

The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York

Journal of American History, vol. 80, no. 3 (December 1993): 868-889

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American historical literature, Michael Kammen has said, lacks "a sense of the tragic." Kammen was moved to this striking reflection by his work on the American revolutionary war, and the historiography of American wars bears him out. Historians of the United States have rarely dealt with the destructive effects of war on ordinary people. In this they have insulated themselves from much twentieth-century philosophical and historical writing. Among Europeans the tragic experiences of the world wars contributed to the popularity of existentialism, which articulated a profound despair, insecurity, and alienation and dwelt on the absurd and paradoxical nature of human beings. Twentieth-century historians of the European past have cataloged the devastation of war in the immediate loss of wealth and lives and the subsequent disintegration of economic stability and social cohesion.¹

The tendency to ignore the tragic side of war is particularly notable in the literature on the Revolution. Historians have often focused their attention on the war's positive outcome. The war has usually been seen either as a contest of ideas—active loyalism versus active whiggism—or as a vehicle for the development of republican, democratic, and individualistic ideology or of social radicalism.²

John Shy went one step further by emphasizing positive aspects of the American War of Independence. Writing in the early 1970s, he may have been impressed by the way the Vietnamese antagonists of the United States stimulated, and drew sustenance from, an increasing nationalistic fervor. Seemingly politicized by the war

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I wish to thank the following individuals for their criticisms and suggestions: Professors John Murrin, Edward Countryman, and Allen Ballard and Ms. Susan Armeny.

¹ Michael Kammen, "The American Revolution as a Crise de Conscience: The Case of New York," in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience: The American Revolution in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York*, ed. Richard M. Jensen (New York, 1976), 188. C. V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New Haven, 1939), 505–26. For military units as a scourge to society, see Geoffrey Best, *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (New York, 1982).

² See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992); Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, 1976); and Edward Countryman, *A People in the Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1768–1790* (Baltimore, 1981), esp. chs. 4 and 5.

itself, Vietnamese fought at a huge human cost and often successfully against the American military machine. Shy presented the American revolutionary war "as a social process" of political education for the majority of Americans or a struggle for hearts and minds. Shy said that as the depredations of the British military intensified and as increasing numbers of adult males served in the militia, many Americans who had been apathetic about the Anglo-American controversy and averse to involvement in the war changed from "loyal subjects of the crown" to patriotic citizens of the United States. Once made, the aroused citizens' new commitment to the Whig cause could not be reversed. Their commitment had far-reaching implications not only for the outcome of the war but also for American politics after the Revolution. In short, the revolutionary war politicized and nationalized the wary Americans.³

The theory of politicization overlooks the possibility that the protracted and intense warfare might have had the contrary effects of depoliticizing some Americans and of making the apolitical and the uncommitted more apathetic. By *depoliticized*, I do not suggest that Whigs became either anti-American or completely indifferent, but that they were increasingly unwilling to involve themselves in the process that required a sacrifice of their time and resources. Otherwise, one might speculate, the war would not have lasted as long as it did. Emphasis on the politicizing effect of the revolutionary war also ignores the experience of those Americans caught in a cross fire between the two adversaries, preyed upon and subjected to the repeated exactions of both. To neglect what the American army did to these totally defenseless and innocent civilians, regardless of the flag they carried, makes the sociology of the war a one-sided story.

The historical actors of the revolutionary era were not just those who took an active role in directing the wheel of politics and ideology. Thousands cared little about public purposes. Circumstances rendered them either unable or unwilling to understand the full meaning of the war for their lives and pursuit of happiness. Among them were women, children, the aged, and the alienated, who together make up the majority of human beings in a society. Kammen had his telling insight while examining "a crisis of conscience" precipitated by the revolutionary war. That crisis compelled many Americans to choose sides and swear oaths, sometimes against their wishes. The war often put such people in existential situations where death loomed, whatever choice they made.⁴

This is a story of how the ordinary people in Westchester County, New York, shifted for themselves in the midst of a war that raged continuously around them

³ John Shy, "The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill, 1973), 146–47, 156; John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1976), 7, 191–92. For objections to this Vietnam War-inspired approach, see Don Higginbotham, "Reflections on the War of Independence, Modern Guerrilla Warfare, and the War in Vietnam," in *Arms and Independence: The Military Character of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1984), 1–24. On Americans' war weariness, see Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill, 1980), esp. 31, 64.

⁴ Kammen, "The American Revolution as a Crise de Conscience," 188.



A portion of Claude Joseph Sauthier's map of Westchester County drawn in 1779 for Maj. Gen. William Tryon. Sauthier's map mistakenly includes the Manor of Cortlandt in Dutchess County, although it was part of Westchester County. *Courtesy Stephan Bielinski.*

and brought only sorrow and hardship to them and their families. It is also a story of how the war sapped civilian morale, virtue, and enthusiasm for any public cause—an ironic story of how the campaign to establish a democratic republic founded on public virtue reinforced, at least temporarily, privatism and self-interest.⁵ This understanding of the American revolutionary war was influenced by my own experience of the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, and its aftermath. As a teenager then, I saw the traumatic effects of the war all around, which was devastating to lives, human dignity, morals, property, and community. I and many other Koreans resented the war, cursed every ideology of public import as a scourge, and escaped into privatism for the time being. The records of Westchester during the American War of Independence reveal similar suffering and similar responses.

The experience of Westchester County in the American Revolution offers a trenchant example of the war's impact on society for two reasons. First, the county, located just north of Manhattan Island and on the east side of the Hudson River and inhabited by about 28,000 people (24,000 whites and 4,000 blacks) on about half a million acres, was the scene of continual struggle from the fall of 1776 to 1782. Contending armies, both regular and irregular, crisscrossed the county, and the dangers of war were ever present in the lives of its inhabitants. Second, on the outbreak of armed conflict, most of the county's adult males were apolitical and apathetic farmers, the kind of people whom both the American Whigs and the British military tried to proselytize.

In the intensity and duration of this struggle, Westchester was almost unique. An investigation of its revolutionary history may seem less a case study than an examination of extreme-situation behavior. Nevertheless, there were parallels elsewhere to Westchester's encounter with war—in the Jersey "Neutral Ground," parts of both shores of Long Island Sound, the Philadelphia periphery in 1777–1778, and much of the Deep South after 1779. Late in the war, perhaps the rest of America finally began to experience some of the misery that had overtaken Westchester as early as 1776.⁶

Before 1775 the county was notably indifferent to continental and imperial politics. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who lived on a 370-acre farm in Orange County, across the Hudson River from Westchester, before the war, observed that the constitutional controversy about Anglo-American relations that stirred so much emotion in urban centers interested neither him nor his neighbors. According to a recent study, in Queens County, across the Long Island Sound from Westchester,

⁵ This essay does not address the question of how a community shifted allegiance from one government to another during the Revolution, as happened in the town of Poughkeepsie and in Queens County, both in New York. Both were predominantly Loyalist at the start of the war but Patriot at its conclusion. See Joseph S. Tiedemann, "Patriots by Default: Queens County, New York, and the British Army, 1776–1783," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 43 (Jan. 1986), 35–63; and Jonathan Clark, "The Problem of Allegiance in Revolutionary Poughkeepsie," in *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, ed. David D. Hall et al. (New York, 1984), 285–317.

⁶ See Adrian C. Lieby, *The Revolutionary War in the Hackensack Valley: The Jersey Dutch and the Neutral Ground, 1775–1783* (New Brunswick, 1962); Russell F. Weigley, *The Partisan War: The South Carolina Campaign of 1780–1782* (Columbia, S.C., 1970); and Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*.

