Society, once every three years. For the military “in this environment of military-political ill will, fiscal impotence, and public dividedness, the Society of the Cincinnati

² Society of the Cincinnati, *Institution*, May 13, 1783.

³ *Ibid.*

represented an alternative to military disobedience.”⁴ The first meeting of the General Society was scheduled for May 1784. It was during the year before this meeting that opposition to the Society took hold.

The Controversy

The first real outcry over the Society of the Cincinnati came as the result of a pamphlet printed by a South Carolina Supreme Court Justice, Aedanus Burke. He had served in the military but not for long enough to become a member of the Society. His two main concerns about the Society were the hereditary nature of its membership and his fears of a military coup because “military commanders acquiring fame, and accustomed to receive the obedience of armies, are generally in their hearts aristocrats, and enemies to the popular equality of a republic.”⁵ He pointed out that the nobles of Europe were “formed out of the ... barbarian Generals and field officers of the Goth and Vandal army. And if we believe Robertson, many of those titles were, like the Cincinnati, self-created.”⁶ He predicted that the “Order is planted in a fiery, hot ambition and thirst for power, and its branches will end in tyranny.”⁷ His pamphlet was widely circulated and then reprinted in several other states.

Massachusetts Congressman Elbridge Gerry was quick to take up the anti-Cincinnati position. He wrote to another opponent, John Adams, “how ridiculous to exchange a british Administration, for one that would be equally tyrannical, perhaps much more so?”⁸ His letter to Samuel Adams about the Society became famous when it

⁴ Hunemorder, Markus. The Society of the Cincinnati: Conspiracy and Distrust in Early America. New York, Berghahn Books, 2006, 21.

⁵ Burke, Aedanus. “Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati.” South Carolina, A. Timothy, 1783, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ Gerry, Elbridge. Letter to John Adams, November, 1783.

was printed in the *Independent Chronicle*, a Boston paper. In his letter he “accused the Cincinnati of establishing a parallel power structure independent of, and soon to be dominant over the legitimate political system of state legislatures and Congress.”⁹

In early 1784, Benjamin Franklin joined in the discussion about the Cincinnati. He came down against it, writing to his daughter from France to ask rhetorically why “a number of private persons should think proper to distinguish themselves and their posterity, from their fellow citizens, and form an order of *hereditary knights*, in direct opposition to the solemnly declared sense of their country.”¹⁰ In his letter he stated his belief that his new country should establish honoraries in the same manner as the Chinese. He wrote that in China, if a man performed well in battle, his parents received the same honors that he did since they had contributed to his success. The man’s children received nothing since they did not contribute and, added Franklin, since it would make them falsely proud.¹¹

Criticism of the Society also came from France where the famous writer Mirabeau read Burke’s pamphlet and wrote his own criticism, “Considerations on the order of Cincinnatus.” He echoed Burke’s arguments and added alarming predictions over what the Society would produce. He said that the Society would “stifle” all the advantages of republican government. He wrote, “the alarm is now founded. Let the brave awake. The freedom of a country may be overturned by causes imperceptible to the multitudes.”¹² His criticisms were reprinted across Europe and brought international attention to the controversy.

⁹ Hunemorder, Markus. *The Society of the Cincinnati: Conspiracy and Distrust in Early America*. New York, Berghahn Books, 2006, 28.

¹⁰ Franklin, Benjamin. Letter to Sarah Bache, January 26, 1784.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Riqueti, Honore Gabriel. “Consideration on the order of Cincinnatus.” 1784.

The Supporters

While proponents of the Society of the Cincinnati were not quite as vociferous as their opponents, they still spoke out and defended the organization. One of the founders of the Society, General Henry Knox, responded with sarcastic humor to criticism of the Society by General Thomas Pickering, “With a sagacity peculiar to himself, he thinks through the mist he sees spirits and hobgoblins of hideous forms and no popularity.”¹³ He also wrote to George Washington trying to explain away criticism of the Society writing that “the Cincinnati appears (however groundlessly) to be an object of jealousy.”¹⁴ The point could be made that the loudest critics of the Society, such as Burke, Gerry, Mirabeau, Jefferson, both Adams, and Jay were those who were not eligible for membership.

Support for the Society also came from Thomas Paine, writer of *Common Sense*. He wrote “the intention of the name appears to me either lost or not understood. For it is material to the future of the freedom of the Country, that the example of the late Army retiring to private Life on the principles of Cincinnatus, should be commemorate, that in future ages it may be imitated.”¹⁵

Paine referred to the fact that the Society of the Cincinnati had been named after Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, an early Roman farmer who was twice called to serve as consul during times of aggression against Rome. In both instances Cincinnatus gave up power after the crisis passed and returned to his farm. Paine argued that the naming of the Society after Cincinnatus was a clear indication of its intentions.

