

Strategic Situation in Ohio after Harmar's Expedition of 1790

Michael Taint
Independent Scholar

With the successful conclusion of the Treaty of Paris of 1783 and the establishment of the Northwest Ordinance in 1789, the United States was well-positioned for a rapid territorial expansion. Land was plentiful. The Northwest Territory doubled the size of the republic. The adoption of the Ordinance and its crucial policy of permitting new states to be added to the nation on equal footing with the first thirteen ensured pioneers would retain the benefits of American citizenship.¹ The rich topsoil, abundant game and numerous rivers promised highly profitable agriculture, hunting and good transportation, all keys for successful settlements. Indeed, conditions were so inviting that Washington wrote to Richard Henderson on June 19, 1788.

If I was a young man, just preparing to begin the world, or if advanced in life, and had a family to make a provision for, I know of no country where I should rather fix my habitation than in some part of that region.(present day Ohio)²

For Americans, there was one major obstacle. This land of was already occupied. Several tribes of Native Americans—most notably the Miami and Shawnee nations—were well aware of the Americans' ambitions for territory their people occupied. Native Americans hoped that the Ohio River would establish a permanent boundary between themselves and the United States, so when the first settlers ventured into what is now Ohio, began clearing land, tilling soil and building rudimentary communities, there was no doubt what it meant. Ensuing violence by the indigenous nations against the American settlers immediately got the attention of the new Republic's government.

President Washington through Secretary of War Henry Knox dispatched most of the tiny American Regular army—a force of only about 400 men in the West³—under the command of the America's most senior active duty officer, Brevet Brigadier General Josiah Harmar. By June of 1790 the frequency of attacks by "*banditti*" (Washington's term for Native Americans engaged in raids on white settlements) resulted in

Knox's conclusion, "No other remedy remains but to exterminate (sic) utterly, if possible, the said *banditti*."⁴

The national leadership wanted results, and believed they were achievable with the forces already at hand. Knox had high expectations, writing to Harmar:

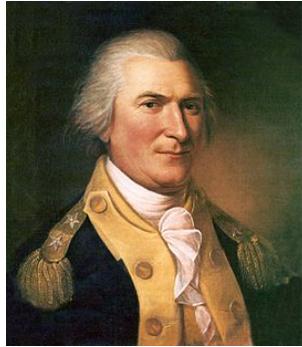
The expedition you are about to undertake is not only of great importance in itself, but it may be attended with extensive and remote consequence—Every consideration therefore of a public nature, as well as personal to yourself, require that it should be conducted in the most perfect manner.⁵

At the end of September 1790 Harmar's expedition was finally under way, leaving Fort Washington (now Cincinnati) and progressing northward toward the Indian town of Kekionga (modern day Ft. Wayne, IN), their ultimate target, at a painfully slow rate of about 8 miles a day. It was no longer a small force, numbering over 1400 men, but more than 1100 of them were Kentucky militia with virtually no training or even equipment. "They appear to be raw and unused to gun or woods; indeed, many are without guns,"⁶ recalled an officer afterward. During the coming weeks they would show a clear propensity for both desertion and running away at the first sign of enemy fire. And flee they did during their only significant combat with the Indian Confederation on October 22, 1790. Having burnt a few unoccupied villages and attendant crops in what is now northwestern Ohio, Harmar retreated to Fort Washington, claiming great success. His adjutant, Lieutenant Ebenezer Denny, felt otherwise. The main objective of destroying the Native American army not been achieved and he made a separate report directly to Secretary Knox with a lengthy, accurate account of the entire affair. Carefully chronicling the expedition from start to end, including combat with the Native Americans, Denny described a woefully unprepared militia and completely inadequate logistics, particularly a lack of cold weather clothing for a winter that came early. For leading a campaign of "expense without honor or profit," along with rumors of drunkenness on duty, Washington removed Harmar from command although a court martial exonerated him from responsibility.⁷

Preparations for the Second Campaign, 1791, led by St. Clair

The failure of the Harmar campaign encouraged even more Native American raids against the encroaching white settlers north of the Ohio River. Four early 1791 letters from Rufus Putnam, a leader in

the Ohio Territory, to Secretary Knox all described mass killings of Americans by the indigenous peoples and implored help from the War Department. "Our numbers are too small to make head against a host of savages, without aid from the General Government."⁸ Quelling these Indian raids became a more pressing issue than ever.