"a decisive majority" of adult male inhabitants, 60 percent, were neutral on the issue before the war. Other evidence shows that the Westchester farmers shared virtually the same apolitical culture. Most of them, including the 272 tenant families on Philipsburgh Manor and the 150 tenant families on Cortlandt Manor, were affluent middling sorts who engaged in livestock and dairy husbandry because the county terrain was better suited for "grazing than any other" in the province. Their market in ever-expanding New York City consumed "prodigious" quantities of meat, dairy products, and vegetables. Their passions and energy were so engrossed in agricultural endeavor that their involvement in even local governance was very marginal, often limited to the business of registering their livestock earmarks with the town hall, and their deeds and wills with the county government.⁷

Residents of Westchester did not show much interest in local and provincial politics, perhaps because they were preoccupied with the pursuit of worldly goods and creature comfort. New Yorkers, from the very inception of the colony, lacked the visionary and republican intellectual tradition that guided New Englanders. A grass-roots, popular political culture had never developed in the colony. Thus Westchesterites let their social betters, such as the Van Cortlandts, the Morrisises, the Thomases, the Philipses, the De Lanceys, and the Grahams, think and speak for them about political matters. The political behavior of the tenant families, who constituted only 10 percent of the county population, was no exception to the pattern of deference. Indeed, class relations between landlords and tenants were severely tested when agrarian disturbances over conflicting land titles swept New York in 1766, but all of the Philipsburgh tenants and most of the Cortlandt tenants kept their distance from the forces that challenged the colony's land system.⁸

Westchesterites were stirred from their lethargy only when their leaders called for their help. To them, election times were no more than social occasions of merry entertainment where liquor flowed liberally. Their indifference also reflected their lack of political education through active participation in town government, which contributed so much to raising the political consciousness of New Englanders. Unlike New England town governments, those in New York had no material benefits, such as land, to grant to their inhabitants; instead they were burdens for the people to support with their tax money. Westchester residents were so apathetic politically that until March 1775 they seldom took public measures to oppose or support ministerial policy: they established no Sons of Liberty, calmly ignored a 1774 invitation from the New York City Committee of Correspondence to create their own committee, and issued no resolves. In the early months of 1775, residents of Cortlandt Manor were severely criticized by Loyalist and Whig writers alike for their "inattention" to public issues.⁹

⁷ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York, 1963), 198; Nathaniel Sackett to Alexander McDougall, March 12, 1777 (microfilm: roll 2), Alexander McDougall Papers (New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.). On Queens County, see Tiedemann, "Patriots by Default," 36–37. On Westchester farmers' economic situation, see Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664–1775* (Chapel Hill, 1978), 192–93.

⁸ Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York*, 281–415.

⁹ Cadwallader Colden to Earl of Dartmouth, July 6, 1774, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of*

The political doldrums in the county were reinforced by, and mirrored, the moderately whiggish but wishy-washy posture of Pierre Van Cortlandt, a proprietor of Cortlandt Manor and its representative in the provincial legislature, and John Thomas of Rye, a representative from the county at large. They typified the attitude of most of the Whig assemblymen from agrarian districts throughout the colony who defended American rights while maintaining a strong faith in the good will of George III and eventual reconciliation with the mother country. Whatever small influence they had was neutralized by the aggressive Loyalist leaders in the county, namely, Frederick Philipse III, the proprietor of Philipsburgh Manor and an assemblyman from the county at large; Isaac Wilkins, a representative from the borough town of Westchester; Rev. Dr. Samuel Seabury, an Anglican rector of Westchester (the author of "Letters of a Westchester Farmer"); and James De Lancey, county sheriff. Those Loyalists were endowed with everything necessary to make them powerful in county affairs. Philipse owned the county's largest estate (92,000 acres), worked by 272 tenant families, and was the county's richest man. De Lancey held, apart from his family wealth, the most influential countywide office. His pulpit gave Seabury the most respectable forum in the area to disseminate his views, and he was well connected with prominent intellectuals in New York and New Jersey. Together they, unlike the Whig leaders, were ever willing to translate their assets into political capital to silence their enemies. But they were not strong enough to convert a majority of the apathetic inhabitants into their partisans.¹⁰

From the midspring to the fall of 1775, Westchester inhabitants experienced the same pressures and forces that elsewhere polarized the population as the Anglo-American conflict escalated and campaigns by partisan leaders to recruit converts mounted. The politicization of the people through political and military means probably reached its climax during this period. Both camps proselytized frantically as if the outcome of the dispute depended on the number of converts they obtained. To the leaders, neutrality in the contest became a luxury they could not afford, and ordinary folk found it increasingly difficult to stay outside the political vortex lest they invite wrathful vengeance from both parties. Some Westchester people indeed succumbed to the pressure of mobilization and politicization, but the majority did not.

The first overt attempt to politicize the county people was a Whig convention at White Plains on April 11, 1775. Having selected several delegates to the forthcoming provincial convention, participants in the county convention called on the county inhabitants to rally for the "preservation of the Union of the Colonies and rights and liberties of America" by subscribing to the Continental Association, the

the State of New York, ed. E. G. Callaghan and Berthold Fernow (15 vols., Albany, 1856-1887), VIII, 470, 486; *Rivington's New York Gazetteer*, Feb. 16, March 9, 1775.

¹⁰ Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting of a Collection of Authentic Records, State Papers, Debates, and Letters and other Notices of Public Affairs* (4th ser., 6 vols.; 5th ser., 3 vols; Washington, 1837-1853), 4th ser., I, 1302-22; Frederick Philipse's testimony, Oct. 25, 1784, vol. XIX, pp. 385-86, class 12, Audit Office Series (Public Record Office, London, Eng.); vol. C, p. 86, *ibid.*; vol. XIX, pp. 355-59, *ibid.*; Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., I, 1188-89, 1289-1322.

agreement promulgated by the Continental Congress to boycott British goods. The convention, which met in response to a request from the New York City Committee of Inspection and drew about a hundred "principal freeholders," was significant. For the first time the county linked itself to the mainstream of the revolutionary movement. Equally important, it provoked a Loyalist countermeasure. The county Loyalist leaders mobilized nearly four hundred people for a mass rally at the same time and place to denounce the measures of the Continental Congress and New York Whigs. They resolved to organize a Loyalist Association to oppose the Whig non-importation and nonexportation agreement and to invite others to join it. The rally was a massive political demonstration, the likes of which, in the number of people involved, had never been seen in the history of the county. At this critical phase of the contest, the Loyalists were clearly much stronger than the Whigs.¹¹

The skirmishes between British troops and American militia at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts (April 19, 1775), and the subsequent spread of armed conflict over the continent quickened the tempo of politicization and polarization. Commenting on the climate of opinion in New York City, Gouverneur Morris of the borough town of Westchester stated in early May 1775 that "not one month ago . . . Whiggism was branded with Infamy. Now each person strives to show the excess of his zeal by the madness of his actions."¹² The wild mood of the people there paralyzed the royal government. The revolutionary committee of New York City assumed control over the metropolitan area. On April 26, three days after the news from Lexington arrived in the city, the committee unanimously called for "a Provincial Congress." The Whig leaders in Westchester County met at White Plains on May 8, elected a "Committee of ninety persons" for the county under the chairmanship of Gilbert Drake, a well-to-do tenant of Cortlandt Manor, and appointed eleven deputies to the Provincial Congress. In forming a county committee three weeks before the Provincial Congress recommended doing so, the county Whig leaders were rapidly becoming front-runners in the American cause. At their prodding, subcommittees for various county towns were established. They also began placing the county in a state of defense. Acting on the directives of the Continental and Provincial congresses, they set up county militia organizations from June to September and tried to arm those supporting the Whig cause and to disarm those rejecting the Continental Association. Whig activities not only threw Loyalists on the defensive but also awed some hitherto apathetic and timid folks into joining the American side. Some newly appointed militia offices had not, until then, signed the association. Now, on the very day they were commissioned, they changed their minds, providing one measure of the Whig leaders' success in politicizing them.¹³

¹¹ Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., II, 137–38, 314–15, 321–24, 644; *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, March 20, 1775. Most of the Loyalist rally participants came from Philipsburgh, borough town of Westchester, Rye, and Cortlandt Manor. *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution, in the office of the Secretary of State* (2 vols., Albany, 1868), I, 462–63.

