

THE GREAT UPHEAVAL

Chapter One

America

Soldiers marched that day in Manhattan. For almost as long as anyone could remember, the sight of soldiers had invariably meant the same thing, whether they were French or Russian, Austrian or English, whether they belonged to kings or were battle-hardened mercenaries, whether they moved in great formations or galloped along on horseback. Too often their presence was ominous, signaling that the campaign was beginning and the war was deepening, that the dead would increase and the bloodshed would continue, and the suffering would go on. But today their footsteps were unique, booming out the rites of nationhood. They called out a celebration of victory and the raising of the flag—the American flag. It was November 25, 1783. Evacuation Day in New York City.

As morning broke, the crowds converged and the collective pulse quickened, murmuring with exhilaration. A hundred years later, the city would still remember and celebrate this day. By Manhattan's shores, the last British troops, heads bowed, dour and defeated, were ferried out to transport ships waiting for them in the harbor, then, sails aloft, their gleaming masts disappearing into the distance. For the British there was indescribable sorrow at the loss of their "thirteen beautiful provinces." And there was then, as one man remembered, "a deep stillness." And then pandemonium.

This final corner of occupied territory was now free.

It was precisely one o'clock. The bells of New York, all but silent since the Stamp Act's repeal and languishing for years in storage, now rang, while at the southern tip of the island, the flag, torn down in September 1776, was soon hoisted anew to flutter in the wind. All across the city, young and old alike collected in anticipation, by the corner of Broad and Pearl streets, where a roar of applause would ebb and mount, and over to Bowling Green, where in 1776 the Declaration of Independence was read and patriots had toppled the king's equestrian statue and hacked the gilded crown off his head. Handkerchiefs flapped and gawkers hung out their windows, down past Trinity Church, where desperate Americans had once quietly prayed for deliverance. And now, before a thicket of patriots, scores of battle-tested American troops entered to reclaim the city. Led by General Henry Knox and flanked on one side by a hatless George Washington, mounted upon a brilliant white steed, and by Governor George Clinton on the other, here they came. These were the survivors of Bunker Hill, the heroes who crossed the Delaware, the men who had shivered at Valley Forge, and the victors at Yorktown. They were "ill-clad and weather-beaten," but the people loved them just the same. Marching southward in formation under a velvety sky, the triumphant procession wound past Blue Bells Tavern, where Washington reviewed the pageantry, past half-ruined mansions where errant British flags still flew, and past the moldering earthworks and trenches that dotted the roads, down to the island's edge and the streets to the Battery. Crowds gasped and erupted into shouts of "Hurrah." A thirteen-gun salute exploded into the air, while artists and scribblers converged, ready to record the event for posterity.

At Fort Mifflin, the password of the day was "peace." The eight-year war was over.

The dawn of a new era had begun.

From a distance, one British officer marveled, "The Americans are a curious . . . people; they know how to govern themselves, but nobody else can govern them." Yet the Revolution had been hard on the country. At least 25,000 Americans had died in the conflict—a staggering one percent of the population, a number surpassed only by the ruthless carnage of the Civil War—indeed, one estimate held that as many as 70,000 had perished. And there were the memories. Legions of American soldiers had been held captive aboard British prison ships anchored in the East River, ships that

were damp, cold, and reeking from inadequate sanitation. The filth and the lice, the disease and malnutrition, not to mention the gross mistreatment, had carried off an astounding eleven thousand continentals—nearly half of all the deaths in the war itself. And with grim regularity, the bleached skulls and skeletons of the dead would lap up on the shore, bearing silent witness to British atrocities.

In New York, after seven years of British rule and martial law, the city was a shambles, a legacy of the transforming burdens of war. The day's delirium aside, as the sun rose that morning, the vistas were chilling. The city was a patchwork of shanty huts and brick skeletons, remnants of the devastating fire of 1776. The enormity of the reconstruction challenge was overwhelming: In every direction spread weed-choked ruins, rotted-out homes, and vacant lots; and everywhere stood the debris of war. The streets overflowed with trash, squalor, and excrement, and block upon block lay bare and decrepit; New York had even been stripped of its fences and trees—the British troops used them for firewood—while its wharves had been left to rot and sink into the river. No less than Trinity Church was reduced to a blackened hull. Bony cows and pigs scavenged freely, and the people themselves were crammed into a haphazard mass of pitched tents and cramped hovels. Pale-faced and unwashed—disease-ridden too—they existed, in the words of one visitor, "like herrings in a barrel." No wonder New York's future mayor, John Duane, ruefully noted that the city looked as if it "had been inhabited by savages or wild beasts."

And what now? In these early days—or the final ones, it depended upon your perspective of the British crown—the signs were hardly encouraging. For the Tory supporters of the king, the hallowed era of British rule had come to an inglorious end: Powerful businessmen and overseas merchants were without homes; prosperous shipbuilders had been reduced to nothing short of beggars; great politicians appointed by the crown saw their houses rummaged through and their family dynasties abruptly undone. And hordes of English-American children were cast aside by the only world they had ever known. Already, some 60,000 to 80,000 Tories had fled to England or to the safer outposts of Bermuda, the West Indies, and Canada. They knew that for thousands of American "patriots," Tories were little more than hated traitors; they also knew that vengeance, greed, and jingoism made for a lethal cocktail. Sunk in grief, many thus became permanent refugees in foreign lands, clinging vainly to the faint dream of return. Tragically, when the exiles made their way to Britain, more often than not they were viewed as public burdens or social embarrassments, or, in the end, as simply mere bores. "We Americans," one loyalist said gloomily, "are plenty here, and cheap."