The First President Deals with the Crisis

¹³ Knox, Henry. Letter to Benjamin Lincoln. May 21, 1783.

¹⁴ Knox, Henry. Letter to George Washington, February 21, 1784.

¹⁵ Paine, Thomas. Letter to George Washington, April 18, 1784.

Before the controversy developed, George Washington was elected and accepted the position of the Society's first President General. He began the process of setting up the first meeting and determining who could be a member. Once the furor developed, however, his concerns about the Society grew. He faced a dilemma. He did not want to alienate his fellow soldiers; however, he also thought that completely ignoring the critics would create an unnecessary rift in the new nation. In anticipation of the first meeting of the Society in May 1784, he considered solicited and unsolicited opinions he received about the organization. One of the opinions he solicited was that of Thomas Jefferson, to whom he wrote in April 1784.

Jefferson was firmly against the formation of the Society. He wrote in his April 1784 reply to Washington, "experience has shewn that the hereditary branches of modern governments are the patrons of privilege & prerogative, & not of the natural rights of the people whose oppressors they generally are: that besides these evils, which are remote, others may take place more immediately; that a distinction is kept up between the civil & military."¹⁶

Washington took the criticisms he heard from Jefferson and others to heart and decided to propose changes to the Society, while still supporting it as an organization. At the first meeting of the General Society on May 4, 1784, he suggested, with founder Henry Knox's approval, getting rid of hereditary membership, ridding the Society of any reference to politics, not allowing any honorary memberships, putting its charitable functions under the authority of the legislature, and not having any more meetings of the

¹⁶ Jefferson, Thomas. Letter to George Washington, April 16, 1784.

General Society.¹⁷ He argued that “no alteration short of what is here enumerated will, in my opinion, reconcile the Society to the Community.”¹⁸

Washington used his power of persuasion, as well as his threat to resign from the Society, to get his changes approved. After the changes were accepted by the General Society, Washington had them printed in the newspapers along with a letter he wrote saying that there was no longer any cause for alarm.

The Crisis Dissipates

In order for Washington’s changes to take effect, all the state societies had to approve them. While this did not happen, the proposal and the presumption that the changes would take place counteracted some of the furor over the Society. However, its critics were not completely pacified. Several states such as Rhode Island and North Carolina threatened to pass legislation prohibiting Society members from holding office, although none ever succeeded.¹⁹ There was public pressure put on Cincinnati members as well. For example, John Quincy Adams wrote to his father John Adams to happily report that Samuel Adams had succeeded in derailing the political ambitions of a General Lincoln based on his Society membership.²⁰

As the second meeting of the Society approached in 1787, Washington decided not to attend the meeting, due to the state societies’ failure to ratify his reforms. However, since the Constitutional Convention was set to start at the same time and in the same city as the meeting of the General Society, he was presented with yet another dilemma. He finally decided to attend the Constitutional Convention and, to avoid

¹⁷ Washington, George. “Suggestions for Changes in the Institution,” Philadelphia, May 4, 1784.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hume, Edgar Erskine. General Washington’s Correspondence concerning The Society of the Cincinnati. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941, 157.

²⁰ Ibid., xvi.

offending Society members, he attended their meeting as well. He remained President of the Society until his death in 1799. Some argue that he “retained his membership in the Society only to check it – and that he succeeded.”²¹

Time was the ultimate cure for the furor over the Society of the Cincinnati. Washington’s attempted changes helped calm the controversy as did a new Constitution that firmly established the new country as a democracy. But, ultimately, the failure of the Society to encourage a coup or to set themselves up as nobility reduced its critics’ evidence for ulterior motives. Eventually, the Society was accepted even by some of its harshest critics. For example, Benjamin Franklin became an honorary member on July 4, 1789. During his presidency, John Adams wrote to the Rhode Island Cincinnati, “I trust that, by the blessing of Heaven and the valor of our citizens, under their ancient and glorious leader you will be able to transmit your fairest inheritance to posterity.”²² It was a far cry from what he had said during the height of the controversy when he declared that the Society was “against our confederation, against the constitution of the several States, against the spirits of our governments and the genius of our people.”²³

There was some lasting fallout from the controversy over the Society of the Cincinnati. Some of the state societies and the French society became dormant during the years after the uproar. However, there was a revival of those societies after the Civil War and all were active again by 1925.

²¹ Wills, Garry. Cincinnatus: George Washington & the Enlightenment. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984, 145.

²² Hume, Edgar Erskine. General Washington’s Correspondence concerning The Society of the Cincinnati. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941, xviii.

²³ *Ibid.*, xvi.



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