¹² *The Papers of Charles Lee*, 4 vols., in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* (1871–1874), IV, 178.

¹³ Thomas Jones, *History of New York during the Revolutionary War*, ed. Edward Floyd DeLancey (2 vols., New York, 1879), I, 39–42; Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., II, 400, 428; *Rivington's New York Gazetteer*, May

In the meantime, the Loyalists were not idle. They feared that “their lives” were no longer “safe among the whigs.” In the fall of 1775, they secretly started to organize into military units and arm themselves for self-defense. The Loyalists’ military preparations were active, especially in the northern section of Philipsburgh under Philipse’s proprietorship and near Peekskill in Cortlandt Manor. Westchester Loyalists planned to acquire a supply of arms and ammunition from a British warship in New York harbor. This scheme was detected by the Whigs in late October. Tensions ran high and culminated in November in a three-day clash between the armed antagonists. The Loyalists—about 250 men strong—seemed so menacing and the county militia so inadequate to suppress them that on November 8 the county committee sent for a thousand troops from Connecticut. But the Whig forces of the county managed to scatter the armed Tories and arrest their leaders (Samuel Merrit, Nathan Whitney, and Jeremiah Travis, all Cortlandt Manor men) without bloodshed before the Yankee militia arrived.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the crackdown was not sufficient to root out all Tories in the area. In the following year, the regrouped Tories continued to obstruct the Whig cause, despite such Whig precautions as disarming the Tories or obliging them to give bonds of £100 or even £500 to insure at least their neutrality. At times the Tory threat was so serious that Van Cortlandt’s presence at his home on the Croton River was required to counter it. For instance, on January 23, 1776, Van Cortlandt, then serving as chairman of the Provincial Committee of Safety at Fishkill, had to ask for a leave of absence to return home, which was granted on the grounds that his “attendance there will be of use to the public tranquillity in that part of the country.” Even after the Whig party achieved a firm political and military control over the province, Whigs remained wary of the Loyalist menace in the area. In July the Cortlandt Manor Committee of Safety petitioned the Provincial Congress for two cannons to defend two large storehouses in the manor because they were “surrounded with numbers of Tories daily” scheming to destroy them. Van Cortlandt, echoing the observations of other worried Whigs, admitted to his son Philip on July 17 that “this manor abounds with Tories.”¹⁵

The emergence of the northwestern section of the county, especially the Peekskill area, as the focal point of conflict between Whigs and Tories presents an interesting case study of revolutionary dynamics. This area had formerly been inhabited by what the partisans called “apathetic” people. As late as June 1775, one irate Whig

11, 1775; *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 64, 122, 158; *Journal of the Provincial Congress of the State of New York, 1775–1777* (2 vols., Albany, 1842), I, 1–5, 8, 18.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Merrit to William Tryon, Oct. 18, Nov. 11, 1775, vol. 1106, pp. 709, pp. 725–28, class 5, Colonial Office Papers (Public Record Office); Peter Corne to Tryon, Nov. 1, 1775, *ibid.*, 722–25; Cornelia Beekman to Philip Van Cortlandt, Nov. 12, 1775, Van Cortlandt–Van Wyck Papers (Manuscript Division, New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.); Gilbert Van Cortlandt to Philip Van Cortlandt, Nov. 13, 1775, ms. no. 11326 (New York State Library, Albany); *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 188.

¹⁵ Ezekiel Hawley to the Provincial Congress, June 22, 1776, *Journal of the Provincial Congress*, II, 196–97; Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., III, 1068; *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 473; Pierre Van Cortlandt to Philip Van Cortlandt, July 17, 1776, *Magazine of American History*, 22 (1889), 169.

writer assailed them as "very indolent." The antagonists targeted the area for a vigorous proselytizing campaign, resulting in three political addresses to its inhabitants in the first six months of 1775, something that no other part of the county experienced. Pierre Van Cortlandt, although he was just one of the two dozen proprietors of Cortlandt Manor, emerged in the summer of 1775 as the most active Whig of the manor. With the help of Gilbert and Samuel Drake (who later commanded the Westchester County Minutemen), both of the manor, he took the lead in organizing revolutionary and militia organizations that other county towns emulated. In November he also ordered the North Battalion of the Westchester County Minutemen to suppress Loyalists' organizing activities. Yet, even as he stimulated some apathetic manor residents to join his cause, he seems by his own admission to have alienated others, thus swelling the ranks of Loyalists in the manor.¹⁶

In Westchester, politicization cut several ways. Some became Whigs and others Tories. There was another division: as some were attracted to politics, others were repelled by its excesses. We may never know for sure what was responsible for this paradox. The alleged prewar antipathy between tenants and landlords was not a factor, for an overwhelming majority of the tenants in the Philipsburgh and Cortlandt manors, like others in the province, followed their landlord's lead, if they took a side at all. At least half of the Cortlandt Manor inhabitants were freeholders who had bought their lands from the manor proprietors before 1775 and were thus politically more independent than tenants. Many of the manor inhabitants, whether freeholders or tenants, opposed the Whigs, probably because they resented the Whig assault on their preferred life of neutrality. For these people loyalism was a reaction to pressure from Whig committees and militia mobilization. Some in Cortlandt Manor were probably swayed by the formidable influence of Frederick Philipse III and of hundreds of active Loyalist neighbors in Philipse's Highland Patent in Dutchess County under the lordship of his brothers-in-law, Maj. Roger Morris and Beverly Robinson, each of whom owned one-third of the patent.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in spite of the increasing militancy of the partisans, most Cortlandt Manor inhabitants, like the other residents of the county, remained neutral. The number of those committed on either side in the middle of 1776 never exceeded 20 percent of the adult male population of the manor. Except for occasional small disturbances here and there, the county at large continued to be tranquil and prosperous.¹⁸

This situation changed radically with the convergence of the main military forces of the United States and Great Britain on the county in the fall of 1776. The

¹⁶ Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., II, 644; *Journal of the Provincial Congress*, I, 304–31; *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 234, 241.

¹⁷ See Sung Bok Kim, "Impact of Class Relations and Warfare in the American Revolution: The New York Experience," *Journal of American History*, 69 (Sept. 1982), 326–46. For example, Nathaniel Merrit, a merchant and tavern keeper in Peekskill, was a favorite of Frederick Philipse III, who in 1774 recommended Merrit for the office of justice of the peace in Westchester County. "Loyalist Transcripts," vol. XXIX, p. 333 (Manuscript Division, New York Public Library); *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts*, vol. CI, pp. 67, 80 (New York State Library).

¹⁸ Kim, "Impact of Class Relations and Warfare in the American Revolution," 343. On the continuing apathy of the people, see affidavits of Peter Paulding, James Willis, and Joseph Pauling, Aug. 5, 6, 9, 1776, *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 445–46; Philip Schuyler to McDougall, March 14, 1776 (roll 1), McDougall Papers.

strategists of both countries agreed, as George Washington wrote, that the Hudson River valley was the key to control of "the communication between the eastern and southern States; and of all the posts" in North America. With this view in mind, the British invaded Staten Island, Long Island, New York City, Westchester County, and New Jersey between July and November. They set up their military headquarters in the city and ringed it with strong advance posts at outlying places. The British decision to move military operations from Boston to New York seems to have reflected two additional considerations. The British government early concluded that the Royal Army would find no inhabitants friendlier and readier to assist it than New Yorkers. And the region around New York City, particularly Westchester County and Long Island, was sufficiently rich in livestock and grains to feed and support the army. George Washington deployed his army and state militia units to prevent the British from achieving their military and economic objectives. Inevitably, Westchester County became a major theater of war, as it remained throughout the entire conflict, with devastating consequences for the lives of its people.¹⁹