For those who remained, the dreaded Armageddon had finally arrived. Gone were the customary sights that had for so long been an integral part of their British lives—the elegant redcoats with their scarlet uniforms and burnished arms who were their defenders, the glory of the king and the glamour of their empire, the clatter of official carriages and the pitched whistles of British naval vessels that were the great empire's protector, and, of course, the long skyline adorned by the Union Jacks fluttering aloft; all had changed, absolutely and inexorably forever.

At the moment of the British exodus, one anxious loyalist said tearfully, "The town now swarms with Americans." And the last loyalists themselves? The wreckage of their lives was soon to be revealed in vivid detail: homes seized and sold at auction; family furniture and precious heirlooms abandoned or outright ransacked; thieves callously picking over their personal effects; and shattered dishes littering the floors of once elegant abodes, everywhere the dishes. Most humiliating were the public notices, formally banning the exiles from ever returning to America—or the laws curtailing their civil and financial rights. And soon would come frightening incidents of revenge: One loyalist, seized by a mob in New London, was strung up by the neck aboard a dockside ship, whipped with a cat-o'-nine-tails, tarred and feathered, and thrown on a boat to New York. In South Carolina, another was hanged by embittered ex-neighbors.

So on that morning the remaining loyalists numbly waited, listening to the haunting sound of American military men marching their way, the thud of enemy feet in the streets, the sharp commands ringing in the air—and the terrible echo of celebratory cannons off in the distance. One

New Yorker even observed that the loyalists were now in "a perfect state of madness, drowning, shooting and hanging themselves."

But euphoric Americans took little heed. As the loyalists escaped New York, packing the roads and crowding the wharves, a surge of new residents arrived, doubling the city's population in just two years and quickly turning this restless little seaport into the most vivacious and cosmopolitan society on America's shores.

New Yorkers, indeed all Americans, were already looking ahead.

Two days after Evacuation Day, George Washington, hugging his artillery commander, gave a tearful farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern. "With a heart full of love and gratitude," he told his officers, fighting back his emotions, "I now take leave of you." One of his men who witnessed the scene would recall that he had never seen such a moment "of sorrow and weeping." But more than that, they saw something else quite startling. Washington was sending out a powerful signal: To a man, they were all mere servants of the nation, even as he resisted calls to become a king.

After crossing the Hudson, Washington then rode south through the gathering chill to Annapolis, Maryland, where the Congress was now meeting. Around noon on December 23, 1783, Washington was escorted into the State House, where he met the assembled delegates. He rose and bowed, and with a faint quiver in his hands, proceeded to read his carefully chosen words. "Having now finished the work assigned me . . ." His voice dwindled. He continued: ". . . I retire from the great theatre of action, and bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body . . . I here offer my commission and take my leave." Now his eyes filled. Neither the heartbreaking loss of New York, or the brazen victory at Trenton, nor the winter nightmares of Valley Forge and Morristown, or the decisive liberation at Yorktown, could have prepared him for this moment inside these hushed chambers. The spectators, fighting back their own tears, also grasped the importance of the day, itself replete with symbolism: For once more, Washington was relinquishing his military power, underscoring civilian control in the new republic.

In London, King George III was soberly informed that Washington would resign and turn to private life. His reply is legendary. "If he does that, sir," the king exclaimed, no doubt with a slight tremble to his voice, "he will be the greatest man in the world." From a king who could barely hear the words "United States" uttered in his presence and who would turn his back on Thomas Jefferson, this was a subtle admission packed with historic meaning. American liberty was now not simply a rhetorical chant mouthed to stay the hands of a prevaricating despot or a corrupted parliament, but a reality. And this incipient revolution was, it seemed, not destined solely for Americans, but for peoples the world over, and, at long last, it was coming into full reveal.

In the epicenter of Europe in 1783, France, now the globe's mightiest empire, felt it too.

It was a paradox, to be sure. Even if France's support for the young rebels had far less to do with idealism than with a cynical settling of scores with England, and even if the young country to which the monarchy had helped give birth remained a footnote in its attentions, France's fashionable society felt quite differently. Heroic poems with thirteen stanzas became the rage. So were picnics on the thirteenth of the month, in which thirteen toasts to the Americans were drunk. And so were the hundreds of French nobles who had rushed abroad and risked death so that a young republic might live: the Marquis de Lafayette, who would achieve immortality as George Washington's protégé and nearly lose his life at the battle of Brandy-wine; Admiral d'Estaing, who would take Newport and almost die in the struggles to take Savannah; and Admiral Rochambeau, who would eschew the lavish comfort of the French court for one last glorious crusade to fight side by side with the Americans.

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