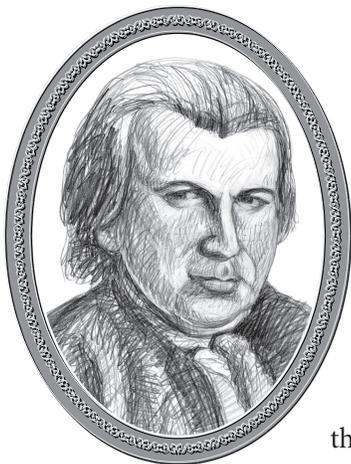


ROBERT MORRIS (1734–1806)

For my part I considered this Subject [independence] early & fixed on principles the part I should take in the unhappy Contest. I sided with this Country because their claims are founded in Justice and I wish every Friend to the American Cause may act on the same principle.

—Robert Morris, 1776



The group of soldiers huddled around a small fire in front of their tent as darkness fell on the encampment of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. It was a cold December night in 1777, and the American army had been fighting the British for two years. The men were downhearted, having little food and thin, ragged uniforms. Some lacked boots or footwear of any kind. In addition, the prospects for the American cause seemed bleak after the military setbacks of the summer and fall. As the soldiers warmed themselves at the fire, one of them called his comrades' attention to two men on horseback heading in their direction. As the riders drew closer, the men recognized one as their commander, General George Washington. The soldiers quickly snapped to attention and gave a salute as their tall, solemn leader passed. They did not recognize his companion. He was shorter than Washington, heavy-set, and lacked the aura of the great Virginian. He did not look like a leader of men. In fact, Robert Morris's appearance gave little indication of the crucial role he was to play during the next few years in keeping this army alive—a role second in importance only to the man with whom he rode that night.

Background

Morris was born in Liverpool, England, in 1734. His father, a merchant, immigrated to Maryland and soon brought his son across the Atlantic to join him. Morris was sent to Philadelphia for an education, but his father was dissatisfied with his progress. He asked his son why he had learned so little from his tutor. "Sir," the young Morris replied, "I have learned all that he can teach me." When Morris was sixteen years old, his father was accidentally shot and killed. The boy then became an apprentice at the shipping and banking firm of Willing and Company. In 1757, at the age of twenty-three, Morris became a partner in the renamed firm of Willing, Morris, and Company.

Morris became a leading citizen in Philadelphia. He founded the London Coffee House, which was a predecessor of the Philadelphia Stock Exchange. The Coffee House was a center of trade and political discussion. His company traded in a variety of products, including tobacco, flour, rum, molasses, and wheat. Morris's company also transported European indentured servants to America and, for a brief time, African slaves.

Resistance to British Rule

Morris took a leading role in opposing British policies in the 1760s. He believed that the new taxes imposed by Parliament during this decade violated the colonists' rights as English citizens. In 1765, Morris served on a local committee formed to oppose the Stamp Act. The next year, in response to the Townshend duties, he led local merchants in a campaign to close the port of Philadelphia to imported goods from England. One result of this action was the end of the slave trade in Philadelphia.

After the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Morris again assumed a prominent role in the resistance to British oppression. He served on Pennsylvania's Committee of Correspondence as well as its Council of Safety, and he was appointed warden of the port of Philadelphia. Morris also was elected a member of the Pennsylvania legislature and was chosen to represent the colony at the Continental Congress.

In Congress, Morris served on the Marine Committee. He took charge of building a sixteen-ship American navy, selling some of his own ships to Congress. Morris was also a member of the Secret Committee for the Procurement of Munitions. In this role, he obtained from Europe weapons and ammunition for American forces.

Independence

Until 1776, Morris hoped that America and Great Britain could reach a settlement and avoid war. Morris even initially voted against independence in the Continental Congress, but he changed his mind and signed the Declaration of Independence. Morris also signed the Articles of Confederation on behalf of Pennsylvania in 1778.