The war inflicted severe wounds on the Westchester people physically and psychologically. Unlike the earlier limited struggles among inhabitants with familiar faces, this phase of war was destructive, impersonal, continual, ubiquitous, and indiscriminate in its effect. The people's travail stemmed from three aspects of the conflict. First, soldiers on the march and in battle trampled the sowed grounds; wasted orchards; destroyed houses, barns, and other buildings; cut trees; and pulled down fences for firewood. Second, marauding bands from the armies, both regular and irregular, deliberately robbed and plundered noncombatants. Finally, the rival armies impressed the inhabitants' goods, especially livestock and grains, in return for certificates. The army planners justified impressment on the ground of military necessity. But as Robert R. Livingston, a prominent revolutionary leader, admitted, "certificates . . . lost their credit from the uncertainty and difficulty that attends their payment." To victims forced to surrender the means of their livelihood in return for certificates of uncertain value, the line between impressment and plundering was blurred. Both did violence not only to their property but also to their persons and their dignity. Equally important, the war hurt almost everyone in the county regardless of political creed or affiliation; Loyalists, Whigs, and neutrals all suffered these depredations.²⁰

Indiscriminate military violence to the Westchester inhabitants began with the Battle of White Plains in October and November of 1776, where the main armies

¹⁹ Washington to Putnam, Dec. 2, 1777, in *Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795, 1801-1804*, ed. Hugh Hastings (10 vols., New York, 1899-1914), II, 561-62; Jonathan Boucher to [William Knox?], Nov. 27, 1775, *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 8 (Sept. 1913), 250-51; Henry Clinton to unknown, March 14, 1776, Sir Henry Clinton Papers (William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mich.); Tryon to William Howe, Dec. 13, 1775, *ibid.*

²⁰ Robert R. Livingston to Washington, Jan. 14, 1778, vol. II, Robert R. Livingston Papers (Manuscript Division, New York Public Library); Thomas Wharton to Nathanael Greene, May 7, 1778, in *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard K. Showman (2 vols., Chapel Hill, 1976), II, 376; Greene to Washington, Feb. 20, 1778, *ibid.*

of Washington and Maj. Gen. Sir William Howe joined in combat. The destruction and plundering of civilian property by the troops before and during the battle were so widespread and complaints so frequent that both commanders issued orders on October 31 strictly forbidding plundering. Col. Stephen Kemble, an aide to General Howe, admitted in his diary, "The Country all this time [was] unmercifully pillaged by our Troops, Hessians in particular. No wonder if the country people refused to join us." The British and Hessians committed these offenses all along the road they marched, in and around Eastchester, New Rochelle, Mamaroneck, Yonkers, and Dobbs Ferry, all the way to White Plains. Friends and foes alike were stripped of "every necessary of life," and even the "wearing apparel of women and children" was not spared. Sometimes a company of ten or twenty looted systematically. About seven hundred Loyalist rangers under Col. Robert Rogers made almost daily incursions into the county and wasted and destroyed all that they could not take with them.²¹

The American troops, especially New England units, that were dispatched to check the enemy's movements and to protect the inhabitants were no less abusive to the civilians and rapacious of their property. Consider the behavior of six New England regiments (about fifteen hundred strong) under Gen. Joseph Spencer of Connecticut. Soon after the battle, the distressed county inhabitants pleaded with him for protection. He refused. Instead he announced that he thought them "not worth defending" and that if the enemy should appear again, his troops would "retreat to the borders of Connecticut," where they would take a stand. Col. Jedidiah Huntington of Connecticut was rather glad that the American troops burned "a few houses" at White Plains upon their retreat because leveling the village would deprive the enemy of an incentive to penetrate into the country. When women and children cried and begged the troops to spare their houses and barns, all they got from the soldiers was insulting words. John Thomas, chairman of the Westchester County Committee of Safety, charged in December that "many of the Eastern troops, while in our country, instead of protecting its inhabitants from the enemy, did plunder and distress them more than the very enemy themselves, taking off with them our stock, household furniture, and even our farming utensils."²²

Facts bear out this charge. During the Battle of White Plains, New England troops, without "any necessity," burned down the county courthouse and most of

²¹ Colonel Stephen Kemble's *Journal and British Army Orders, 1775-1778*, 2 vols., in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* (1883-1884), I, 309; *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle, Secretary to Lord Howe, 1776-1778* (San Marino, 1940), 176; Tryon to Lord George Germain, Nov. 28, 1776, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, ed. Callaghan and Fernow, VIII, 692. Bernhard A. Uhlendorf, trans., *Revolution in America: Confidential Letters and Journals, 1776-1784, of Adjutant General Major Baurmeister of the Hessian Forces* (New Brunswick, 1957), 65; Benjamin Trumbull, "Journal of the Campaign at New York, 1776-77," *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* (1899), 209-10; Robert R. Livingston to Edward Rutledge, Nov. 13, 1776, vol. I, pp. 281-83, Robert R. Livingston Papers; *Papers of Charles Lee*, II, 273, 322.

²² John Thomas et al. to New York State Convention, Dec. 23, 1776, in *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 563-65; Jedidiah Huntington to Jonathan Trumbull, Nov. 7, 1776, in *American Archives*, ed. Force, 5th ser., III, 559. On thieving and looting at other places, see Louise Rau, ed., "Sergeant John Smith's Diary of 1776," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 20 (Sept. 1933), 263.

the dwelling houses and barns full of grain and hay in the town. It did not matter to them whether the goods and houses belonged to fervent Whigs. One victim, who had served as an officer in the recent Canadian expedition, found his house ransacked, "his desk split to pieces," his money, books, and papers taken away by "our own troops," and his tavern and barn torched to the ground.²³ The Yankees, who disliked Yorkers for their worldliness and ambivalence toward the Revolution, apparently felt no compassion for a people in anguish and acted as if Westchester were a free zone for looting and destruction. Another angry New Yorker was mortified and insulted to hear the Yankees' daily "boasts" that they were obliged to protect New York, "when their chief business" was to "abuse and plunder" its many "respectable and patriotic" citizens. On behalf of the New York State Convention, Pierre Van Cortlandt protested to the Continental Congress in November, "Whenever our troops have marched or been stationed, they have done infinite damage to the possessions and farms, and pilfered the property of the people." Washington repeatedly issued orders against such outrages and court-martialed arsonists and marauders, but the behavior of the raw and undisciplined soldiers did not improve fast.²⁴

The distress of people near the enemy line was aggravated by military impressment. Knowing how much the British needed livestock and other provisions, Washington was determined to make these, even "a blade," unavailable. "What can not be removed," he argued, "should be consumed without the least hesitation." In accordance with this policy, Gen. Charles Lee ordered his two brigades, beginning at Yonkers and proceeding northward, to collect all the "stout and able horses—all the Cattle fat and lean—all the sheep and hogs" except some milk cows and a few hogs necessary for the "immediate subsistence for the Families." The foraging parties were also told to compel the civilians to "deliver up all their Blankets and Coverings" leaving only one to each person. As an afterthought, Lee added that troops on this mission were not to "plunder or insult the wretch'd people." Although the policy was adopted out of military necessity and the inhabitants were given certificates for the goods taken, the distinction between "official" confiscation and nonofficial plundering was probably lost on much of the populace. In one respect, impressment, compensated or not, was much more serious than mere sporadic plundering because it threatened to deprive the people of their livelihood by destroying the livestock industry.²⁵

²³ Otto Hufeland, *Westchester County during the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (White Plains, 1926), 55–56.

²⁴ William Duer to Abraham Ten Broeck, Feb. 25, 1777 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; Pierre Van Cortlandt to John Hancock, Nov. 20, 1776, *Journal of the Provincial Congress*, I, 11, 211; Pierre Van Cortlandt to William Heath, Dec. 3, 1776, in *The Van Cortlandt Family Papers*, ed. Jacob Judd (4 vols., Tarrytown, 1976–1978), II, 138.

