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American Officer Development in the Massachusetts Campaign 1775-1776

Victor Daniel Brooks

The news of the British expedition against Lexington and Concord prompted Abigail Adams to add a new key date to Western history. She insisted that this was an era “as we never before experienced and could scarcely form an idea of.” Her reactions to the onset of hostilities were probably typical of many colonists as she felt that the upcoming struggle for Massachusetts would alter every aspect of provincial life as “if we look back we are amazed at what is past, if we look forward, we must shudder at the view. All our worldly comforts are now at stake—our nearest and dearest connections are hazarding their lives and properties.”¹

The series of events from the confrontation on Lexington common to the rebel fortification of Dorchester heights produced far more implications than the British evacuation of Boston harbor. Between April 1775 and March 1776 the first conflict between Englishmen and Americans progressed from a skirmish between garrison troops and Massachusetts militia to a full scale war between the extensive resources of the British Empire and an increasingly united alliance of rebellious colonies. However, the process of creating a united military effort was slow and subject to disaster. John Adams admitted that the merging of different regions into a continental alliance was difficult as “in such a period as this, when 13 colonies unacquainted in a great measure are working together into one mass, it would be a miracle if such heterogenous ingredients did not first produce violent fermentations.”²

One of the leading candidates for “violent fermentation” during the Massachusetts campaign was the issue of officer development in the army besieging Boston. While most patriot leaders agreed on the necessity of maintaining a rebel army to besiege the British in Boston, the procurement and training of officers for the army became a highly disputed process. The variation of social, political and military traditions between New England and her southern allies was focused on the officer development controversy as the dispute threatened to create a rift in the alliance even before the key issue of independence could be debated in Philadelphia. The examination of the various models of officer development, the controversy surrounding implementation of these models and the

eventual partial resolution of theories can provide an interesting microcosm of the dynamic accommodation of diverse colonies into a united military and political entity in the first year of the American Revolution.

The fact that the first campaign of the Revolution was conducted in Massachusetts provides an imperative reason to consider the military heritage of New England and its impact on theories of officer development. The patriots who faced the first shock of British military power viewed the confrontation as a sequel to an earlier struggle for individual liberty. The heroes and battles of the English Civil War continued to occupy an important position in New England thought in 1775. The popular election of officers, the religious fervor of the leaders and the eagerness for personal sacrifice in Cromwell's New Model Army was compared to the vanity, selfishness, and arrogance of royalist forces. Thus the Massachusetts militia officers were viewed as the spiritual descendants of Cromwell's noble Puritans while British officers reflected all of the negative features of their royalist predecessors. Thus early accounts of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill stressed the traditional New England virtues of the rebel officers. Religious fervor, good relationships with enlisted men, and personal courage were listed as the principal attributes of living and dead heroes of the conflict. On the other hand, all of the traditional vices of a professional officer corps seemed to emerge from the enemy ranks.

A satiric broadside titled "The Affrighted Officers" alleged that British officer development was based on little more than instruction in the protection of personal reputation. Thus the retreat from Concord was portrayed as an unpleasant threat to budding reputations as "it is a pretty state for British officers and British troops—the terror of the world become mere scarecrows to themselves. We came to America fresh with high expectations of conquest and curbing these sons of riot. Instead of this agreeable employment we are shamefully confined within the bounds of three miles, wrangling and starving among ourselves."³ Hugh Brackenridge's dramatic account of Bunker Hill emphasized that the British council of war on the eve of battle seemed more interested in securing reputations than saving soldiers. "How long brave generals shall . . . in vain arrangements and mock siege display their haughty insolence?" The only solution to this predicament was a frontal assault as "a veteran army pent up by a disordered herd untaught and unofficered is a poor scene for glory and profit. Who could have thought of it, that British soldiers in this later age, beat back by peasants and in flight disgraced."⁴

The orientation toward glory and profit might discourage the whole British war effort if little of either commodity could be gained in suppressing the rebellion. An "ensign of the footguards" noted that this might be a good war to watch from the safety of England. "What's the honour that dare force us hence, souls without spunk and pockets without pence. Was I commissioned a vile ship to board and draw the unrelenting sword? All my intentions were of bearing arms to recommend me to the ladies charms. Ye soldiers who have better nerves than mine may serve the King, but I must resign."⁵ Even the *British Annual Register* implied that the military traits of the Massachusetts rebels had been underestimated as "they now exulted that their actions had thoroughly dismissed

those aspersions which had been thrown upon them in England of a deficiency in spirit and resolution.”⁶ Thus a comparison of the advantages of officer development in the British and rebel forces probably encouraged many New England patriots to trust in the traditional, democratic selection of officers who now seemed more than a match for their more professional counterparts.

