The Newburgh Conspiracy was a plan by Continental Army officers to challenge the authority of the Confederation Congress, arising from their frustration with Congress's long-standing inability to meet its financial obligations to the military. By early 1783, widespread unrest had created an atmosphere ripe for mutiny. In the end, however, George Washington defused the situation with an eloquent, personal plea to his officers to remain loyal to Congress, in the process perhaps saving the fate of the American Revolution.

Without the power to tax under the Articles of Confederation, Congress relied on irregular, voluntary payments from the states known as requisitions to raise revenue. The states' slipshod record of compliance forced Congress to struggle to support the army throughout the war. Officers and soldiers alike were not being paid regularly, and the army was often forced to requisition supplies from citizens. In 1780, Congress passed a resolution providing half-pay for retired soldiers. However, as of 1783 the states had yet to comply with Congress's request for the needed funds. The following year a group of nationalists led by the Superintendent of Finance of the United States, Robert Morris, his assistant Gouverneur Morris, and Washington's former aide-de-camp Alexander Hamilton, supported an amendment to the Articles of Confederation that would allow Congress to raise revenue through taxes to support the army and pay its foreign loans. However, the state legislatures rejected the impost amendment.

As the British threat receded following the war's last major engagement in 1781, the states became even more reluctant to fulfill Congress's requisitions for the army. By late 1782, many in the northern army encamped at Newburgh feared Congress would never would meet its obligations. Hoping to intimidate Congress into meeting those requirements, the nationalists in Philadelphia attempted to stoke the army's
unrest. Whether the events at Newburgh occurred at the nationalists' prompting or, as some historians suggest, was actually a coup d'état planned by a few extreme members of the army led by Washington's rival General Horatio Gates, remains uncertain.

On March 10, a meeting of officers was anonymously called for the following day in the camp at Newburgh. An inflammatory address written by Major John Armstrong, aide-de-camp to General Gates, also circulated. The address implored the men to abandon the moderate tone of Washington's entreaties to Congress in favor of a forceful ultimatum. If Congress did not comply, the army should threaten to either disband—leaving the country unprotected—or refuse to disband after a peace treaty ending the war was signed. The latter option was a thinly veiled threat of a military takeover.

The address electrified the camp. On March 11, Washington's general orders declared the impropriety of such a meeting. Hoping to give the soldiers time to cool their inflamed "passions," he called for a meeting four days later to discuss the matters and implied that he would not be present.

On March 15, the officers gathered and Gates stepped forward to chair the proceedings. However, he was interrupted when Washington entered the room unexpectedly and said he wished to address the meeting. He denounced the address's author, adding that his plan had "something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea." "My God!" he continued, "What can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures! Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather is he not an insidious foe?" Washington implored them to "give one more distinguished proof of unexampled patriotism and patient virtue" by placing their "full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress."

In closing, Washington told the officers that he wished to read them a recent supportive letter from Joseph Jones, a Congressman from Virginia. However, Washington's vision had recently begun to fail. After stumbling through the first paragraph, he reached in his pocket for a pair of spectacles. Pulling them out, he remarked off-handedly, "Gentleman, you must pardon me, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in service to my country." The disarming hint of vulnerability from their otherwise stoic leader so deeply affected the officers that some wept openly. After Washington left, they resolved to present him with "the unanimous thanks of the officers" and added that "the officers reciprocate his affectionate expressions, with the greatest sincerity of which the human heart is capable."

Ironically, Washington scored one of his greatest triumphs as a military general with words rather than bullets or bayonets. His victory also testifies to the strength of the bond between Washington and the officers and soldiers of his army, without which the Revolution might have ended quite differently.

Michael Hattem
Yale University

Notes:

Bibliography: