

# General Washington's Spectacles

## How a pair of eyeglasses helped save the country

### PROLOGUE

**Prologue narrator:** At last, the United States was a free country! In September 1781, the forces of Great Britain surrendered to the Continental Army, commanded by General George Washington. After six bloody years, the major fighting of the American Revolution was over.

But a year later, there was still

no peace treaty with Britain. British soldiers remained in New York City. Congress had asked General Washington to stand guard nearby with his army. Unable to go home, the men were restless and unhappy. Besides, Congress had not paid many of them for up to six years. Among a group of officers, discontent threatened to turn into **mutiny**.

As winter set in, Washington faced a growing crisis. Could the commander keep his men from destroying the new democracy?

of advisers at his headquarters.

**General George Washington:**

What is the mood in camp?

**General Henry Knox:** Not good, General. The officers are grumbling louder than the soldiers.

**General Alexander McDougall:** Another cold winter will not help. Our uniforms are in tatters.

**Washington:** I have pleaded with Congress to pay the men. How can we convince them?

**Narrator C:** Washington approves a strong letter demanding that Congress pay the Army.

### Characters

Prologue narrator

\*Officers 1-5

General George Washington,  
Commander of the Continental Army

General Henry Knox

General Alexander McDougall

Robert Morris,  
United States Superintendent  
of Finance

Gouverneur Morris,  
Assistant Superintendent of Finance

Alexander Hamilton,  
delegate to Congress from New York

General Horatio Gates

Colonel Walter Stewart

Major John Armstrong,  
aide to General Gates

Narrators A-E

Epilogue narrator

\*Indicates a fictional or composite (combination) character. All others were real.

### SCENE 1

**Narrator A:** It is December 1782.

At their camp near Newburgh, New York, Continental Army officers discuss their plight.

**Officer 1:** Month after month goes by without pay. We've sacrificed the best years of our lives, and what have we gotten?

**Officer 2:** Back home, others have grown rich while our wives and children scrounge for food.

**Officer 3:** What will happen if peace comes, and Congress dismisses us without our **pensions**? I am in deep debt and will lose my farm.

**Narrator B:** Meanwhile, General Washington receives a group

### SCENE 2

**Narrator D:** In January 1783, General McDougall and two other officers take the letter to **Philadelphia**. There, officials discuss the alarming news from Newburgh.

### Words to Know

- **mutiny** (n): a revolt of armed forces against their commander.
- **pension** (n): money paid regularly to a retired person.
- **Philadelphia** (n): a chief city of the state of Pennsylvania; also, the nation's capital until 1800.

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**"I HAVE PLEADED WITH  
CONGRESS TO PAY THE MEN."**  
—General George Washington



## American History Play

**Robert Morris:** The problem is bigger than the Army. Congress refuses to raise taxes for *anything!*

**Gouverneur Morris:** As long as the country is unable to raise money, it will be intolerably weak.

**Alexander Hamilton:** That's what some of the states want—a weak national government. We must get the Army to *frighten* delegates into allowing Congress to raise taxes.

**G. Morris:** You want them to appear as if they might take up arms against Congress? I can't see General Washington going for that.

**Hamilton:** You're right. I hinted about that in a letter, and he answered, "God forbid that the Army be involved in producing civil war and bloodshed."

**R. Morris:** We're stuck with Granny.

**Narrator E:** General Horatio Gates, known to his men as "Granny," is second-in-command at Newburgh. He is a fierce rival of Washington.

**Hamilton:** That villain Gates! He has more personal ambition than loyalty! He has tried to replace General Washington before. But I bet he'll take our bait. Our only hope is that Washington and Knox can stop him before he goes too far. That's the risk we must take to keep the nation together.

### SCENE 3

**Narrator A:** Hamilton and his allies send Colonel Walter Stewart to secretly approach General Gates and his aides.

**General Horatio Gates:** Colonel, what do the men in Philadelphia say about the situation in Newburgh? Do they realize that they are sitting on a powder keg?

**Colonel Walter Stewart:** Well, sir, *certain* important people do. They know that the Army must act now,

before a peace treaty is signed.

If a treaty is signed first, Congress will disband the Army and send us home without a cent.

**Major John Armstrong:** Indeed. Our civilian leaders have had long enough to deal with us fairly.

**Gates:** General Washington will not challenge Congress in the way that you are suggesting.

**Stewart:** But you understand that your men need justice.

**Gates:** We must do what must be done.

**Narrator B:** With Gates's approval, Major Armstrong writes an anonymous note summoning the officers to a meeting to take action.