The first challenge to this informal model of officer development began to occur soon after the Massachusetts Provincial Congress decided to seek military assistance by appealing to the Continental Congress to adopt the army besieging Boston. The Continental Congress quickly appointed a staff of general officers from various regions with George Washington as commander-in-chief. While John Adams lauded the new general of the Army of the United Provinces as a “gentleman whose views are noble and disinterested,” Washington’s opinion of most New England officers contained neither of those elements.⁷ The Virginia planter now commanded “a force of Yankees” which he described as a “peculiar people whom I do not understand. They are the most aggressive levellers among Americans.”⁸ Washington’s first impressions of the militia officers were similar to an earlier evaluation by his new adversary, Thomas Gage. Gage had written Washington in 1756 to comment on the military potential of the various Colonial regions. His impression of the New England officers was that “they are the greatest boasters and worst officers on the continent. . . . I never saw any in my life as infamously bad.”⁹ The new commander seemed to agree as he confided to a fellow Virginian that the Massachusetts militia were “generally speaking the most indifferent people I ever saw. I dare say the men would fight very well if properly officered although they are a dirty and nasty people.”¹⁰ The accumulation of artillery, gunpowder, and weapons became secondary to the burden of “the creation of an effective officer corps which sits heaviest upon my mind.”¹¹

The new general’s concept of “an effective officer corps” was based on an aristocratic heritage in which planters were comfortable with sharp distinctions between those in command and those commanded as distinctions of rank came naturally to a commander who believed that “gentlemen of fortune and reputable families generally make the most useful officers.”¹² This philosophy tended to conflict with the New England tradition of fraternal relationships between officers and enlisted men. These officers were not recruited from a class trained to expect obedience nor did the soldiers come from one accustomed to give it. Thus Washington’s creation of a Continental Army was threatened by conflicting models of officer procurement and promotion, a task which one historian has described as “the most crucial enterprise of the period from the Boston Tea Party to the framing of the Federal Constitution.”¹³ The plan to create a new model officer corps through a program of pay increases for officers, the replacement of some existing officers, and the infusion of new officers from colonies outside New England created potential conditions for the first crisis of colonial unity on the battlefield.

Washington’s desire to encourage large pay raises for officers became public soon after his arrival in Cambridge. When he called a council of his new officers, he experienced difficulty in identifying officers as “they were nearly of the same kidney with the privates. They ate and bunked with their men in complete

equality; if one happened to be a barber in private life, he shaved his soldiers."¹⁴ The new commander now began to seek out those officers who could exert "order, regularity and discipline." A substantial pay increase for these leaders would help to separate them from the enlisted ranks as "the junior officers could support the character and appearance of their rank and thus keep that distance from the men which would enable them to exert command."¹⁵ The process of weeding incompetents from the officer ranks was equally swift. Washington admitted to a fellow Virginian that "I have made a pretty good slam among such kind of officers as the Massachusetts government abounds in. . . . in short I spare none, yet fear it will not all do as these people seem to be inattentive to everything but their interests."¹⁶

The prospect of introducing officers from the Middle and Southern colonies into New England regiments was enhanced in October when a Continental Congress investigating committee visited the camp. The three-man delegation, which included Benjamin Franklin and planters from Virginia and South Carolina, was instructed to determine "the most effective method of continuing support and regulation of a continental army."¹⁷ The subsequent proposal to reduce the number of regiments from forty to twenty-eight and a concurrent cancellation of a number of provincial commissions, provided Washington with a perfect time to utilize officers from outside of New England. Although opposition was expected, the commander insisted "they are now troops of the United Provinces of North America and it is hoped that all distinctions of colonies will be laid aside."¹⁸

The new commander-in-chief expected considerable popular opposition to a fairly radical reorganization of officer development policies. Washington informed Richard Henry Lee that "by showing so little countenance to irregularities and public abuses, I expect to render myself very obnoxious to a great part of the New England men with whom I am surrounded."¹⁹ The general's assumption was soon validated as Washington's military reorganization, the Congressional Committee's recommendations, and the embarrassing British interception of a confidential evaluation of Yankee officers seemed to indicate to at least some New Englanders that the war was merely a substitution of "King Stork for King Log." Perhaps the tyranny of Continental union would be worse than the actions of Parliament.

