

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Points of Light: Continental Army Chaplains and Civil Relations

John Brinsfield, PhD, DMin^a

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U.S. Army chaplains have been engaged with civil and religious authorities from the beginning. Chaplains who served in the American Revolution came from local churches or from college faculties. Whether they arrived with militia units or as individual volunteers, they came with the support of their home communities. Although they did not use the exact term at that time, many leaders, clergy and laity alike, understood the center of gravity of the Army to be the spirit and determination of the men and women to endure until victory was achieved. Chaplain presence and encouragement reinforced that strength. This article explores why chaplains were included in the organization of the U.S. Army from its formation during the American Revolution, and why they were seen as indispensable “points of light” for the Continental armies through eight years of warfare.

The establishment and survival of the armed forces have depended directly on the support of civil authorities since the beginning of the American Republic. The appointment of military leaders, the training, supply, and sustainment of units in the field, and the health and welfare of military personnel have been matters of national security. Civilian support and control of the military have been pillars of our American democratic form of government through 120 U.S. Congresses and for over 250 years.

U.S. Army chaplains have been engaged with civil and religious authorities from the beginning. Chaplains who served in the American Revolution came from local churches or from college faculties. Whether they arrived with militia units or as individual volunteers, they came with the support of their home communities. Although they did not use the exact term at that time, many leaders, clergy and laity alike, understood the center of gravity of the Army to be the spirit and determination of the men and women to endure until victory was achieved. Chaplain presence and encouragement reinforced that strength.

^a Chaplain (Colonel-Ret) John W. Brinsfield, PhD, DMin, is a former Chaplain Corps Historian and Adjunct Professor at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. He is a graduate of Vanderbilt, Emory, and Yale Universities and held a Woodrow Wilson Research Fellowship at Oxford from 1972-73. His teaching assignments have included the History Department at West Point, the Army War College and the Army Chaplain School. He wrote his first article for the *Military Chaplaincy Review* fifty years ago (Summer, 1974). Since then, he has published ten books on Chaplain Corps history.

I explore why chaplains were included in the organization of the U.S. Army from its formation during the American Revolution, and why they were seen as indispensable “points of light” for the Continental armies through eight years of warfare.¹ Some two hundred eighteen pastors, including one Roman Catholic priest, volunteered to serve in line units to uphold the morale, the courage, and even the fighting spirit of the Army. One clergyman also served in the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Without the support of the government, the endorsement of diverse faith groups, and the sacrifices of the civilian population, the Army and the Chaplaincy would have ceased to exist.

Animating the Soldiery

The leading advocate and proponent for the inclusion of chaplains in the Continental Army was General George Washington. In fact, over fifty references to chaplains appear in George Washington’s letters. Chief among them was the appointment, pay, and value of military chaplains “to animate the Soldiery and Impress them with a Knowledge of the important rights as we are contending for...holding forth the Necessity of courage and bravery and at the same time of Obedience and Subordination to those in Command.”²

To reinforce the connection between religion and obedience to proper authorities, Washington ordered his regimental commanders to procure a chaplain for each regiment. He also expected all officers and soldiers to attend Divine Services and to behave decently and respectfully in accord with the Rules and Regulations Governing the Army passed by Congress on June 30, 1775.³

Washington’s interest in military chaplains within the Continental Army was not merely a result of his own religious faith, although Washington did believe that “the blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary” to crown “our arms with complete success.”⁴ Practical reasons for assigning chaplains to regiments and later, to brigades included the roles eighteenth-century clergy played in educational, social, and moral leadership in civilian and military organizations.

1 George Washington referred to chaplains as “points of light” during the final encampment of the Continental Army at New Windsor, New York, in his General Orders, February 15, 1783, as cited in Colonel Aaron Barlow’s “Book of Orders,” Rare Book Collection, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, NY Light was often a sign of hope and safety.

2 John C. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, vol.1 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1931), 498 and Index.

3 Henry Whiting, ed., *Revolutionary Orders of General Washington* (London: Sparks and Sons, 1844), 74-75; Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1905), 2:112.