²⁵ Washington to William Livingston, Nov. 7, 1776, Letter Book A, 1697–1776 (microfilm: roll 5), William Livingston Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston); "Instructions to General Nixon," Nov. 22, 1776, in *Papers of Charles Lee*, II, 302. In December 1776, the New York Committee of Safety ordered militia units to remove all forage, grain, and livestock from parts of the county exposed to enemy incursions, to burn everything along the county shores of the sound as far eastward as Rye, and to impress oats and wagons. The Committee of Safety to George Clinton, Dec. 12, 1776, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, I, 462–63. I am thankful to E. Wayne Carp for calling my attention to his book. He analyzes the elaborate impressment procedures estab-

The pattern of the Westchester experience was set during the first three months of war in the county. American and British forces fought back and forth over the real estate between their lines. The British advance post line ran from Kingsbridge to West Farm. That of the Americans, whose headquarters were at Peekskill, extended westward from Mamaroneck on the sound to Dobbs Ferry on the Hudson. The area between the opposing lines, which became known as the "Neutral Ground," inevitably suffered the worst depredations, although areas behind the lines were not immune to similar ravages.²⁶

After the main military conflict shifted in 1777 to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the area near Lake Champlain and Lake George, the British forces in the lower Hudson Valley concentrated on procuring livestock, destroying American military stores, recruiting Loyalists, and punishing Whig leaders. These tasks were carried out by Loyalist troops such as the Queen's Rangers under Robert Rogers, Lt. Col. Andrew Emmerick, and Oliver and James De Lancey. Their incursions were far-ranging, daring, well coordinated, and, in the words of the Whig county committee, "Night after Night." The inhabitants along the shores of the Hudson River were "continually insulted" by the enemy's navy. A number of the county Whig leaders, including Thomas and Peter Van Tassel of Philipsburgh, were captured, their houses and stores destroyed, and their valuables pillaged. So thorough and systematic was the Loyalist army that during a two-week period in the spring of 1777 it hauled away more than five hundred cattle and "a large number" of horses, sheep, and hogs.²⁷ In the face of this depressing situation, the New York State Convention requested Gen. Alexander McDougall, commander of the American forces at Peekskill, to provide protection for the county. But the American army was not often obliging. Now and then it launched retaliatory strikes venturing as far as Morrisiana. General McDougall confessed that he could not afford county inhabitants the protection they wished. Meanwhile some of the American army contingents were prone to destroy fences, which were "of the utmost importance to the proprietors," and to

lished by state legislatures, but the procedures were not always followed, and they broke down more often between the lines. See E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, 1984), esp. ch. 4.

²⁶ I found the earliest use of this phrase in Joshua H. Smith's memorial to the British Parliament, Dec. 16, 1784, vol. CI, p. 173, class 12, Audit Office Series.

²⁷ On the Queen's Rangers, see Robert Rogers to Daniel Strang, Dec. 30, 1776, *William Heath Papers*, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (1904-1905), 7th ser., IV, 50-51. Brig. Gen. Oliver De Lancey strictly and repeatedly forbade marauding, plundering, and unauthorized impressment by his troops. His orders, however, did not seem to have much effect on his soldiers' behavior. *Orderly Book of the Three Battalions of Loyalists Commanded by Brigadier-General Oliver DeLancey 1776-1778* (New York, 1917), 5, 9, 11, 21, 23-24, 35, 39, 44, 50, 52, 59, 75. As for James De Lancey's activities in 1777, see Abraham Leggett to George Clinton, Dec. 6, 1777, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, II, 565-66. On the Loyalist foraging, see *New York Gazette & Weekly Mercury*, March 24, 1777; Duer to McDougall, Feb. 17, 1777 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; "Extract from the Minutes of the Convention of the Representatives of the State of New York," April 7, 1777, *ibid.*; McDougall to Convention of New York State, April 4, May 16, 1777, *ibid.*; Petition of General Committee for the County of Westchester, April 3, Aug. 18, 1777, in *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, II, 64-65, 278; Richard Hatfield to George Clinton, May 9, 1777, *ibid.*, I, 801-2; Samuel H. Parsons to Tryon, Nov. 21, 1777, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, ed. Callaghan and Fernow, VIII, 735; "List of Houses burnt at Peek's Kill," *New York Gazette & Weekly Mercury*, March 31, 1777.

plunder. The town of Peekskill, consisting of about sixty houses, was deserted by its inhabitants because soldiers had wasted their enclosures, rendering the land unfit for livestock farming. General McDougall lamented in the summer of 1777 that the American army marked its footsteps with "dreadful havoc" and that it had already made a lot of "Tories" as it marched from Kingsbridge to Peekskill. In the meantime, impressment went on unabated.²⁸

Other evils afflicted the people. The disruption of agriculture threatened to pauperize them. Famine threatened parts of the county where the waste and desolations by the armies were most acute. Malnutrition was another problem as the procurement of such daily necessities as salt became increasingly difficult when trade was cut off. A related danger was the threat of such contagious diseases as smallpox, dysentery, and the variety of infections known as "camp disorder," all of which contending armies spread among the civilian population. Never before in the history of the county had its inhabitants encountered a concatenation of forces so violent and menacing as the revolutionary war.²⁹

What did the county inhabitants do under these circumstances? Some took refuge in such places as Dutchess County to the north and New York City to the south, remote from the scene of conflict. Some enlisted in the British or Loyalist army and some in the American army. We will never be certain about their motives and numbers. We know, however, that in the fall of 1776, sixty Cortlandt Manor people joined the British army. Since there were about 180 families on the manor, as many as one out of every three manor families thus contributed directly to the Crown cause.³⁰ Some county residents became politicized to support one side after they had been hurt by its antagonist. In contrast, Francis Pemart, a Whig of Peekskill, joined the British army after British forces destroyed his store, which had contained enormous quantities of American military supplies. As the Pemart case suggests, politicization of the inhabitants was not always a hostile reaction to the armies' assault on their persons and property, although some partisan leaders hoped for such political conversions. But when indiscriminate atrocities of equal intensity were committed by both sides, the politicizing effects were likely to cancel each other out.

²⁸ McDougall to Convention of New York State, March 22, April 21, 1777 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; McDougall to Putnam, July 22, 1777, *ibid.*; David Wooster to Duer, Feb. 15, 1777, *ibid.*; Duer to McDougall, Feb. 25, 1777, *ibid.*; "Report on General Putnam's Letters," [Aug. 1777], *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, II, 264–65.

²⁹ *American Journal of Ambrose Serle*, 182; Robert R. Livingston to Duer, July 3, 1778, box 4, Robert R. Livingston Collection (New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.). I do not have direct evidence of epidemic illness among Westchester families, but in other parts of the country, disease spread from armies to civilians; I assume that Westchester County risked the same problem. On disease in the American army in the county, see George Clinton to John McKesson, Oct. 31, 1776, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, I, 399–400; McDougall to Washington, April 3, 1778 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; Trumbull, "Journal of the Campaign at New York," 191, 204; *Journal of Lieutenant John Charles Philip Von Kraft* (New York, 1968), 93; William Van Horne to brother, Oct. 6, 1778, in "Revolutionary War Letters," ed. William E. Van Horne, *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 53 (April 1970), 121–22.

³⁰ About thirty tenant families of Philipsburgh Manor took refuge in Dutchess County. See "Petition" to New York State Legislature, March 12, 1782, *Tarrytown Argus*, April 28, 1894. *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, I, 485; Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York*, 273, 181–82.

