

## Conway Cabal

The Battle of Saratoga fought in the fall of 1777; it proved to be a turning point in the American struggle for independence. Saratoga was unquestionably the greatest victory yet won by the Continental Army in terms of prisoners and captured arms and equipment. Nearly 6,000 enemy soldiers were taken, along with 42 cannon and massive quantities of stores. (Army-mil)

Following the American victory, morale among American troops was high. With General John Burgoyne's surrender of his army to General Horatio Gates, the Americans scored a decisive victory that finally persuaded the French to sign a treaty allying with the United States against Britain, France's traditional enemy.

The entrance of France into the war, along with its financial and military support, in particular its navy, was in the end crucial to Washington's victory at the Battle of Yorktown in October 1781, which effectively ended the war.

It also had a direct impact on the career of General George Washington. Without the victory at Saratoga, American forces would likely not have received critical assistance from the French, and faith in the war effort would have been weakened.

But the victory of General Gates at Saratoga also led to a serious but ultimately unsuccessful effort to replace Washington with Gates as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. (Mount Vernon)

The cabal ...

A 'Cabal' is the "contrived schemes of a group of persons secretly united in a plot (as to overturn a government)." (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

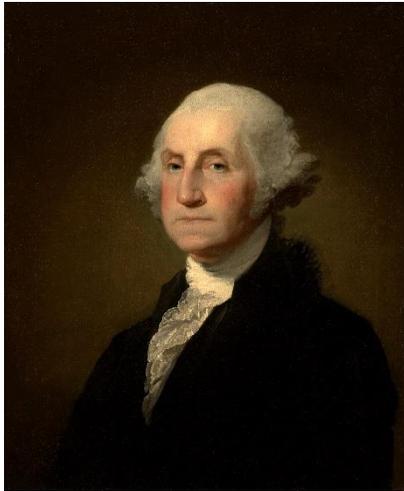
The Conway Cabal refers to a loosely organized attempt by a group of military officers and members of Congress to remove General George Washington from command of the Continental Army and replace him with Major General Horatio Gates.

The supposed leader of this movement was Brigadier General Thomas Conway, an Irish member of the French army who commanded a brigade in Washington's army.

Conway was critical of Washington's performance in the Battle of Brandywine and boastful about his own feats at the same engagement. Shortly after Brandywine, Conway wrote Congress requesting a promotion to the rank of major general. Washington protested Conway's promotion and was irritated by the request, believing it would have disastrous effects on the morale of more senior officers.

In October 1777, Conway wrote a letter to encourage Gates' ambitions. Washington learned of this letter from Lord Stirling who was informed by a member of his staff. On November 5, Washington wrote a short note to Conway, saying,

"Sir, A letter which I received last night contained the following paragraph. In a letter from General Conway to General Gates, he says – 'Heaven has been determined to save your country, or a weak general and bad counselors would have ruined it.' I am Sir Your Humble Servant"



George Washington



Thomas Conway



Horatio Gates

Stirling's colleague heard the details of the letter from a drunken James Wilkinson, Gates' aide-de-camp. In response, Washington informed Conway that he was aware of the contents of the letter, to which Conway replied that he never penned the phrase "weak general." Conway added that he believed Washington was influenced by men not equal to him in experience.

On November 14, Conway offered his resignation to Congress. However, instead of accepting the resignation Congress promoted Conway to the newly created position of Inspector General and to the rank of Major General.

In addition, a Board of War was created to oversee Washington after some members of Congress, including Samuel Adams, Thomas Mifflin, and Richard Henry Lee, began to question whether Washington could lead the Americans to victory.

Conway served with Washington at Valley Forge, and reported to the Board of War, which appointed Gates as its president on November 27, 1777.

In response to these developments, Washington distanced himself from Conway. Nonetheless, Washington maintained that his personal dislike for Conway never interfered with their professional relationship.

Conway later discovered that Wilkinson was responsible for leaking the contents of the letter and subsequently informed Gates of the betrayal. In response, Gates wrote Washington a letter accusing someone of stealing his letters with Conway. (Mount Vernon) Then, there was a series of letter exchanges ... To George Washington from Major General Horatio Gates, December 8, 1777,

I shall not attempt to describe what, as a private Gentleman, I cannot help feeling, on representing to my Mind, the disagreeable Situation, which confidential Letters, when exposed to public Inspection, may place an unsuspecting Correspondent to ...

... but, as a public Officer, I conjure your Excellency, to give me all the Assistance you can, in tracing out the Author of the Infidelity, which put Extracts from General Conway's Letters to me, into your Hands. Those Letters have been stealthily copied; but, which of them, when, or by whom, is to me, as yet, an unfathomable Secret.

There is not one Officer in my Suite, nor amongst those who have a free Access to me, upon whom I could, with the least Justification to myself, fix the Suspicion; and yet, my Uneasiness may deprive me of the Usefulness of the worthiest Men.

