

THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI

Reflections on Professor Minor Myers Book

"Liberty without Anarchy"

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In the State of Connecticut and

Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Ohio

The scene is General Washington's headquarters at Newburg, New York in the fall of 1782. Although the British had surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, the ports of New York, Charleston, and Savannah were still in British hands. It was felt that they might mount a new campaign, but the real topic of conversation was how to get Congress to fund retirement pay as the war wound down.

Discontent over pay had prevailed for at least five years, and many officers had actually used their private funds to equip and supply their men. Lacking the power to tax and because of the disinterest of the states, the issue of a pension just wasn't making headway. Some of the more militant officers prepared position papers known as the Newburg Addresses which fomented the thought of a military coup against congress to get action. Learning of this, General Washington's aim was to let the army be heard, but to keep the protests "within the bounds of moderation". Action was to be taken at a meeting called in March 1783. Washington strode into the room and took the podium quickly. He spoke forcefully for moderation and loyalty to Congress. Finally, speaking haltingly, he reached into his pocket for his spectacles and said "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself going blind."

He carried the day! With the war coming to end, the Army would soon be disbanded. When the officers returned to their homes, there no longer would be any organized political pressure on Congress to raise the money to fund the long-promised pension plans. The time was right for General Henry Knox to move on his long-cherished plan for an hereditary organization of officers of the revolution with a general society and supreme authority resting in thirteen state societies - France would also form a state society. On May 13, 1783 the Institution of the Society was born at the Verplanck House at General Van Steuben's headquarters at Fishkill-on-the-Hudson. The announced purpose was to provide continuing fellowship, perpetuate the ideals that had won the war, and provide a fund to take care of hardship cases among the officers. Each officer would contribute a set amount depending on his rank. \$166 for a major general, \$20 for an ensign. Future membership would be hereditary based on primogeniture. Washington was elected president general, and top officers were assigned to organize the various state societies.

As the word got out about this new organization, the public reaction was intense and vicious. "A nascent nobility, patrician, pompous, and members might soon try to trace their lineage to heaven", were some of the milder criticisms. Benjamin Franklin, who had spent much of his time in France, call the Hereditary Society an "absurdity", it should be noted, however, that Mr. Franklin accepted honorary membership in 1789. There was a widespread feeling that the Society would replace Congress and actually take over the government.

The organizational approach to getting congress to fund the pension certainly did not satisfy all the military. An example was one Henry Carberry, a Captain in Pennsylvania. He mounted a mutiny that was put down. Under sentence of death he escaped to England and later turned up in Pennsylvania and was sponsored for the Society of the Cincinnati in 1805 by David Zeigler, the First Mayor of the City of Cincinnati.

General Washington was sensitive to the sharp division and controversy over the new society. In early 1784 he discussed the situation with Thomas Jefferson, who was an arch foe of the society, concluding, "if the thing be bad, it must be totally abolished". By the time of the National Society meeting in May 1784, Washington, as President General, presented certain changes that would have been made in the Institution if it were not to be abolished. These included the elimination of all political activity, removal of the hereditary provision, no more honorary members, donations to come only from U.S. citizens, and no more general meetings. Strong objections were raised to the proposed amendments to the institution, but Washington was firm.

Then, wonder of wonders, Major Pierre L'enfant who designed the medal of the society and had gone to France to have it made, appeared with a shipment of dazzling golden eagles and word that King Louis XVI had approved the Society in France. More importantly, Major L'enfant had brought a special diamond encrusted eagle from French Admiral D'estaing for George Washington on behalf of the French Navy. Whoever said, "diamonds are a girls' best friend" was only half-right!

The sharp debate turned to murmurs of pleasure and the amendments to the Institution were toned down.

Any thought of abolishing the Society would be a gross insult to our loyal French comrades. The golden eagle had saved the day! Interestingly, this diamond eagle has been the badge of every President General of the Society through its history.

Approval of the amended institution by the state societies was mighty slow, and I rather think that it never was totally ratified. Conditions in the country were deteriorating financially, and the fear of anarchy prevailed. Rumors were rife - first it was said that Prince Henry of Prussia had been asked to become King of America. Another story was that the Duke of York was to take over as monarch. Finally, how do you like this one - - that King George III, our

recent adversary, would give us the Canadas, Nova Scotia, and other British territories in our country if we would accept one of his sons as King!

With all this confusion and turmoil, the members of the Cincinnati did not use their strength and experience to usurp power and take over the government, as people had feared. Instead they were always available when a strong stand for law and order was required. When the Shays Rebellion of 1787 shut down the courts in Western Massachusetts, so debtors could not be tried and sent to jail, a force led by Members of the Cincinnati crushed the uprising. Likewise, when an army of two thousand was authorized to "putdown the Indians", most of the officers were Cincinnati under the leadership of General Benjamin Lincoln.

It was not surprising then, when the Constitutional Convention was assembled, 22 of the 55 delegates were Cincinnati. By contrast the total number of Cincinnati represented only .7% of the total population. It has been said that the electoral college was adopted to serve as a check on the power of the Cincinnati. Actually, they did not operate as a group and were usually on both sides of any issue. On the need for a strong national government, however, there was complete agreement. This expression of individual views carried over the debates on ratification by the several states. The story is told of the hot debate in the New York Legislature where Alexander Hamilton was pushing for ratification and Governor George Clinton was opposed. Finally, Hamilton said that New York City would secede from the State if the constitution was not ratified. It passed 34 - 32!