### SCENE 4

**Narrator C:** As the note circulates in camp, it causes a stir.

**Officer 4:** Listen to this: "Is this a country that tramples your rights and disdains your cries? If Congress treats you this way, while the very swords you wear are necessary for the defense of America, what good is peace?"

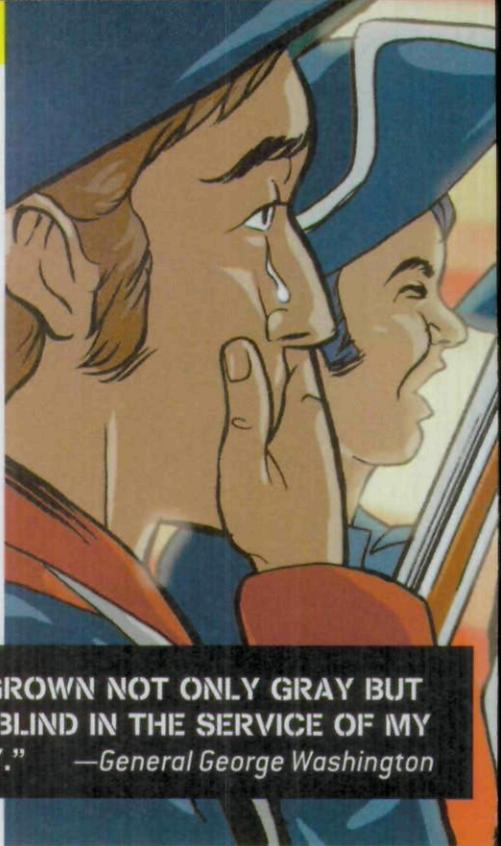
**Officer 5 (also reading):** "When these swords are taken from you, will you be left to grow old in poverty?" I'm not going to let that happen!

**Narrator D:** Hearing of the note, General Washington consults with his aides.

**Washington:** This has gone too far! Horatio Gates must be behind this. We cannot allow an armed attack on the civilian government we have pledged to protect.

**Knox:** Yet you cannot ignore the men's anger, sir.

**Washington:** I realize that. I need time to work out a solution. For



**"I HAVE GROWN NOT ONLY GRAY BUT ALMOST BLIND IN THE SERVICE OF MY COUNTRY."** —General George Washington

now, I'll require that they postpone their meeting for a few days.

**Narrator E:** Washington agrees to let the men meet on Saturday, March 15. He orders that the ranking officer—General Gates—make a report at the meeting. In doing so, the Commander hints that he himself will not be present.

### SCENE 5

**Narrator A:** Tension in camp builds as the meeting approaches. That Saturday, hundreds of officers crowd into the Public Building at Newburgh. An angry murmur fills the room while General Gates prepares to call the meeting to order.