It is, I believe, in your Excellency's Power to do me, and the United States a very important Service, by detecting a Wretch, who may betray me, and capitally injure the very Operations under your immediate Direction.

For this Reason, Sir, I beg your Excellency will favor me with the Proofs you can procure to that Effect. But, the Crime being, eventually, so important, that the least Loss of Time may be attended with the worst Consequences; ...

... and, it being unknown to me, whether the Letter came to you from a Member of Congress, or from an Officer, I shall have the Honor of transmitting a Copy of this to the President, that the Congress may, in Consert with your Excellency, obtain, as soon as possible, a Discovery, which so deeply affects the Safety of the States. Crimes of that Magnitude ought not to remain unpunished. I have the Honor to be, Sir, with the greatest Respect, Your Excellency's most humble, & most obedient Servant, Horatio Gates

George Washington wrote back to Major General Horatio Gates, January 4, 1778,

Your Letter of the 8th Ulto came to my hands a few days ago; and, to my great surprize informed me, that a copy of it had been sent to Congress—for what reason, I find myself unable to acct ...

... but, as some end doubtless was intended to be answered by it, I am laid under the disagreeable necessity of returning my answer through the same channel, lest any member of that honble body, should harbour an unfavourable suspicion of my having practiced some indirect means, to come at the contents of the confidential Letters between you & General Conway.

I am to inform you then, that Colo. Wilkenson, in his way to Congress in the Month of October last, fell in with Lord Stirling at Reading; and, not in confidence that I ever understood, inform'd his Aid de Camp Majr McWilliams that Genl Conway had written thus to you "Heaven has been determined to save your Country; or a weak General and bad Counsellors would have ruined it" -

Lord Stirling, from motives of friendship, transmitted the acct with this remark - "The inclosed was communicated by Colo. Wilkenson to Majr McWilliams, such wicked duplicity of conduct I shall always think it my duty to detect."

In consequence of this information, and without having any thing more in view than merely to shew that Gentn that I was not unapprized of his intriguing disposition, I wrote him a Letter in these words. "Sir—A Letter which I received last night contained the following paragraph.

"In a Letter from Genl Conway to Genl Gates he says 'Heaven has been determined to save your Country; or a weak Genl and bad Counsellors would have ruined it—I am Sir & ca."

Neither this Letter, nor the information which occasioned it, was ever, directly, or indirectly, communicated by me to a single Officer in this army (out of my own family) excepting the Marquis de la Fayette ...

so desirous was I, of concealing every matter that could, in its consequences, give the smallest Interruption to the tranquility of this army, or, afford a gleam of hope to the enemy by dissensions therein.

Thus Sir, with an openness and candour which I hope will ever characterize and mark my conduct, have I complied with your request. the only concern I feel upon the occasion (finding how matters stand) is, that in doing this, I have necessarily been obliged to name a Gentn whom I am perswaded (although I never exchanged a word with him upon the subject) thought he was rather doing an act of Justice, than committing an act of infidelity;

and sure I am, that, till Lord Stirling's Letter came to my hands, I never knew that Genl Conway (who I viewed in the light of a stranger to you) was a correspondant of yours, much less did I suspect that I was the subject of your confidential Letters ...

... pardo(n) me then for adding, that so far from conceiving, that the safety of the States can be affected, or in the small(est) degree injured, by a discovery of this kind; or, that I should be called upon in such solemn terms to point out the author, that I considered the information as coming from yourself ...

... and given with a friendly view to forewarn, and consequently forearm me, against a secret enemy; or, in other words, a dangerous incendiary; in which character, sooner or later, this Country will know Genl Conway. But—in this, as in other matters of late, I have found myself mistaken. I am Sir yr Most Obedt Ser(v)t Go: Washington

Then, Major General Horatio Gates wrote to George Washington, January 23, 1778

The Letter of 4th Instant, which I had the Honour to receive from Your Excellency, has relieved me from unspeakable Uneasiness.

I now Anticipate the Pleasure it will give you, when you discover that what has been conveyed to you for an Extract of General Conway's Letter to me, was not an Information, which friendly Motives induced a Man of Honour to give, that injured Virtue might be "fore-armed against Secret Enemies.["] That paragraph, which Your Excellency has condescended to transcribe, is Spurious.

I cannot avoid Sketching out to Your Excellency the History of General Conway's Letter, from the time that it came to my Hands, by Lieutenant Colonel Troup, my Aid-de-Camp, to whom General Conway delivered it at Reading, on the 11th of October, to this time, as far as it affected me, and the Officers in my Family.

That Letter Contained very judicious Remarks upon that Want of Discipline, which has often Alarmed Your Excellency, and I believe, all observing Patriots. The Reasons which, in his Judgment, deprived us of the Success we could reasonably expect, were methodically explained by him; but, neither the "Weakness" of any of our Generals, nor "bad Councillors" were mentioned, and

Consequently, cannot be assigned, or imagined as Part of those Reasons, to which General Conway attributed some of our Losses.