4 Whiting, *Orders of General Washington*, 74-75.

Preachers and Propagandists

No other professional group, except perhaps lawyers, had as much effect on public opinion as the clergy. Many meeting houses doubled as places of worship and political activity in the colonies. Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts blamed many of his troubles in 1773 on “Mr. [Samuel] Adams and his black clergy,” while Governor Sir James Wright of Georgia complained in a letter to Lord Dartmouth in 1776 that he was surrounded by clerics “of Cromwellian sympathies.” On July 23, 1775, John Adams informed his wife, Abigail, that “the clergy of all denominations here [in Philadelphia] preached upon politics and war in a manner that I have never heard in New England.”⁵

In addition to preaching against the policies of Great Britain, the ministers also published letters and articles in newspapers criticizing the Crown. Rev. Richard Furman, pastor of the Santee Baptist Church in South Carolina, wrote an “Address on Liberty” circulated by the patriot militia throughout the countryside. Furman accused the “British Legislature” of laying taxes on Americans that “would be effectual to the enslaving” of them all.⁶ William Tennent III, of the prominent Tennent family of New Jersey, published a letter in *The South Carolina and American General Gazette* in which he called British General Gage, Governor of Massachusetts, a “Turkish Bashaw” whose oppression caused unrest and led troops to be sent to America.

These political diatribes paled in comparison to the sermons given by some chaplains in the field. New Hampshire Chaplain Thomas Allen at Fort Ticonderoga, New York, in June of 1777 preached:

Valiant soldiers! Yonder (pointing to the enemy that lay in sight) are the enemies of your country, who have come to lay waste, and destroy, and spread havoc and devastation through this pleasant land. They are enemies hired to do the work of death, and have no motive to animate them in their undertaking. You have every consideration to induce you to play the man, and act the part of valiant soldiers. Your country looks up to you for its defence. You are contending for your wives, whether you or they shall enjoy them. You are fighting for your children, whether they shall be yours or theirs – your houses and lands – for your flocks and herds, for your freedom, for future generations, for everything that is great and noble, on account of which only life itself is worth a fig. I must

⁵ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Familiar Letters of John Adams* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1876), 84.

⁶ Manuscript in the Furman Collection, Furman University Library, Greenville, SC. Like many other rural Baptist preachers, Furman may have been concerned lest the British extend taxes to include non-conformist church property as had been done in England.

recommend to you the strictest attention to your duty, and the most punctual obedience to your officers. Discipline, order and regularity are the strength of an army.

VALIANT SOLDIERS! Should our enemy attack us, I exhort and conjure you to play the man. Let no danger appear too great – let no suffering appear too severe for you to encounter for your bleeding country.⁷

While sermons could enervate the soldiers in the field, prayers were sometimes just as volatile on the home front. In the spring of 1777 Rev. Samuel Webster, Chaplain to the New Hampshire troops, outraged over the treatment of church buildings by British forces, offered this prayer and petition to God Almighty before the New Hampshire House of Representatives:

[T]hey have vented a peculiar spite against the houses of God, defaced and defiled thy holy and beautiful sanctuaries where our fathers worshipped thee, turning them into houses of merchandise and receptacles of beasts and some of them they have torn in pieces and burned with fire. Therefore we humbly pray that thou wilt hedge up their way and not suffer them to proceed and prosper. But put them to flight speedily, if it be thy holy will, and make them run fast as a wheel downward, or as fast as stubble and chaff is driven before the furious whirlwind. As the fire consumes the wood, and sometimes lays waste whole forests in the mountains, so let them be laid waste and consumed . . . and so return to their own lands, covered with shame and confusion.⁸

Recruiters

Chaplains also recruited volunteers. Ministers could, and did, encourage enlistments from their congregations through their monopoly on their pulpits and politics. After a few stirring sermons, finding volunteers became easier. Rev. Nathaniel Eells, pastor of the Congregational Church at Stonington, Connecticut, recruited a company of men during his sermon. When they mustered on the town green they elected him Captain.⁹ After Rev. Peter Muhlenberg, pastor at Woodstock, Virginia, announced to his

⁷ Parker C. Thompson*, *From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy** (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 1978), 282. Chaplain Thompson has other examples of Revolutionary War Chaplain prayers and sermons in Appendix VIII.

⁸ Nathaniel Banton, ed., *Documents and Records Relating to the State of New Hampshire, during the Period of the American Revolution, 1776-1783* (Concord, NH: State Printer, 1874), 1, 274-275 as cited in Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 304.