Pecuniary considerations probably induced more people to join the military. To some impoverished Westchester males, joining the army perhaps seemed the best recourse for survival and the most generous employer. Military service, though risky, also offered the opportunity to plunder. Soldiers who found such opportunities attractive committed frequent robberies in the county, leading many common folk to think of both armies as "Robbers" and not as protectors.³¹

But soldiering was never an option for women, children, and older men. Many inhabitants of Westchester had nowhere else to go and were forced to live with the calamities of war. During the prewar period, they had at least controlled their own private lives, thanks to their inconspicuous government. Now, sandwiched between brutal military forces, they found themselves incapable of doing even that. This situation bred despair, cynicism, a sense of helplessness, and, above all, anomie in these people. If they had been active politically before, they now became depoliticized and apathetic, for, as Gen. Nathanael Greene wrote to Washington, no person's native "virtue" was "equal to constant sufferings." If they had been apathetic, their war experience reinforced this attitude. The only struggle that gripped them was the one for survival. The most perceptive firsthand observation of the everyday attitudes and behavior in Westchester was offered by Timothy Dwight, who, as a chaplain of the American army, resided in the county in the fall of 1777. Writing four decades later, he vividly recalled what he had seen.

The unhappy inhabitants were . . . exposed to the depredations of both [armies]. Often they were actually plundered, and always were liable to this calamity. They feared everybody who they saw and loved nobody. It was a curious fact to a philosopher and a melancholy one, to hear their conversation. To every question they gave such an answer as would please the inquirer; or, if they despaired of pleasing, such a one as would not provoke him. Fear apparently was the only passion by which they were animated. The power of volition seemed to have deserted them. They were not civil, but obsequious; not obliging but subservient. They yielded with a kind of apathy, and very quietly, what you asked. . . . Both their countenances and motions had lost every trace of animation and feeling. Their features were smoothed, not into serenity, but apathy; and instead of being settled in the attitude of quiet thinking, strongly indicated that all thought beyond what was merely instinctive had fled their minds forever.

Their houses in the meantime were in a great measure scenes of desolation. Their furniture was extensively plundered or broken to pieces. The walls, floors,

³¹ William Whipple to unknown, Jan. 15, 1777, no. 2, folder LII, Sparks Manuscript (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.); William Livingston's message to the New Jersey legislature, Jan. 24, 1777, Revolutionary Era Manuscripts, MG 4 (New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, N.J.); Pemart's memorial to Parliament, [1786], vol. XXVI, p. 79, class 12, Audit Office Series; *New York Gazette & Weekly Mercury*, March 31, 1777. Some joined the British side because the American forces appeared to be weak and losing. See Kim, "Impact of Class Relations and Warfare in the American Revolution," 345. Regarding the financial motive, see *Calendar of Historical Manuscripts Relating to the War of the Revolution*, II, 122–23; Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., V, 1473–74, VI, 1032, 5th ser., III, 1237; and Callaghan and Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, VIII, 680. On the military as robbers, see June 24, 1777, *Minutes of the Committee and of the First Commission for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York*. . . . (2 vols., New York, 1924–1926), II, 324.

and windows were injured both by violence and decay, and were not repaired because they had not the means of repairing them, and because they were exposed to the repetition of the same injuries. Their cattle were gone. Their enclosures were burnt where they were capable of becoming fuel, and in many cases thrown down where they were not. Their fields were covered with a rank growth of weeds and wild grass. Amid all this appearance of desolation, nothing struck my own eye more forcibly than the sight of this great road, the passage from New York to Boston. Where I had heretofore seen a continual succession of horses and carriages, and life and bustle lent a sprightliness to all the environing objects, not a single, solitary traveler was visible from week to week, or from month to month. The world was motionless and silent, except when one of these unhappy people ventured upon a rare and lonely excursion to the house of a neighbor, no less unhappy; or a scouting party, traversing the country in quest of enemies, alarmed the inhabitants with expectations of new injuries and sufferings.

Any gloss to this remarkable quotation would be superfluous.³²

Such a state of mind would not have developed or persisted had either adversary been able to extend complete control over, and protection to, the county. But neither army was able to dominate Westchester, and the best that either could do was to challenge the other's efforts. Neither the British nor the American commanders desired, especially after 1778, to throw their main armies into the county in order to "hazard a general action." The American army's "Fabian" and "feeble" mode of fighting often let the enemy penetrate deep into the country. The revolutionary government that could not provide "Protection" to the inhabitants did not seem morally justified in demanding their "allegiance," as an informer warned Gov. George Clinton of New York. As a battleground subject to frequent retaliatory violence between two armies, the county endured a collective torment that left its residents confused and oblivious to the moral issues of the Revolution.³³

Imperatives of survival dictated that Westchester people pledge their overt allegiance to neither contestant and encouraged them to traffic with anyone who offered profit or needed goods. Many of them brought livestock and agricultural produce to New York City (within the British lines), for which they received coveted hard cash and imported merchandise. The trade was risky, but it was so lucrative that many people in Connecticut and New Jersey—including Whigs—sought a lion's share of it. The more their farm work was disrupted, the more eagerly Westchester residents pursued this line of business to recoup their losses. In 1779, General McDougall took note of "large quantities of Hard money in the Hands of various persons Whigs and Tories on the eastern borders [of New York State] and the South

³² Nathanael Greene to Washington, April 20, 1778, in *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Showman, II, 355; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara M. Solomon (1821-1822; 4 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1969), III, 345-46.

³³ Alexander Hamilton to Robert R. Livingston, June 28, 1777, in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (26 vols., New York, 1961-1979), I, 275-76; Gouverneur Morris to Hamilton, July 4, 1777, *ibid.*, 279; Washington to George Clinton, Oct. 18, 1780, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VI, 315; Thomas Smith to George Clinton, April 27, 1777, *ibid.*, I, 743-44.

Western part of Connecticut," which he suspected derived from their trade with the enemy. At the same time, Westchester farmers, like their fellow citizens in other states, were very reluctant to sell their goods to the American army for rapidly depreciating paper money or for certificates. Their behavior in both instances, though inspired less by pro-British or anti-American sentiment than by necessity or greed, rendered them odious to the American army and government leaders.³⁴

From 1778 on, the American and British forces depended increasingly on local sources for provisions, Americans because of poor logistical management and the loss of credit by state and Continental governments, and the British because of the French navy's threat to their supply line from home. A fierce scramble developed between them for livestock, hay, vegetables, dairy products, and grains. Both resorted to more frequent foraging expeditions into the area. Inevitably, the amount of available forage diminished, and the armies were compelled to cover a wider territory in their sorties. Even communities with no strategic military value, such as Bedford and Crompond, which had been safe from British incursions in 1776 and 1777, became vulnerable in subsequent years. Whatever the primary reason for the movement of armed forces, the military always brought violence to civilians. To be sure, plundering by the Continental Army declined noticeably as the plan of discipline introduced in 1778 by Friedrich Wilhelm, Baron von Steuben, gradually bore fruit. But the view of the American army as composed of robbers persisted because local militia units, the French army, and such irregular armed groups in American service as the so-called Skinners and Refuges resorted to the practice. The British and Hessian troops' pillaging activities continued unchecked. The Cowboys led by the De Lancey brothers (James and John) and other Loyalist units, none of which were on the British quartermaster rolls, were given a free hand to support themselves and their families by looting local neutrals and Whigs.³⁵

Several important examples of economic warfare by the military illustrate the dispiriting and pathetic experience of the people of Westchester. The uninterrupted flow of livestock and other necessities from and via the county to New York City and Westchesterites' refusal to sell the same goods to the American army angered Gen. John Nixon. On July 25, 1778, he sent his ill-clad and ill-fed troops—twenty-

³⁴ Benjamin Tallmadge to George Clinton, Sept. 23, 1780, no. 2, XLIX, Sparks Manuscript; McDougall to George Clinton, April 5, 1778, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, III, 131–33; Samuel H. Parsons to George Clinton, Feb. 16, 1778, *ibid.*, II, 763–64; Samuel Townsend to George Clinton, Aug. 29, 1780, *ibid.*, VI, 148–49; Utney Hay to the Supervisors, assessors & Justices of the peace in the State of New York, June 1780, *ibid.*, V, 848–52; McDougall to Washington, Jan. 5, 1779 (roll 3), McDougall Papers; Herman Swift to Theodore Woodbridge, April 6, 1779, Theodore Woodbridge Papers (Connecticut Historical Society, New Haven, Conn.).