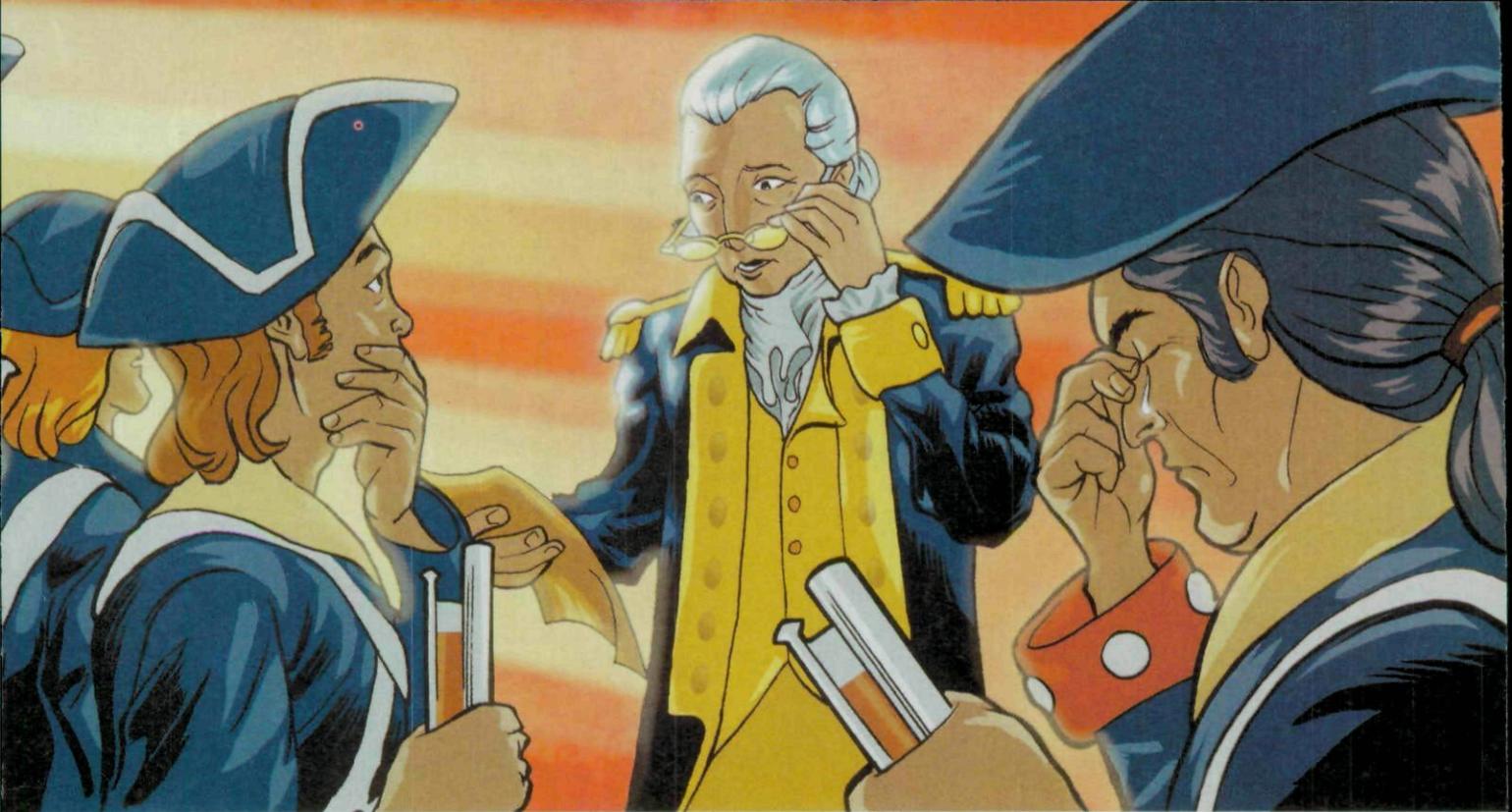
**Narrator B:** Suddenly, a side door opens, and General Washington enters. Automatically, the officers stand for their commander.

**Gates:** General Washington!

**Washington:** General Gates, forgive me for interrupting. I ask your leave to speak with my officers.

**Gates:** Of course, sir.

**Narrator C:** Seeing the anger and mistrust in his officers' faces,



the General unfolds a speech.

**Washington:** Gentlemen, an anonymous writer has summoned you here. But I must appeal to you. All of you know that I have not left your side for one moment, from the war's beginning.

**Narrator D:** The men begin to shift about uneasily.

**Washington:** This anonymous writer tells you to let an "ungrateful country" defend itself. But who will defend our wives, children, and farms? I have every reason to believe that Congress will do this army justice. I beg you to resist any man who wishes to overturn the liberties of our country.

**Narrator E:** As Washington finishes speaking, some officers are grumbling and shuffling their feet. They will not meet his eyes. Then the General pulls out an envelope.

**Washington:** Allow me to read this letter from Representative Joseph Jones. I hope it will convince you of the support we have.

**Narrator A:** The General unfolds the letter, written in tiny script—

then stops. Suddenly, from another pocket, he produces a pair of eyeglasses. He looks up at his astonished audience.

**Washington:** I beg your pardon. Permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have grown not only gray but almost blind in the service of my country.

**Narrator B:** The room falls silent as the General puts on the eyeglasses and continues to read. Only Washington's closest aides had known of his failing vision. His simple act of putting on the glasses affects the men more than any speech could.

**Officer 1:** He's right. How could we fail the commander who has stood beside us for all these years?

**Narrator C:** As Washington finishes and leaves, General Knox jumps to his feet.

**Knox:** I move that we vote to reaffirm our confidence in Congress and in General Washington.

**Narrator D:** The men overwhelmingly acclaim Knox's motion. In an instant, the "mutiny" is over.

## EPILOGUE

**Epilogue narrator:** The "Newburgh Conspiracy" did frighten Congress into agreeing to pay the Army. The U.S. finally signed a peace treaty with Great Britain in September 1783.

Historians differ over whether the officers would have really marched on Philadelphia. But most agree that George Washington was crucial in steering the new nation past the crisis at Newburgh. Six years later, a grateful Congress unanimously made him the first President of the United States under its new Constitution. —Andrew Ragan

### ➔ Think About It

1. Why were some officers threatening to mutiny in 1782? Do you think they were justified?
2. Can you name other instances in U.S. history, like the one with Washington, where actions spoke louder than words?