⁹ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 103-104.

congregation that he had been commissioned a colonel to raise a regiment to serve with General Washington, some 162 men volunteered in less than thirty minutes.¹⁰

Parish ministers were not the only recruiters, nor were soldiers the only patriots recruited. Faculty members from colonial colleges also played a part. Rev. Dr. Samuel Langdon, President of Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is one example. When he heard about the fighting at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775, Dr. Langdon called a meeting of Congregational ministers—most Harvard graduates. He asked for volunteer chaplains to serve in the American army. Langdon knew how important chaplains might be in ministering to the wounded and dying since he had been a chaplain in the French and Indian War.¹¹ Led by Langdon himself, thirteen ministers volunteered immediately.

Langdon's personal ministry to the officers and soldiers was largely confined to Cambridge. He offered his own house to General Washington to serve as headquarters for the army.¹² Langdon then started a preaching ministry to the soldiers. Chaplain David Avery of Patterson's Massachusetts Regiment noted in his diary, April 30, 1775: "Dr Langdon being chaplain for ye army precht [sic] in ye College area I Tim. 6,2—Fight ye good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life."¹³

Langdon preached many times to the soldiers, especially just before the Battle of Bunker Hill. From his experiences in the French and Indian War, Langdon knew that not all of the men would return. On June 16 he offered a sermon and then a prayer for their safety and success just before they marched away from the college. His text was from Jeremiah 13:16, "Give glory to the Lord your God before He brings the darkness, before your feet stumble on the darkening hills."¹⁴ Langdon's ministry was far-reaching: by the end of the war thirty-two Harvard graduates were serving or had served as chaplains to the troops.¹⁵

Role Models in Combat and in Camp

Some chaplains and ministers backed up their recruitment by taking up arms and fighting with their troops. Chaplain Joseph Thaxter, Rev. Dr. Phillips Payson, and Rev. Edward Brooks during the British retreat from

¹⁰ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 128.

¹¹ "A Chaplain of the American Revolution: From the Rev. David Avery's Diary," *The American Monthly Magazine* 17 (July-December 1900): 344.

¹² Langdon's house at 105 Brattle Street in Cambridge is now known as The Longfellow House.

¹³ "David Avery's Diary," 345.

¹⁴ Dr. Langdon's sermon is in the Harvard College Library Archives in eighteenth-century shorthand. Accessed August 23, 2010.

¹⁵ Compiled from Joel T. Headley, *The Chaplains and Clergy of the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864); Thompson, *European Antecedents*; and "David Avery's Diary," 345.

Lexington, Rev. John Martin at Bunker Hill, Chaplain Benjamin Trumbull in Connecticut, Rev. Peter Muhlenberg and Chaplain Robert Smith at Charleston, South Carolina, are a few examples.

Rev. Naphtali Daggett, Professor of Divinity and seventh President of Yale College was another fighting clergyman. When a British raiding party under the command of Major General William Tryon landed at West Haven, Connecticut, on July 5, 1779, Daggett determined to oppose them. Professor Daggett recruited one hundred Yale students, paraded them on the New Haven Green with what arms they could find, and set out to defeat Tryon and his two thousand seven hundred redcoats.¹⁶

Daggett led the attack with his fowling piece. After firing a volley at the British advance guard, the students ran for their lives. The Professor calmly fired his bird shot until he was taken prisoner and marched at bayonet point back to New Haven. Daggett was exhausted and wounded, but he was able to recover and resume his duties preaching in the chapel. He died sixteen months later, but his story was repeated throughout Connecticut. By the end of the war hundreds of soldiers and forty-seven chaplains, all graduates of Yale, were added to the Continental rosters.

The noncombatant status of chaplains was not codified until the twentieth century. These clergymen were not violating any rules or laws of the day. The British Militia Law of 1757 did not exempt clergymen from serving in the ranks, although most clergy would have been accorded officer status. Emmerich Vattel's *Law of Nations*, published in 1758 and known to the Continental Congress, was silent about clergy taking up arms.¹⁷

As another part of their work, General Washington expected chaplains to reinforce military discipline. He phrased this as "Obedience and Subordination to those in Command."¹⁸ Chaplains were required to read the laws of land warfare to the troops every Monday morning when the soldiers were in camp if there were no other officers present.¹⁹ Chaplains were also expected to encourage moral behavior. They discouraged swearing (which might offend Providence and cost them a victory), stealing (which was a serious breach of the Eighth Commandment from the Bible), and drunkenness (which was contrary to military law).

¹⁶ Headley, *Clergy of the Revolution*, 199-204.