Chaplain William Emerson noted that the arrival of Washington and other "foreign" officers prompted "a great overturning in the camp as to order and regularity. New lords, new laws. Great distinction is made between officers and soldiers—everyone is made to know his place and keep it."²⁰ Captain Joseph Ward insisted that the new generals seemed oblivious to New England tradition in the selection and promotion of officers. "The best plan was not adopted, the old experienced path which has conducted our fathers with safety and glory for 150 years was neglected and a new one chosen."²¹ Captain Samuel Robinson believed that the social distinctions encouraged by Southern officers would threaten the morale of the army. "The modeling of a new army out of the old one with submission and raising the pay of the officers will be attended with many evil consequences," he wrote. "The men have had opportunity to know their officers in the past."²²



**“George Washington at Dorchester Heights,”
from William Orcutt’s *Good Old Dorchester, 1630-1893* (Boston 1893)**

The extensive cultural, religious, and political differences between New England and the Southern colonies seemed to make the infusion of Southern officers into a New England army a particularly humiliating experience. Abigail Adams noted the loose morality of Southern gentlemen and believed that these new officers would ignore the necessary moral improvement of the troops. She noted a "laxness in the continental connection toward the morals of our young soldiers. A little less swearing at our New England Puritanism would be full as honorary to our Southern brethren."²³ Colonel Samuel Osgood defined the "reform" in officer appointments as "a specimen of tyranny" concocted by Washington and a Southern-dominated Congress. He wrote that "no difference of sentiment, no regard or attachment a soldier has to this or that officer of his own colony is to be respected—but on the contrary despised."²⁴ Osgood felt that the ultimate humiliation was that New England's role in future battles seemed to be particularly degrading as "I heard one officer of the first rank say that the men were very good, but by God, one must send to the southward for officers. The northern men are determined not to be commanded by Southern gentlemen."²⁵ Washington and the Continental Congress did not seem to fully appreciate the regional pride in the courageous performance of the militia which had forced the finest soldiers in the world to retreat at Concord and approach annihilation at Bunker Hill. A number of New England patriots felt that the brunt of the war effort was being carried by that region's troops while other colonists gave encouragement from the sidelines. Thus some political and military leaders saw the Massachusetts campaign as the beginning of an unfortunate division of labor in which "we may do the drudgery but not share the honor."²⁶

The quite valid concerns of New Englanders were brought to the point of crisis by the Tory and British publication of confidential and less than complimentary evaluations of Northern political and military leaders by Southern patriots. Yet while the dispute over officer development policies continued throughout the war, the enemy hope of a regional schism never occurred. Two possible reasons for essential compromise may be considered. First, a number of influential New England patriots, though deeply committed to the interests of their region, apparently believed that the officer development models presented by Washington were superior to the chaotic condition of the early days of the campaign. Second, it seems equally apparent that a number of leaders also realized that the war would extend beyond the frontiers of Massachusetts and that the siege of Boston was merely the opening act in a long and perhaps disastrous drama. The acceptance of these premises implied the need for a more sophisticated officer development process than the informal models utilized in the opening battles.

The evaluation of the militia leadership conducted by James Warren and Elbridge Gerry contained implicit criticism of the early appointment of officers. Warren informed John Adams that the failure of 90 percent of the available rebel forces to see action at Bunker Hill implied an inherent weakness in the officer corps. Warren labeled Artemas Ward, the senior Massachusetts officer, as "a general destitute of all military ability and spirit to command" and suggested that if Washington had been present "the day would have terminated with as much glory to America as the 19th of April."²⁷ Gerry rated Ward as "an honest

man, but he lacks the genius of a general in every instance. Order, spirit, invention and discipline are deficient. If he is superseded by Washington I cannot but think we shall be in a good situation. The camp at Cambridge is more like an unorganized collection of people than a disciplined army."²⁸