In that same year Morris became chairman of Congress's Finance Committee. In this position, he persuaded reluctant states to contribute funds to the continental system and the army, and he obtained loans from wealthy businessmen. Morris also obtained war supplies, such as guns, powder, and blankets, from Europe, risking his own ships in bringing these supplies past the powerful British navy. The Continental Army would likely have disintegrated if not for Morris's efforts.

Morris' company was paid by the American government a commission of two percent on each shipment of supplies the company brought into the country. But Morris did not receive a salary for his work as chairman of the Finance Committee. Some people at the time criticized Morris for profiting at the expense of the country. There were even whispers that Morris had taken more money than he was entitled to. Congress appointed a committee to look into these charges. The committee found Morris innocent of any wrongdoing, concluding that he had "acted with fidelity and integrity and an honorable zeal for the happiness of his country." John Adams, who was a member of the Continental Congress at the time, also defended Morris, saying that the Pennsylvanian was "an excellent Member of our Body."

Superintendent of Finance

Morris left Congress in 1778. He served again in the Pennsylvania legislature until 1781. In that year, the Articles of Confederation went into effect. Morris accepted an appointment as superintendent of finance in the new government. This was the highest-ranking office under the Articles. Morris had broad powers, which he used to stabilize the nation's financial system. He cut spending, streamlined accounting procedures, and cajoled the states into meeting their quotas of money and supplies. Morris risked his own money and credit to help keep the government afloat, putting up more than one million dollars of his own fortune to finance the decisive Battle of Yorktown that assured America's victory in the war.

Morris believed it was essential that the United States be placed on firm financial footing. He knew that the government must honor its debts. To this end, he urged Congress to adopt an impost, a tax on imports that would serve to provide the government with funds. But the impost amendment failed to win the approval of all thirteen states as required by the Articles of Confederation.

Morris next decided to try to pay the country's debts by enticing the wealthy to invest in United States bonds. He promised investors a six percent return on their money, which was guaranteed by the government. To further this plan, Morris established the Bank of North America, which opened its doors in 1782. The bank handled the nation's money as well as Morris's own financial affairs. This unusual arrangement generated renewed criticism from his enemies. Some again leveled the charge of corruption. When in 1783 the states again failed to approve an impost, Morris's frustration boiled over. "At the moment," he complained, "I fill the most powerful position of the new government and I am trying to get rid of it."

The Constitutional Convention

Morris resigned his position as superintendent of finance in 1783. Returning home, he was once more elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. Though he participated in state politics, he also remained concerned about national affairs. His disputes with the states had convinced him of the need for a stronger national government. Morris therefore supported the movement to revise the Articles of Confederation. He attended the Annapolis Convention of 1786 and the following year was elected to the Constitutional Convention.

No orator or student of political theory, Morris rarely spoke at the convention. "The science of law is entirely out of my line," he commented. But Morris made no secret of his strong nationalist sentiments. He was pleased with the final document produced by the convention and eagerly affixed his name to the Constitution. Morris declined George Washington's offer to be the first secretary of the treasury. Instead, he accepted his state's offer of a senate seat in the first Congress of the United States.

Later Years

During his years as a senator, Morris got himself into financial trouble. He speculated in Western land, buying vast tracts of land cheaply in the hope of selling them later at a high price. This gamble and several other new business ventures failed. During the 1790s, Morris also invested an enormous amount of money into the construction of an extravagant mansion in Philadelphia. In 1797 he was bankrupt, and the following year he was arrested for failure to pay his debts. Morris was put into debtor's prison. He was released in 1801 because of a new federal bankruptcy law. But by then his health had deteriorated, and he was unable to revive his businesses. The man who had once been called "the richest man in America" died in poverty in 1806 at the age of seventy-three.



Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What three important American documents did Morris sign?
2. What led Morris to favor a strong central government?
3. How did Morris end up in poverty at the end of his life?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. The introduction to this essay suggests that Morris's role in the establishment of the United States may have been second in importance only to that of George Washington. How can this statement be supported?
5. Do you think it is proper for government officials to profit from public service as Morris did?