

# CONWAY CABAL

Brigadier General Thomas Conway, serving in the main Continental Army under General George Washington sat down one evening in Pennsylvania and penned a letter. Many a general officer on many a night during the American Revolution did the same thing. However, Conway's missive was addressed to Major General Horatio Gates, commanding general of the northern army and recent victor at Saratoga. Conway was frustrated at slights he perceived he had received from Washington, including the latter's blocking of his promotion to major general, even though over twenty fellow brigadier generals had seniority. That did not matter to the Irish-born, French army veteran, well-versed in military tactics and not shy about acknowledging his expertise to all those who cared—or did not care—to be within earshot. He even showed displeasure at the promotion of another European officer, Baron de Kalb, who Conway outranked on the continent.

One line from that letter, which, when heard by certain ears, had severe implications in the fall and winter of 1777-1778, much to the demise of Thomas Conway, said,

“Heaven has been determined to save your Country, or a weak General and bad Councillors would have ruined it...”

Under the flickering glow of a candle in eastern Pennsylvania, Conway unwittingly tied his name to what historians have labeled the “Conway Cabal.”

Most historians agree that the so-called "Conway Cabal" was not an organized effort to replace Washington with Gen. Horatio Gates, the victor of Saratoga or some other general.

But there were some in the Army who felt they were better qualified than the Virginian and several politicians were critical of his performance.

The so-called "cabal" was a lot of mutterings and niggling criticism that finally broke out in the open with the help of an arrogant Irish-born, French-reared soldier of fortune, Thomas Conway. He was recruited in France by Silas Deane and was granted the rank of brigadier general. Washington and many other American officers took an immediate dislike to the boastful Conway.

It seems that Conway along with English Army veterans Charles Lee and Gates all felt they had better military credentials than Washington and would make better commanders.

In fact, with the exception of brilliant but minor victories at Trenton and Princeton, Washington had lost all his battles with the British. On the other hand, Gates' victory at Saratoga had resulted in the surrender of 6,000 British troops. In truth, Gen. Benedict Arnold and Daniel Morgan had saved the day at Saratoga with little help from Gates.

Washington's civilian critics included Philadelphia physician and radical patriot Dr. Benjamin Rush; New Englanders John and Sam Adams, and Elbridge Gerry. The man most responsible for the supply problems at Valley Forge, Thomas Mifflin, was another loud critic.

The whole anti-Washington movement was brought to a head when an aide to Gates, Gen. James Wilkinson, revealed over drinks, details of a certain letter to Gates from Conway that was highly critical of Washington.

Washington was informed of the Conway letter by Gen. William Alexander "Lord" Sterling. Conway's letter allegedly stated, "Heaven has been determined to save your country; or a weak general and bad counselors would have ruined it."

Washington confronted Conway with the insult, which brought Gates into the fray, and eventually, the whole thing became a matter for Congress.

In the end, Washington emerged stronger than ever.

About a year later, Wilkinson and Gates engaged in a pistol duel, in which neither was injured. Washington admirer John Cadwalader, a Pennsylvania militia leader, fought another duel with the obnoxious Conway, hitting him in the mouth. Conway recovered and returned to France.

In truth, most of the officers and men suffering at Valley Forge worshipped Washington. Many historians say the leader's calm, caring presence during those horrible winter months was the most important factor in preventing the Army from disintegrating.