The cherished tradition of popular selection or election of officers was challenged by a number of New England military men who believed that Washington's proposals were not based on Southern arrogance, merely good sense. Captain Nathan Price noted that "it can't be wondered at if among our officers there should be some who do not fill their parts with dignity and honor; commissions were distributed in a great hurry and confusion and he that was popular obtained the commission."²⁹ William Tudor, a Massachusetts lawyer and an aide to General Washington, emphasized the necessity of the new commander's reforms. Before Washington arrived, Tudor noted that "the importance of implicit discipline to the order of their officers is not yet sufficiently felt and acknowledged among the ranks. There is little emulation among the officers. The freedom which our countrymen have always been accustomed to gives them an impatience of control and renders it extremely difficult to establish that discipline so essential in an army which to be invincible, ought to be made only by the commander of it."³⁰ The arrival of Washington improved Tudor's outlook as the changes in officer appointments gave hope "that we shall soon be able to meet the British troops on any ground."³¹

The possibility that the rebel army would indeed have to meet the enemy "on any ground" was becoming increasingly apparent during the autumn and winter of 1775-1776. On December 22, 1775, King George III approved an edict "to prohibit all trade and intercourse with the North American colonies now in actual rebellion."³² The prohibiting act was a virtual declaration of war as the monarch concluded "I am certain any other conduct but compelling obedience would lie ruinous and culpable." The King's objective was quite explicit, "to force these deluded people to submission."³³ American patriots began to see similar ominous predictions of annihilation in the British press. For example, Parliament member Sir John Dalrymple published a public warning to the "deluded" rebels of North America. "No people situated as you are can hope for success in war. Your destruction is inevitable because no country and people were ever so peculiarly ill situated for a war with us as you are at this instant. A veteran army lately come from carrying conquest wherever it carried colours is on its way to America. A war with Britain must expose you to calamities from which even demons would turn their eyes."³⁴ Thus the possibility of a prolonged war encouraged consideration of officer development models based on more formal training and education. Henry Knox compared his exhaustive study of the science of war to the intellectual achievements of most Massachusetts militia officers and found "a parcel of ignorant, stupid men who might make tolerable soldiers but bad officers."³⁵ The lack of interest in the study of military tactics was so pronounced that "nothing less than the infatuation of the enemy and the almost immediate interposition of Providence has saved this army."³⁶ One possible solution to this crisis of officer development was the formal training of newly appointed officers "in which the whole theory of the art of war shall be taught."³⁷

Captain Roger Stevenson viewed future officer development as a combination of in-service training of junior officers and the school-based training of young men interested in future positions of responsibility. Stevenson published a training manual for "brother officers" which promised an improvement over British texts which "tend only to obscure what they mean to explain and in many circumstances to misinstruct."³⁸ Stevenson suggested that the long-term reform of officer development would be based on the initiation of military subjects in academies and colleges. "Gentlemen of learning should be initiated in military training so that if they should at any time have occasion to step forth in defense of their property and all they hold dear, they would be prepared. Students should not leave the academies like simple scholars but formal soldiers."³⁹

Perhaps the most influential spokesman for a policy of formal training and education for new and in-service officers was John Adams. Adams was a master of the art of compromise as he consistently proposed reform of the militia election system within the context of the particular attributes of New England's educational and military heritage. Thus while he emphasized that "Massachusetts has numbers of gentlemen who are better qualified with knowledge both of theory and practice than any who can be had upon the Continent," he urged his fellow New Englanders to accept Southern officers in their camps not as arrogant interlopers but as fellow students of the art of war.⁴⁰