³⁵ Samuel Drake to George Clinton, June 10, 1779 (microfilm: roll 14) (Morristown Historical Park Collections, Morristown, N.J.); *Rivington's Royal Gazette*, May 16, 1780. On the diminishing forage in the county, see Persifer Frazer to his wife, Oct. 2, 1778, "Frazer Letters, 1776–78," folder XXI, Sparks Manuscript. For the French army's pillaging in Westchester County, see *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VII, 110; Thomas Balch, ed., and William Duane, trans., *Journal of Claude Blanchard . . . 1780–1783* (Albany, 1876), 123. Catherine S. Cray presents the Cowboys as well disciplined and not prone to plundering, but available evidence does not support her contention. Catherine S. Cray, "Guerrilla Activities of James DeLancey's Cowboys in Westchester County: Conventional Warfare or Self-Interested Freebooting?," in *The Loyalist Americans: A Focus on Greater New York*, ed. Robert A. East and Jacob Judd (Tarrytown, 1975), 14–24.

five hundred strong—to “collect all the live stock” from the people living “between the Two Armies,” that is, in the swath of neutral ground between the Long Island Sound and the Hudson River. This massive, two-day foraging expedition was a splendid success, according to his report. But it was an extremely painful event for those “men and women the owners of stock” who followed the returning troops all the way to White Plains “with dejected countenances, soliciting indulgence, as if they had lost their All.” At another time, General McDougall ordered the Quaker residents near Mamaroneck to convey twenty tons of hay and two hundred bushels of oats, rye, or Indian corn to the army. If they refused, he threatened that he would “send the bayonet among them.” Indeed, responding to growing criticism of the practice of impressment by the American army wherever it operated, Nathanael Greene articulated the army officers’ typical mentality when he wrote in August 1780 that it was “impossible to carry on a war without oppressing the inhabitants in some degree” and that foraging for the support of the army was justifiable to advance “the common good and general safety.” Even Timothy Pickering, quartermaster general of the United States Army, was accused of having “committed lawless and daring depredations on Public and private Property” in the county by taking things from its inhabitants without giving the “usual certificates” on the grounds that the army was in a conquered area.³⁶

The Refuges and Skinners were notorious for their “Spirit of Plunder” and “love of gain.” Operating behind and within the lines, they “skinned” their victims first and asked about their political affiliation later. In 1780, a Whig leader from Westchester was so distraught over the barbaric practices of “our own Plunderers” that in the name of “humanity” he urged Governor Clinton to strengthen the county civil authority, which had been totally inadequate to “punish” the offenders. But the state government did nothing effective to redress the grievances of the civilians. According to Gen. William Heath, some of these Refuges employed an ingenious method of enriching themselves at the expense of both the “well affected” and innocent people. They robbed the inhabitants between the lines of the opposing armies of their cattle. Having brought the animals to the north side of the Croton River, they kindled fires, discharged their muskets, and then drove up the cattle, “pretending” that they had defeated the Loyalist Cowboys and retaken the cattle, which they then sold at vendue. They often insulted, whipped, beat, and occasionally hanged the inhabitants to extort money and other valuables from them. In the spring of 1780, General Heath wrote that he feared that such atrocities had already “driven a very considerable number to join the enemy” for protection, and that they would supply “more recruits” for the enemy than Tory recruiters.³⁷

³⁶ John Nixon to John Sullivan, July 25, 1778, in *Letters and Papers of Major-General John Sullivan*, 3 vols., in *Collections of the New Hampshire Historical Society* (1930–1939), II, 120; “Return of Forage Received” (roll 3), McDougall Papers. See also Tallmadge to George Clinton, Sept. 23, 1780, no. 2, folder XLIX, Sparks Manuscript; Richard Platt to David Tuttle and others, Jan. 1779 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; Greene to Joseph Reed, Aug. 1, 1780, folder L, Sparks Manuscript; Stephen Ward, “Minutes of a meeting of Refuges from Westchester County,” Aug. 22, 1781 (microfilm: roll 2), James Duane Papers (New-York Historical Society).

³⁷ Tallmadge to George Clinton, Sept. 23, 1780, no. 2, folder XLIX, Sparks Manuscript; Kent Foster,

Even the county militia units, Col. Aaron Burr reported, seemed to have more "itch" for indiscriminate plundering than for fighting the enemy. Some of them became revengeful after they were robbed by the Cowboys, but they directed their wrath not only at the Tories but at others as well, even prominent Whig families. Burr was embarrassed to report to his superior in 1779 that his militia came back from an expedition to New Rochelle and Frog's Neck "loaded with plunder" (horses and other goods) belonging to some of the "most friendly families."³⁸ Gerard G. Beekman, Jr., writing to his father-in-law, Pierre Van Cortlandt, drew in vivid detail a picture of the barbarities committed by the county militia against the friendly residents in Cortlandt Manor. One day in June 1779, a detachment under Col. Samuel Drake came to Peekskill and started to terrorize the residents by "cutting them and beating them with their drawn swords." Some of the militia soldiers put their pistols to the "Breast of a woman in [the] Neighborhood who had [been] laying in but 3 or 4 days." Another detachment, which came to the Beekman house already drunk, ordered Cornelia Beekman, Gerard's wife, to "fill their bottles with spirits." When she refused, they threatened to kill her using the most "scurrilous language imaginable." Beekman's little son Pierre, having heard "so much of the enemy's Light horse," mistook the Whig soldiers for enemies when "these fellows came up to the house with swords drawing and coming on in so furious a manner." The child was so frightened that his parents were afraid that he would "get fits." No doubt many adults were as terrified as the child. One can only imagine the treatment accorded common folks, given the militiamen's bold abuse of the members of the Van Cortlandt family.³⁹

The British and Hessian troops and the Cowboys were as bad as their armed opponents except that, rather than impress goods, they robbed and burned. In July 1779, Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton destroyed the villages of Bedford and Pound Ridge because their residents appeared to be uncooperative. In plundering, the British "did not leave as much as an Iron pott." Near Croton on the Hudson, "Tories have been plundered as much as W[h]igs." "Merritt, Field's, Hayns, Barrot, [and] all the Tuttles, have been well strip'd in and out Doors." Westchesterites expected such incidents to hurt the predators' cause. After this, the victims, who had been pro-Tory, became "all Whigs," a Whig observer reported in 1779. One resident, James Spock, was "Robbed of everything even shoes and buckles."⁴⁰ In 1780, a Loyalist cavalry unit

"Westchester—A House Divided," *New York History*, 28 (Oct. 1947), 407–8; Heath to George Clinton, Nov. 1, 1780, March 1781, Dec. 31, 1779, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VI, 365–66, 704, V, 438–39; petition of Westchester County inhabitants to George Clinton, Sept. 1, 1779, *ibid.*, 253–54.

³⁸ McDougall to George Clinton, Jan. 20, 27, 1777 (roll 2), McDougall Papers; Aaron Burr to McDougall, Feb. 18, 1779, *ibid.*; Daniel Lyman to Egbert Benson, Dec. 17, 1780, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VI, 501–3; George Clinton to Thomas Thomas, Dec. 16, 1780, *ibid.*; James Millen to George Clinton, March 9, 1780, *ibid.*, V, 552–53; Elijah Hunter to George Clinton, April 17, 1780, *ibid.*, 639–41; Nathaniel Underhill to George Clinton, May 2, 1780, *ibid.*, 677; Burr to McDougall, Jan. 13, 1779, in Matthew L. Davis, ed., *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* (2 vols., New York, 1836–1837), I, 142–43.