With ratification accomplished, the attention of many Cincinnati turned to the West, land grants, and the formation of the Ohio Company. These included Von Stuben, Rufus Putnam in Marietta, Benjamin Tupper, William Duer (whose speculation landed him in jail) Winthrop Sargent, General Harmon, General St. Clair, General Anthony Wayne, Richard Clough Anderson, Moses Cleveland, Benjamin Tallmadge, and Major John Burnham who laid out the town of Gallipolis for the French colonizers. Settlements in Ohio were seen not only as a profitable promotion, but also as a safety net if the new Constitution failed.

For a change of scene, let's go over to France to see how their society was doing. Major Pierre L'enfant, whom you have already met, was busy organizing it around Lafayette, Rochambeau, and Admiral D'estaing. Mirabeau opposed it strongly. In French the word Cincinnatus came through where spoken as San Cinnatus, and the people wondered whether the Pope was announcing a Saint Senatus. As the French Revolution developed, eleven Cincinnati were guillotined, Rochambeau and Lafayette were imprisoned, and Admiral D'estaing was killed because of his loyalty and support of Marie Antoinette.

The chaos was recorded by the historian Lamartine. In writing about the revolutionary fanatic, Fournier, he said, "From the neck of his horse dangled a collar composed of crosses of St. Louis, eagles of Cincinnatus, and other military decorations snatched from the breast of victims." As other Cincinnati fled France, the Society disappeared, not to be revised until 1925.

Turning our attention back to the States, we find George Washington dispensing patronage. Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, Knox Secretary of War, Pickering as postmaster, and Pickney and Humphreys as Ambassadors to serve under the arch-foe of the Society, Thomas Jefferson, who was appointed Secretary of State. One interesting appointment was that of collector of the Port of Wilmington, one George Bush! The appointments by George Washington have been described as prominent, but not dominate. However, when it came to appointing Generals and Field Officers for the National Army, 59 out of 62 were Cincinnati. When the Whiskey Rebellion arose in 1794, General Washington personally led the force that put it down.

Following Washington's death in 1799, the Societies went from dominant to dormant in the first half of the century. Members concerned themselves with erecting statues to the late President and pushing again for a new plan to provide retirement pay for officers, even though they had sold their pension certificates. This got nowhere in Congress, but after Lafayette's very successful tour of all the functioning State Societies in 1824 and 1825, Congress did pass an act that allowed full - not half pay - for all surviving officers and enlisted men. This worked well for the survivors, but not so well for Aaron Ogden, the Vice President General of the Society. He had contracted in 1825 to serve as lobbyist to get the pay issue through Congress. When the pay was finally voted, many of the recipients refused to pay the 5% contingency agreed on. Certainly an un noble act!

In this period societies were going out of business one after the other. In Virginia the Society voted in 1802 that its charitable fund would go eventually to Washington College. After years of discussion and Thomas Jefferson's efforts to change the beneficiary to his beloved University of Virginia, the original designation to Washington College was made official. Washington and Lee, as we now know it, received funds for the teaching of Military Science and an annual oration commemorating the Society of the Cincinnati.

In the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the Society experienced a rebirth. President General Hamilton Fish was a Senator with past experience as Governor of the State of New York. During his term of office, a liberalization known as the rule of 1854 permitted each State Society to set its own admission standards. This did not produce any great influx of new members, but did result in some changes that permitted collateral as well as direct descendants.

In 1872, a new force emerged in the person of Asa Bird Gardiner, a career military officer who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor at Gettysburg. When the Rhode Island Society sought reactivation, Colonel Gardiner took up the project and revitalized this and every other State Society during his lifetime. During this period, the "Nascent Aristocracy", which had been so feared in the Eighteenth Century became the model for many new hereditary patriotic societies - The Sons of the Revolution, The Daughters of the Revolution of 1776, The Children of the American Revolution, and The Daughters of the Cincinnati (an organization not readily

accepted by "The Cincinnati"). I have been told by reliable authority at home that the most significant founding was that of the National Society of the Colonial Dames in America.

It is not known whether Colonel Gardiner's success was the cause or result of his period of "Nascent Aristocracy". Suffice it to say that at his death, the New York Times wrote affectionately, "his essential genius as that of getting into and making trouble."

Moving to the middle of the Twentieth Century, one of the very interesting events occurred in the regime of President General Edgar Erskine Hume, who brought to the office a brilliant record as a medical officer in both World Wars as well as prolific writings. In 1952 a new member was being inducted into the Society. Genealogists had traced his descent and found him to be the great great grandson of a Lt. Murray of the Connecticut Society. In accepting the gold Badge of membership, Winston Churchill said, "History unfolds itself by a strange and unpredictable path", and then went on to say that his ancestry had served on both sides in the American Revolution.

Now, as we come to the 207th year of the Society, we find it alive and well with headquarters in the Larz Anderson House at 2118 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., in Washington. When Ambassador Anderson died, his wife left the Turn-of-the Century mansion, with a magnificent collection of art and memorabilia to the Society, as a permanent headquarters. Many of you, I am sure, know Ambassador Anderson's great nephew - V. Anderson Coombe. Our total membership is now something over three thousand, of which there are about one thousand honorary members - presidents, generals, statesmen, educators, poets, bishops, and other leaders of note.

In summary, the following words of professor Minor Myers - the author of *Liberty Without Anarchy* - tells it all.

"Today the Society of the Cincinnati survives and flourishes. Contrary to the expectation of Jefferson, Aedanus Burke, and Mirabeau, it has proved no constitutional threat, but became an organization devoted to principles Jefferson himself approved, the principles of the revolution, the preservation of history, and the diffusion of historical knowledge."

As our founding fathers look down on this world now and see so many countries struggling to manage their newly acquired freedom, I'm sure in their hearts they are cheering them on and reminding our own beloved country that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance - and a lot of work!

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