Adams believed that Massachusetts was becoming a laboratory for the development of officers from all of the colonies, as "our camp will be an illustrious school of military science and will be resorted to and frequented by gentlemen in great numbers from the other colonies."⁴¹ Thus he requested James Warren to treat two young Maryland planters with "the utmost delicacy and politeness [as] such is their zeal in the cause of America, that they are determined to spend the summer in our camp in order to gain experience and perfect themselves in the art military. Their letters to their friends will have a great influence on the Southern colonies."⁴² Abigail Adams was advised to offer special hospitality to two Pennsylvania captains who "are visitors to the camp for the purpose of gaining military knowledge by experience, that their country may have the benefit of it whenever there may be occasion to call it forth."⁴³ The significance of Adams' suggestion of a spirit of intercolonial cooperation in the officer development process is that it addressed the concerns of Washington and Congress on the one hand and the injured pride of New Englanders on the other side. Adams agreed with Washington's desire to promote officers based on merit rather than popularity, but he believed that the educated men of his region were equal to other colonists in leadership skills. While Southern officers should be welcomed in camp as fellow students of military tactics, New Englanders would continue to constitute the best officers for the region's forces. "The character of gentlemen in the four New England colonies differ as much from those in the others as that of the common people differs. Gentlemen, men of science or any kind of education in the other colonies are much fewer in proportion than in New England. Southern gentlemen have large plantations of slaves and the common people among them are very ignorant and very poor. These gentlemen are thus habituated to higher notions of themselves and the distinctions between them and the common people are greater."⁴⁴

Adams agreed with Washington that “gentlemen” would tend to become the best officers especially in comparison to political favoritism and popular election of leaders. However, while Washington seemed to imply that the attributes of a good officer were developed from an aristocratic sense of superiority and command, Adams viewed education as the incubator of leadership skills. The Massachusetts patriot defined officer development theories in terms of an educational process as “a systematic discipline by which all men may be made heroes.” He believed that the best potential heroes were “the young gentlemen of genius and learning of which our country abounds.” In the short term these young men would be advised to “read the books upon martial science” in order to sharpen their talents. The long term proposal was more formal as Adams insisted “it is high time we should have an academy for education . . . in so profitable a branch of science.”⁴⁵

The British evacuation of Boston in March of 1776 marked the end of the initial campaign of the war. However, as Adams, Washington, and other leaders feared, a much larger British expeditionary force carried the conflict to other colonies. The dispute as to whether the best officers emerged from militia elections, political appointments, plantation backgrounds, or academies continued to occupy patriot leaders. In fact, the dispute continued in slightly altered forms through the Civil War and well into the twentieth century. However, while the Massachusetts campaign initiated this controversy, this period also produced a spirit of compromise and cooperation which prevented a disintegration of the colonial alliance and demonstrated that intercolonial union was not an impossible dream. John Adams’ belief that “all men may be heroes” implied a spirit of heroic leadership that continued long after the siege of Boston.

NOTES

1. L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, 1963), I:190.
2. Robert J. Taylor, ed., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, 1979), III:294.
3. *The Blockheads—or The Affrighted Officers* (Boston, 1776), p. 4.
4. Hugh Brackenridge, *The Battle of Bunker Hill* (Boston, 1776), p. 11.
5. An Ensign of the Footguards, *The Tears of the Footguards Upon Their Departure for America* (London, 1776), p. 11.
6. *British Annual Register* (London, 1776), p. 5.
7. Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I:215.
8. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, D.C., 1931-44), III:449.
9. Stanislaus Hamilton, ed., *Letters to Washington* (Boston, 1898-1902), I:54.
10. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, III:309.
11. Burke Davis, *George Washington and the American Revolution* (New York, 1975), p. 34.

12. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, III:508.
13. Page Smith, *A New Age Now Begins* (New York, 1976), p. 564.
14. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, III:450.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 508.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 451.
17. Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, D.C., 1904-1937), III:265.
18. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, III:454.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Jared Sparks, ed., *Writings of George Washington* (Boston, 1834-1837), III:491.
21. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, III:342.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 330.
23. Peter Force, ed., *American Archives* (Washington, D.C., 1837-1853), III:1159.
24. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, III:328.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
32. Sir John Fortescue, *The Correspondence of King George III* (London, 1928), III:306.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
34. Sir John Dalrymple, *Address of the People of Great Britain to the Inhabitants of America* (London, 1775), p. 4.
35. North Callahan, *Henry Knox* (New York, 1958), p. 72.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Roger Stevenson, *Military Instructions for Officers Detached in the Field* (Philadelphia, 1775), p. i.
39. *Ibid.*, p. ii.
40. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, III:182.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Butterfield, *Adams Family Correspondence*, I:309.
44. Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, III:316.
45. *Ibid.*, IV:25.