¹⁷ Charles G. Fenwick, ed., *The Law of Nations* (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Institute, 1916), 254.

¹⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:164.

¹⁹ Colonel Aaron Barlow's "Book of Orders," Rare Book Collection, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, NY.

Pastors

General Washington was sensitive to the pastoral role of chaplains to support the mental, moral, and spiritual condition of soldiers. At Valley Forge, in February 1778, the General commended Chaplain Abiel Leonard for his pastoral work. Such service was especially important amid horrific conditions. Three thousand soldiers were on sick call. Four thousand men had no blankets. Rations were reduced to one cup of flour, one pinch of salt, and lots of cold water. And 1,134 soldiers were listed as deserters. Fortunately, Chaplain Leonard was not alone. At least eight other chaplains were with him at Valley Forge.²⁰ Washington also urged chaplains to visit the men in hospitals, although it became obvious over time that full-time hospital chaplains were needed.²¹

Matching the various denominations of chaplains to those of the soldiers was a potentially revolutionary change in the way chaplains were assigned to the army. In New England, militiamen often marched to war with their Congregational pastors who became chaplains by default. A mixture of Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist soldiers, as well as those who professed no denominational affiliation existed in other colonies. When General Washington was asked in 1777 whether he favored one chaplain for each brigade (of multiple regiments) or one chaplain for each regiment, he replied that he preferred regimental chaplains because it “gives every Regiment an Opportunity of having a chaplain of their own religious Sentiments, [and] it is founded on a plan of a more generous toleration.”²² This differed markedly from the situation on the British side where all chaplains were Anglicans.

Congressional Support

No matter what General Washington wanted, however, the ultimate authority for certifying chaplain positions in the army rested with the Second Continental Congress, specifically a committee entitled the Continental Board of War and Ordnance, chaired by John Adams of Massachusetts. The War Office, located on Market Street in Philadelphia, stood only two blocks from the State House. Members of the Board included Adams, Benjamin Harrison (Virginia), Edward Rutledge (South Carolina), Roger Sherman (Connecticut), and James Wilson (Pennsylvania). These men reviewed requests for appointing officers as well as providing pay, provisions, and

²⁰ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 157. Congregational Chaplains David Avery and John Ellis; Baptist Chaplains Ebenezer David, John Gano, William Rogers, Hezekiah Smith, Charles Thompson. and Anglican John Hurt were at Valley Forge as well.

²¹ Rev. Robert Smith served as chaplain to the 1st South Carolina Regiment and then as chaplain of the Continental Army Hospital in Charleston, SC during the 1780 siege. He was named Chaplain General of the Southern Department with primary responsibility for the hospitals in the South before the war ended. In 1795, Smith was consecrated as the first Episcopal bishop of South Carolina. Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 171.

²² Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 1:271. This sentiment eventually contributed to the Free Exercise clause in the Constitution of the United States.

anything else the army and navy required—including chaplains.²³ The Board then forwarded their recommendations to Congress for approval. Because Congress could not tax citizens directly, they had to hope that the states would raise money to fund their requests.

Although early in the war chaplains were appointed to regiments, Congress found it cheaper to assign chaplains to brigades composed of several regiments. Aside from a starting compensation of the equivalent of about twenty dollars per month, chaplains depended on their commanders for anything else they might need—including tentage and rations. Most chaplains wore civilian or black ecclesiastical clothing unless they purchased a uniform for themselves as there was never enough money to provide chaplains with distinctive uniforms.²⁴

By the Numbers

Two hundred eighteen of the Revolutionary War chaplains who served in American Continental and militia units are known by name and most of those by unit.²⁵ Another sixteen clergy ministered to American soldiers but were not recognized as unit chaplains. These chaplains represented only about 10 percent of the available clergy in the 13 colonies. Denominationally, 99 percent of the chaplains whose faith groups are known were from Protestant faith groups: Congregationalist (52 percent), Presbyterian (23 percent), Anglican (12 percent), Baptist (6 percent), Reformed (4 percent), and Lutheran (2 percent). One Roman Catholic priest, Father Louis Lotbiniere from Canada, and one Universalist pastor, John Murray, from Rhode Island, served with American forces.²⁶

Not surprisingly, 79 percent of the chaplains were from Calvinistic faith groups. Fifty-six percent were from four New England states: Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. Of those whose educational background is known, 119 graduated from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth, Brown, Columbia, and the future University of Pennsylvania. Six were graduates of William and Mary, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Oxford, and Trinity College, Dublin. Some fourteen were privately tutored, but in total, 80 percent of the chaplains I am discussing attended Congregational or Presbyterian colleges.

