

“THE MASONIC CONNECTIONS OF “WASHINGTON’S SECRET WAR”

Presented 01/26/06 by John Parsons, VII°

Author Thomas Fleming has recently published a book entitled, “Washington’s Secret War”; dealing with the political machinations of the Continental Congress, and focused on the time frame from late 1777 until early 1778 when Washington’s Army was at Valley Forge. I examined each of the individuals mentioned in the book, and generally grouped them into two camps: either pro-Washington or anti-Washington. I next looked at their Masonic affiliations, if any, in The MSA publication, “Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers”. The results were interesting.

The MSA book includes a “Founding Fathers” all signers of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, members of the Continental Congress, General officers in the Continental Army or militia, and various aides-tie-camp to George Washington. It then classifies them into one of three categories. Category 1: they are definitely Masons, and a concrete tie has been established. Category 2: they may or may not be Masons. There is some evidence, but not enough to confirm or deny membership. Category 3: they are probably not Masons.

Fleming outlines the political conflicts within the Continental Congress and identifies several “political” generals who tried to ingratiate themselves with Congress at the expense of Washington. The Continental Congress was comprised of at least two distinct factions. The first faction was what one could call the radical or ultra-Whig faction. They came primarily from New England, but had several adherents from other colonies, including Pennsylvania and Virginia. They were merchants, distrusted a professional or standing army, Puritan in background, and come across as a bunch of tight-fisted, humorless prudes. They included such notables as John and Samuel Adams of Massachusetts and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia.

The other faction consisted of planters from the Southern colonies, and some landowners from the Middle colonies. In their outlook, some of these individuals more resembled the English gentry, and were a bit more moderate in their approach to life. They enjoyed hunting, plays and entertainment, and raising a convivial glass. Henry Laurens of South Carolina, the President of the Continental Congress, perhaps epitomizes this faction.

Washington’s generals also formed a faction of which the Continental Congress had to take note. With the exception of two or three politically motivated officers who incidentally were somewhat incompetent, the general officers in the Continental Army formed a solid bloc in support of Washington. The politically inclined generals include Horatio Gates (the much ballyhooed “Hero of Saratoga”), Thomas Conway, Charles Lee, and Thomas Mifflin.

While Washington was encamped at Valley Forge, there was a move afoot by the New England faction in Congress to replace him with Gates. Gates was very good at self promotion, and used Thomas Muffin, the Quartermaster General whom Washington had fired for incompetence, and Thomas Conway, an Irish soldier of fortune, to advance his cause to Congress. Henry Laurens, the President of the Congress, smelled a plot, and asked his son Henry, who was a Major sewing on Washington’s staff, what he thought about the individuals involved. The younger Laurens informed his father that they were all a bunch of scoundrels, mistrusted by the Army, and that Washington was a fantastic leader.



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Over the next several months as the plot played out, Washington's allies effectively scuttled the efforts of the Congressional radicals, and got Conway, Lee, Muffin, and ultimately Gates, removed from any positions of power. Fleming's book does a superb job of demonstrating how they did it.

The results of who were Washington's allies and who were against him are interesting. First, all of the individuals who attempted to oust Washington were not Masons. Nearly all are listed under Category 3 in the MSA book, with only two (Gates and Richard Lee), being listed as possible members. Secondly, nearly all the individuals who played a significant role as allies of Washington were either confirmed (Category 1) Masons, or possible Masons (Category 2), with a couple of non-Masons thrown in for good measure. Laurens, Lafayette, Knox, Arnold, von Steuben and Thomas Fitzgerald, an aide to Washington, all are known to have been members of the Craft, while Greene, Stirling, and Morgan were probably Masons. Two of Washington's staff, the younger Laurens and Tench Tilghman, were probably not Masons.

While Fleming really doesn't go in to the motivations of most of the actors, it is apparent that the ties of Masonic brotherhood played a probable, but non-obvious role, in Washington maintaining his position as Commander-in-Chief

