

I gave a brief speech at the American Legion commemoration on Memorial Day, which I want to try to summarize in this piece. It is also appropriate for Independence Day, a time of celebratory reflection.

In recent years, my reading has centered around the American Revolution, the creation of the U.S. Constitution, and the first American president, George Washington. I now have a more in-depth picture of these critical events in our nation's history than what I learned during my schooling.

At my talk on Memorial Day, I focused my remarks on General Washington and the Continental Army as they camped at Valley Forge in the winter of 1778. In elementary school, I recall the painting of a Washington kneeling in prayer in pure white snow just outside the encampment. Historians have varied opinions about the authenticity of the scene, but notwithstanding, Washington did believe the Revolution was driven by divine providence in a struggle for independence.

Conditions at Valley Forge were hard and miserable. The troops had built makeshift huts for barracks, and they were barraged all winter with episodes of rain, constant mud, freezing temperatures, and heavy snow. Supplies were practically nonexistent, and the soldiers survived on mill firecakes and rancid meat, both of which were infested with maggots.

Disease was rampant. Washington had ordered all troops vaccinated with Edward Jenner's new, experimental smallpox vaccine. While some soldiers died from the vaccination, Washington stated that if smallpox wasn't contained, the British would have no need to fight the Americans since there would be no army left. ([Interesting piece on the subject](#)).

About 2,000 soldiers died in the camp from disease, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements, but Washington was able to hold the desertion rate down. Washington stoically endured criticism that he was incompetent and was not the general to win the war. The British had refused to give him an officer's commission when he was a young man and now denigrated him as a Virginia planter, aka farmer.

Enter Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Von Steuben, a Prussian military officer with French connections, to Valley Forge. He asked to be a part of Washington's staff and offered his expertise as an inspector and training officer. At the time, the Continental Army consisted of a ragged group of militias composed primarily of farmers and laborers. Discipline and military order were practically nonexistent. To the baron's credit, he trained the soldiers to march and work as a real military unit. He created the first functional U.S. Army for Washington and America.

When Washington broke camp in early summer he intended to use this new army to fight the British Red Coats, arguably the best army in the world. Washington had courage and marched his troops to Monmouth to engage the British. In the early part of the engagement, Washington encountered a Continental brigade in rout step retreat. He was furious and reorganized the fleeing troops to move forward to engage the enemy. Washington was right there giving the orders to fight, not to retreat.

The battle of Monmouth was indecisive. Accounts estimate that casualties on both sides were about the same, around 500 to 700 a piece. But Washington, in many respects, turned the tide of the war by demonstrating that he had a trained army that would and could fight as a military unit.

But I think there were other patriots of this historical event that were not on the battlefield that day. They were the soldiers who endured and died in camp at Valley Forge. They did not desert and forsake their duty to seek freedom for this nation. If war had been lost, Washington and the signers of the Declaration of Independence could have been hung for treason against the crown. They put their lives and fortunes on the line for a new America.

On this Independence Day, we should take time during the fireworks, picnics, and celebrations to thank those who came before us and made untold sacrifices so we could all be free. Like the Founders, we all should do our duty as citizens and never desert our nation.