Even Ivy League chaplains experienced the filth and disease of the camps as well as the chaos of battle. Most followed their units into heavy combat at Bunker Hill, Brandywine, Monmouth, Saratoga, Charleston, and Yorktown.

²³ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 120, 140.

²⁴ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 94-95.

²⁵ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 245-267.

²⁶ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 259.

The statistics confirm that of the 218 chaplains known by name, twenty five died during the war or 11.4 percent of the total. That is the greatest percentage of chaplain fatalities in any of America's wars to date.

Late in the deployment of the Continental Army, General Washington issued his last order to chaplains on February 15, 1783:

The Commander in Chief desires and expects the Chaplains to constantly attend the sick, and while they are thus publicly and privately engaged in performing the sacred duties of their office, they may depend upon his utmost encouragement and support on all occasions, that they will be considered in a very respectable point of light by the whole army.²⁷

Washington remembered his chaplains. Eight years later, on March 4, 1791, President Washington nominated John Hurt, a veteran of Valley Forge and a former prisoner of war, to be the first chaplain of the Regular Army of the United States.²⁸

Conclusion

While the inclusion of chaplains in the Continental Army basically followed the pattern already established by the British during the French and Indian War, there was one challenge that made the American establishment different. Because America was at war with Great Britain, the legal basis of the conflict became a matter of definitions. Were the American colonies in rebellion as King George III proclaimed, or were the colonists just asking for the same rights as other English subjects? If Americans were rebels, then by Emmerich Vattel's *Law of Nations* (1758) taking up arms against a duly constituted government was treason and rebels would have no rights to the accepted conventions of limited warfare.²⁹ In short, a rebellion could be crushed using total war methods against civilians in support of the war as well as against the soldiers waging it.

The members of the Continental Congress were fully aware of these distinctions. As Benjamin Franklin wrote to Thomas Jefferson while they were drafting the Declaration of Independence, "We must all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."³⁰ It must be for the cause of equal rights and independence that the gentlemen of Congress would hazard their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.

²⁷ George Washington, "General Orders, 15 February 1783," *Founders Online*, National Archives,

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10643>.

²⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, vol. 31 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1939), 228.

²⁹ Fenwick, *The Law of Nations*, 253-54.

³⁰ Benjamin Franklin, "Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson, June 21, 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0283>.

One of General Washington's solutions to this challenge in the army was to place chaplains in every regiment or at least in every brigade. These clergymen would refute the authority of the British Crown by referring to the Holy Scriptures and the theory of natural rights, endowed by their Creator. God would trump the king. Washington wanted chaplains constantly in front of or beside the soldiers. Chaplains would preach for the men every Sunday at eleven o'clock, read the Military Law to them on Mondays if no other officers were available, visit the sick in the hospitals, bury the dead, and be role models of courage in battle.³¹

However, chaplains were not supermen. Of the 218 patriot chaplains on the rolls, just three are known to have served for eight years: Israel Evans of Pennsylvania, John Ellis of Connecticut, and John Gano of New Jersey. On a percentage basis, chaplain casualties were higher than the Continental Army as a whole.³² Most chaplain fatalities were due to disease rather than to enemy fire, due in part to the proximity of chaplains to field hospitals. At least one chaplain committed suicide, unable to balance the demands of his family with those of his soldiers.³³

The army and the chaplains were successful, in the main, because they received civilian support from a wide variety of sources including farmers, brewers, wagon makers, gunsmiths, seamstresses, coopers, tent makers, and more. The chaplains, in particular, depended on their families, their congregations, their colleges, and on their states. They also depended on Congress to pay them whenever money was available.

To say the War for Independence was fought by a minority of the American people might be correct, but it was won by a determined team of patriots from all walks of colonial life. The biggest mistake the British made was to send one hundred thirty-five thousand British and Hessian soldiers to subdue two million Americans, along with their French, Dutch and Spanish allies, some of whom at least believed more strongly in liberty and justice than in the king and his ministers.

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³¹ Whiting, *Orders of General Washington*, 74-75.

³² Eleven percent of the 218 chaplains, 10.4 percent of the 217,000 soldiers.

³³ Thompson, *European Antecedents*, 256.