He wrote to me as a candid Observer; as other Officers in every Service freely write to each other, for Obtaining better Intelligence than that of the News Papers; and that Freedom renders such Letters, thus far, confidential in some Measure. The Judgement of the Person who receives them, points out to him, according to Time and Circumstances, the Propriety, or Impropriety attending their being Communicated, when no particular Injunction of Secrecy was requested.

Particular Actions, rather than Persons were blamed, but with Impartiality; and I am convinced that he did not aim at lessening in my Opinion the Merit of any Person. His Letter was perfectly harmless, however, now that various Reports have been circulated concerning its Contents, they ought not to be Submitted to the Solemn Inspection of even those who Stand most high in the Public Esteem.

Anxiety and Jealousy would arise in the Breasts of very respectable Officers, who, rendered Sensible of Faults, which Inexperience, and that alone, may have led them into, would be unnecessarily disgusted, if they perceived a Probability of such Errours being recorded.

Honour forbids it - and Patriotism demands that I should return the Letter into the Hands of the Writer. I will do it; but, at the same time, I declare that the Paragraph, conveyed to Your Excellency, as a genuine Part of it, was in Words, as well as in Substance, a wicked Forgery.

About the Beginning of Decemr, I was informed that Letter had occasioned an Explanation between Your Excellency and that Gentleman. Not knowing, whether the whole Letter, or a Part of it had been Stealingly copied, but fearing Malice had altered its original Texture, I own, Sir, that a Dread of the Mischiefs which might attend the Forgery I suspected would be made, put me, for some Time, in a most painful Situation.

When I communicated to the Officers in my Family, the Intelligence I had received, they all entreated me to rescue their Characters from the Suspicions they justly conceived themselves liable to, until the guilty Person should be known.

To facilitate the Discovery, I wrote Your Excellency; but, unable to learn, whether General Conway's Letter had been transmitted to You, by a Member of Congress, or a Gentleman in the Army, I was afraid much time would be lost in the Course of the Inquiry, and that the States might receive some Capital Injury from the Infidelity of the Person, who, I thought, had Stolen a Copy of the Obnoxious Letter –

Was it not probable that the Secrets of the Army might be obtained, and betrayed thro' the same Means to the Enemy? For this Reason, Sir, not doubting the Congress would most Cheerfully concur with You in tracing out the Criminal, I wrote to the President, & inclosed to him a Copy of my Letter to Your Excellency.

About the Time I was forwarding those Letters, Brigr Genl Wilkinson returned to Albany. I informed him of the Treachery which had been Committed, but, I concealed from him the Measures I was persuing, to unmask the Author.

Wilkinson answered he was assured it never would come to light, & endeavoured to fix my Suspicions on Lieut. Colonel Troup, who, said he, "might have incautiously Conversed on the Substance of General Conway's Letter with Colonel Hamilton, whom you had Sent, not long before, to Albany." I did not listen to this Insinuation against Your Aid-de Camp, and mine.

Would Your Excellency's prediction, relative to General Conway, had not been inserted in Your Letter, which came to me, unsealed, through the Channel of Congress.

I hope always to find that Gentleman a firm, and constant Friend to America; I never wrote to him in my Life, but to Satisfy his doubts Concerning the Exposure of his private Letter, nor had any Sort of intimacy, nor hardly the Smallest acquaintance with him, before our Meeting in this Town. With Great Respect I am, Sir, Your Excellency's Most Obedient Humble Servt Horatio Gates

One object of the scheme was to detach the Marquis de Lafayette from Washington, to whom he was devotedly attached, and bring him into the interests of the cabal.

For this purpose he was to have the command of the expedition; an appointment which it was thought would tempt his military ambition. Conway was to be second in command, and it was trusted that his address and superior intelligence would virtually make him the leader.

The cabal, however, had overshot their mark. Lafayette, who was aware of their intrigues, was so disgusted by the want of deference and respect to the commander-in-chief evinced in the whole proceeding, that he would at once have declined the appointment, had not Washington himself advised him strongly to accept it. (Life of George Washington)



As winter wore on, the so-called cabal dissolved, bringing disgrace to and ending the careers of several of its leaders. Washington's authority was strengthened, as loyal supporters rallied to defend and exalt the commander in chief. (Valley Forge, NPS)

The so-called Cabal collapsed on January 19, 1778 after Gates and Conway refused to hand over the "weak general" letter to Congress. At the same time, Washington's generals sent Congress letters of support for their superior, and the movement to remove Washington from command ended. (Mount Vernon)

Information here is primarily from Mount Vernon; The Life of Nathanael Green; Library of Congress; National Archives; Life of George Washington; American Battlefield Trust; National Park Service, Valley Forge

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young