

Letter from George Washington to the Continental Congress, December 23, 1777

[Excerpt]

Valley Forge, Dec^{er} 23rd, 1777

Sir,

Full as I was in my representation of matters in the Comm^{ys}. departmt. yesterday, fresh, and more powerful reasons oblige me to add, that I am now convinced beyond a doubt that unless some great and capital change suddenly takes place in that line, this Army must inevitably be reduced to one or other of these three things— Starve— dissolve— or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can— rest assured Sir this is not an exaggerated picture, and that I have abundant reason to support what I say.—

Yesterday afternoon receiving information that the Enemy, in force, had left the City, and were advancing towards Derby with apparent design to forage, & draw Subsistance from that part of the Country, I order'd the Troops to be in readiness, that I might give every opposition in my power; when, behold! to my great mortification, I was not only informed, but convinced, that the Men were unable to stir on Acct. of Provision, & that a dangerous Mutiny begun the Night before, & which with difficulty was suppressed by the spirited exertion's of some officers was still much to be apprehended for want of this Article.

This brought forth the only Corn^y. in the purchasing Line, in this Camp; and, with him, this Melancholy & alarming truth; that he had not a single hoof of any kind to Slaughter, and not more than 25. Bar^{ls}. of Flour!— From hence form an opinion of our Situation when I add, that, he could not tell when to expect any.—

All I could do under these Circumstances was, to send out a few light Parties to watch & harrass the Enemy, whilst other Parties were instantly detached different ways to collect, if possible, as much Provision as would satisfy the present pressing wants of the Soldiery.— But will this answer? No Sir: three or four days bad weather would prove our destruction. —What then is to become of the Army this Winter? —and if we are as often without Provisions now, as with them, what is to become of us in the Spring, when our force will be collected, with the aid perhaps of Militia, to take advantage of an early

Campaign before the Enemy can be reinforced? —These are considerations of great magnitude, meriting the closest attention— and will, when my own reputation is so intimately connected, & to be affected by the event, justify my saying that the present Commissaries are by no means equal to the execution of the Office, or that the disaffection of the People is past all belief— The misfortune however does in my opinion, proceed from both causes, and tho' I have been tender heretofore of giving any opinion, or lodging complaints, as the change in that department took place contrary to my judgment, and the consequences thereof were predicted; yet, finding that the inactivity of the Army, whether for want of provisions, Cloaths, or other essentials, is charged to my Acct., not only by the common vulgar, but those in power, it is time to speak plain in exculpation of myself— with truth then I can declare that, no Man, in my opinion, ever had his measures more impeded than I have, by every department of the Army,— Since the Month of July, we have had no assistance from the Quarter Master Genl. & to want of assistance from this department, the Commissary Genl. charges great part of his deficiency— to this I am to add, that notwithstanding it is a standing order (& often repeated) that the Troops shall always have two days Provisions by them, that they might be ready at any sudden call, yet, no opportunity has scarcely ever offered of taking advantage of the Enemy that has not been either totally obstructed or greatly impeded on this Acct— and this the great & crying evil is not all. Soap, Vinegar and other Articles allowed by Congress we see none of nor have we seen them I believe since the battle of Brandywine— the first indeed we have now little occasion for few men having more than one Shirt— many only the moiety of one— and some none at all.— in addition to which as a proof of the little benefit received from a Cloathier Genl., and at the same time as a further proof of the inability of an Army under the circumstances of this, to perform the common duties of Soldiers (besides a number of Men confined to Hospitals for want of Shoes, & others in farmers Houses on the same Acct.) we have, by a field return this day made no less than 2898 Men now in Camp unfit for duty because they are bare foot and otherwise naked and by the same return it appears that our whole strength in continental Troops (Including the Eastern Brigades which have joined us since the surrender of Genl. Burgoyne) exclusive of the Maryland Troops sent to Wilmington amount to no more than 8200 In Camp fit for duty. — Notwithstanding which, & that, since the 4th Inst. our

Numbers fit for duty from the hardships and exposures they have undergone, particularly on Acct. of Blankets (numbers having being been obliged & still are to set up all Night by fires, instead of taking comfortable rest in a natural and common way) have decreased near 2000 Men. We find Gentlemen without knowing whether the Army was really going into Winter Quarters or not (for I am sure no resolution of mine would warrant the remonstrance) reprobatng the measure much as if they thought the Soldiery were made of Stocks or Stones & equally insensible of frost and Snow and moreover, as if they conceived it easily practicable for an inferior Army under the disadvantages I have describ'd our's to be wch. is by no means exaggerated to confine a superior one (in all respects well appointed, and provided for a Winters Campaign) within the City of Phil^a, & to cover from depredation and waste the States of Pennsy^l, Jersey, &ca. but what makes this matter still more extraordinary in my eye is, that these very Gentⁿ. who were well apprized of the nakedness of the Troops, from ocular demonstration who thought their own Soldiers worse clad than others, & advised me, near a Month ago, to postpone the execution of a Plan, I was about to adopt (in consequence of a resolve of Congress) for seizing Cloaths, under strong assurances that an ample supply would be collected in ten days agreeably to a decree of the State not one Article of w^{ch}., by the bye, is yet come to hand, should think a Winters Campaign & the covering these States from the Invasion of an Enemy so easy and practicable a business.— can assure those Gentlemen that it is a much easier and less distressing thing to draw remonstrances in a comfortable room by a good fire side than to occupy a cold bleak hill & sleep under frost & Snow without Cloaths or Blankets; however, although they seem to have little feeling for the naked, & distressed Soldier, I feel superabundantly for them, and from my Soul pity those miseries, w^{ch}. it is neither in my power to relieve or prevent.—

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