³⁹ Gerard G. Beekman, Jr., to Pierre Van Cortlandt, June 29, 1779, Van Cortlandt–Van Wyck Papers; Pierre Van Cortlandt to Philip Van Cortlandt, June 30, 1779, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dorothy H. Hinit et al., comps., *The Burning of Bedford, July 1779* (Bedford, 1974); Henry Glen to William Van Ingen, Oct. 6, 1778, Henry Glen & Yates Manuscripts (New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown,

drove off "about 300 head of sheep and about 200 head of cattle" near North Castle and plundered "all those clothing." On their return march, the marauders broke "all those windows of the houses and everything they could find." These Cowboys' depredations were almost daily events. A Hessian officer on one of the British foraging expeditions to Tarrytown and White Plains in 1778 reported watching "some" of his men go berserk in plundering all along the road; many of the houses they entered were left in ruins, although the soldiers had been "strictly" warned "not to take anything from the people in their houses." He ruefully conceded that "even when they were caught in the act," the "punishment" never matched the "prohibition." However, the Hessians were not forbidden to take farmers' livestock, which they carried around on their shoulders and carriages. In the nine months between September 1781 and May 1782, they took sixty-nine horses and fifteen cattle from the forty-five inhabitants in the southeastern part of Cortlandt Manor.⁴¹

Various contemporary observers of the situation and emotional state of the inhabitants in the county near the end of the war used such adjectives as "almost desolate," "exhausted," "debilitated," "truly deplorable," and "almost incredible." The war deprived the area of its life, its beauty, its rich harvest, and its earlier prosperity. Gen. John Stark of the American army noted in 1780 that in the country below White Plains, scarcely a farmer had "more than one cow" and many were "now reduced to indiscriminate poverty." Such physical and economic exhaustion profoundly affected people's minds, especially when military violence was ever close to them and directed at them indiscriminately. Constant fear, anxiety, and worries for their safety and sustenance were their major psychological companions for eight long years of war and drained them of any political commitments and norms, if they had ever had them. Gen. Samuel H. Parsons of the American army wrote Governor Clinton in 1778 that in Westchester the result of inhabitants' war experience was that even "good Whigs" were "determined" to do nothing for their cause. After all, as they saw it, politics had brought this scourge to their once peaceful and flourishing county. A minister in an area similarly ravaged by both British and American armies found the residents became so obsessed with their biological and instinctive drives that they neglected their "spiritual needs." The people whose behavior had so impressed Timothy Dwight in the fall of 1777 were still there in 1782, probably even more apathetic, cynical, and anxious for an uneventful private life.⁴²

N.Y.); Gilbert Van Cortlandt to Pierre Van Cortlandt, June 25, 1779, Van Cortlandt-Van Wyck Papers; Beekman to Pierre Van Cortlandt, n.d. [1779], *ibid.*

⁴¹ Richard Sackett to George Clinton, July 2, 1780 (roll 4), Morristown Historical Park Collections; Thomas to George Clinton, March 13, Sept. 9, 1780, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, V, 539-40, VI, 187; *Journal of Lieutenant John Charles Philip Von Kraft*, 61, 63-65; Uhlendorf, trans., *Revolution in America*, 536-37; "An Account of the No. of Horses & Cattle Stolen by the Enemy" (roll 2), McDougall Papers.

⁴² John Stark to Heath, Nov. 30, 1780, in Caleb Stark, *Memoir and Official Correspondence of General John Stark* (Concord, Vt., 1860), 203-4; Thomas to George Clinton, Dec. 20, 1781, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VII, 605; "Memorial . . . of Westchester County Officers and inhabitants," Dec. 1781, *ibid.*, 629-31; James Thatcher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution, from the Commencement to the Disbanding of the American Army* (Hartford, 1862), 618; Parsons to George Clinton, March 16, 1778, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, III, 49-50. The phrase about "spiritual needs" is from the observations made in 1780 by

Was the Westchester County experience unique? The answer is both yes and no. It was unique in the sense that no other area of the United States except the New Jersey shoreline near New York City and Orange County on the west side of the Hudson River suffered depredations by the armed antagonists so often and so constantly. Military conflict was intense around Boston, Providence, towns along either side of Long Island Sound, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Savannah, Charlestown, and the backcountry of South and North Carolina, but it did not last long, and the intervals of respite gave the inhabitants a chance to restore order to their lives. Nevertheless, the American people in general, even when spared naked violence, labored under prolonged stress. Their government imposed enormous and constant demands on their money, service, loyalty, and patience to prosecute war. It was not easy for them to meet these demands.

The governments at various levels compelled people to bear unprecedented tax burdens, provide men and goods for the army, accept the increasingly worthless money, and follow the ever-growing number of regulations. Never before had these Americans been subject to so much compulsion and exaction for so long a time. They had to contend also with the disruption of economic and family life due to the drafting of their menfolk; with the shortage of food, firewood (especially in cities), and salt; with the extremely chaotic currency system and unbridled inflation; with the ever-present danger of contagious diseases; and even with growing robberies on the highways and at home. At the beginning of the war, under the spell of a *rage militaire*, Whig leaders had preferred such words as "glorious," "sacred," and "providential." From 1778 on, the debilitating effects of the conflict prompted both leaders and followers to call the war "calamitous," "costly," and "ruinous."⁴³

Exhausted and uncertain of the outcome of the war as the Continental Army provided its "feeble" defense from 1778 to 1781, the people of the United States turned to the pursuit of selfish ends and material gains more than to public causes. Even the symbols representing the pride of America and freedom failed to excite them. Thus, in the summer of 1782, the country folks from around the city of Albany were conspicuously absent when Washington made his first visit to the town, although it was publicized by dedicated Whig leaders as the arrival of "the greatest character in the world" and "the Deliverer of their country." As one concerned Whig in South Carolina remarked in 1779, "a spirit of money-making has eaten up our patriotism. Our morals are more depreciated than our currency." Another regretted in 1782 that the "public spirit of our people" seems to have "vanished." Almost every

the Rev. Nicholas Collin, a Swedish rector in Raccoon and Penn's Neck, New Jersey. Amandus Johnson, trans., *The Journal and Biography of Nicholas Collin, 1746-1831: The Journal Translated from the Original Swedish Manuscript* (Philadelphia, 1936), 254-55.

⁴³ On the tax burden during the Revolution, see Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York, 1971). On Americans' enthusiasm at the beginning of the war, see Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*. On the exhausted and demoralized condition of Connecticut at the end of the war, see Richard Buell, Jr., *Dear Liberty: Connecticut Mobilization for the Revolutionary War* (Middletown, 1980).

American leader bemoaned the noticeable decline in public virtue. The people, or many of them, appeared to be depoliticized. In this sense, the Westchester experience was surely extreme, but it was not wholly exceptional.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Leonard Gansevoort, Jr., to Leonard Bronk, June 30, 1782, in *Letters from a Revolution, 1775-1783*, ed. Raymond Beecher (Albany, 1973), 42-43; David Ramsay to William Drayton, Sept. 1, 1779, in *Documentary History of the American Revolution, 1776-1782*, ed. Robert W. Gibbes (New York, 1857), 121-22; John Matthews to Francis Marion, Sept. 18, 1782, *ibid.*, 228; William Davis to Marion, Sept. 20, 1782, *ibid.*, 229; J. Huntington to Jeremiah Wadsworth, Huntington Papers, in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* (1923), 150; P. E. Du Simitiere to George Clinton, May 15, 1781, in *Public Papers of George Clinton*, ed. Hastings, VI, 870-71; Schuyler to "Gentlemen," Nov. 3, 1780, *ibid.*, 377-78; Schuyler to Hamilton, Nov. 12, 1780 (roll 50), Morristown Historical Park Collections; Diary of Christopher Marshall, April 12, 1781 (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.); Greene to brother Jacob, Feb. 7, 1778, in *Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Showman, II, 277; Josiah Bartlet to Whipple, June 19, 1779, in *The Papers of Josiah Bartlet*, ed. Frank C. Mevers (Hanover, 1979), 256-57.

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