Portrait of Arthur St. Clair,
Courtesy Wikimedia

With American expansion into Ohio and the entire Northwest Territory now at risk, on March 4, 1791, the president named Arthur St. Clair, Governor of the Northwest Territory, as the new commanding general. At first glance, one could hardly argue the choice. St. Clair had extensive combat command experience during the American Revolution as a general officer, including service as Washington's aide-de-camp. As governor of the Northwest Territory he had greater familiarity with the challenges of the new nation's frontier than most, though not experienced in Indian style warfare. He also fully understood the mission's criticality: losing Ohio to the "savages" (St Clair's term) was simply unthinkable as it would block American westward expansion and further encourage British expansionism. A concern, however, should have been his physical fitness for field command. St. Clair was a man in his mid-fifties who suffered from gout so painful as to be at times debilitating. Washington knew of this condition for St Clair had used it in a personal letter as reason for a tardy reply eight years earlier in the aftermath of the Newburgh Conspiracy.⁹



Portrait of Henry Knox,
Courtesy Wikimedia

Upon arrival at Ft Washington around May 19, 1791, an arrival delayed two months by another outbreak of gout, St Clair found himself leading a very sorry command indeed: only sixty-two men presented for duty.¹⁰ In a letter to Secretary Knox at the end of the month the new commander provided his superior an anxious picture of his status and emphasized the need for a successful recruiting of regular levies

(draftees to federal service, usually for six month terms, led by regular army officers) in order to dismiss the militia whom he blamed for the failed Harmar expedition:

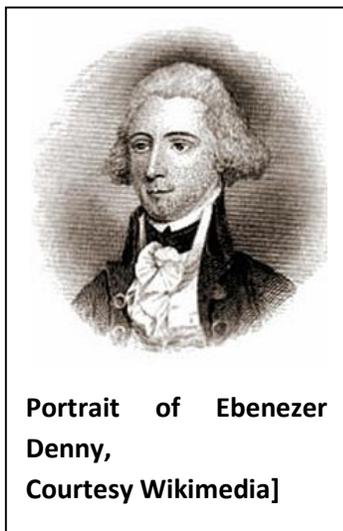
neither do I know how the recruiting for the levies goes on in his quarters, nor, indeed, in any other, and you will be pleased to observe that I can know nothing of it but what you communicate. If it goes on well, there will be no occasion to call for the militia, and that is very much to be wished, for drafting them is an unpalatable operation, and brings out only the worst men .¹¹

The task of recruiting these levies fell to St. Clair's deputy commander Brigadier Richard Butler, an experienced frontiersman and veteran of the Revolutionary War. In a letter to St. Clair on April 7, 1791, Knox optimistically informed the new commander that the recruiting of regular troops for the brand new Second United States Infantry, a direct result of Harmar's defeat, appeared to be successful. Butler had been busy enlisting the new men who were expected to be trained in only a few months at Fort Pitt and ready to depart for Fort Washington for campaign that summer—an ambitious schedule indeed. Knox also acknowledged that St. Clair would have to endure this full plate of challenges despite a re-occurrence of his gout.¹² Butler eventually brought the manpower but once on campaign it became obvious that these new regulars and levies were unfit, unprepared, and practically as bad as the detested militia. The army's adjutant general Colonel Winthrop Sargent recorded in his diary:

Picked up and recruited from the off scourings of large towns and cities; enervated by idleness, debaucheries and every species of vice, it was impossible they could have been made competent to the arduous duties of Indian warfare. An extraordinary aversion to service was also conspicuous amongst them and demonstrated by the most repeated desertions, in many instances to the very foe we were to combat. The late period at which they had been brought into the field left no leisure or opportunity to attempt to discipline them. They were, moreover, badly clothed, badly paid and badly fed.¹³

On the eve of their first and only engagement with the Native Americans, nearly all the levies claimed their six-month enlistments were over and threatened to simply turn around and return to Fort Washington. As now Major Ebenezer Denny, St. Clair's aide-de-camp, wrote in his diary "the first and second regiment of regulars, though

chiefly recruits, are tolerably well-disciplined, but the remainder...being levies, and raised but for six months and their times expiring daily, they take great liberties."¹⁴ To defeat a determined enemy who was



defending their own nations' land, St. Clair had an army of a single-experienced infantry regiment, a second regular regiment of green troops, and untrained and undisciplined draftees.

Besides manpower, supplies are the other essential element any army needs to succeed – from clothing and horses to weapons, tents, food, medical supplies and ammunition. Secretary Knox was sanguine about the logistical preparations because he had just appointed a new Quartermaster

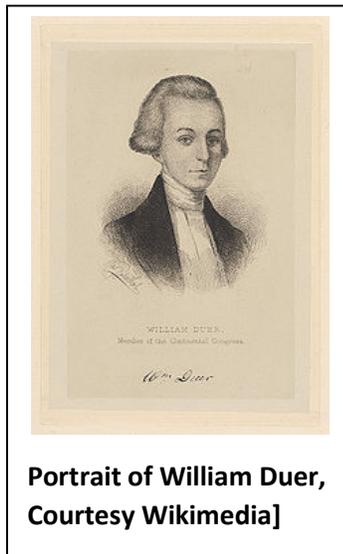
General, Samuel Hodgdon at the time of St. Clair's commission in March. Hodgdon, another Revolutionary War veteran and a successful businessman, had as his assistant William Knox who coincidentally was the War Secretary's brother.¹⁵ In a letter to now Major General Richard Butler, St. Clair's new deputy commander, Knox confidently stated "from the activity of Mr. Hodgdon and his ample funds, I have no doubt that all things in the quartermaster's department will be prepared in full season"¹⁶

Unfortunately, Secretary Knox's confidence was misplaced even though he did his best to keep abreast of logistical preparations by sending at least twenty-six letters to Hodgdon from the time of his quartermaster's appointment until St. Clair's expedition finally departed for action in September.¹⁷ He made it clear from the start that Hodgdon's mission would be a daunting one. "The important station in which you are placed, of Quartermaster to an army destined to great activity in a wilderness, will call for the exercise of your highest exertions, and all your talents for resource." Seven weeks later he seemed satisfied that everything was, indeed, in order:

The Contractor has entered into an agreement with the Secretary of the Treasury to furnish provisions for the troops on the frontiers. If he executes this task well he will be paid the stipulated sum. If he does not, he will be subject to the consequences of the penalty. But the public service must never be delayed or injured by the deficiencies of

contractors. I hope to learn next that all the troops have arrived at Fort Pitt and have descended to Fort Washington.¹⁸

Knox had to provide status to Quartermaster Hodgdon, who wore civilian clothes but held the grade and pay of Lieutenant Colonel, about his own supply contractor because of the curious arrangement for supplying the army in the early Republic. Though the quartermaster was responsible for all supplies and the Government relied upon the private sector to actually produce these supplies, the Treasury Department selected and paid for the supply contractor without any input or apparent control from the War Department.



Further complicating this Byzantine arrangement was the supply contractor himself, William Duer. Like his friend and mentor Alexander Hamilton, Duer was born abroad but came to enthusiastically embrace the Revolution, becoming a member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Articles of Confederation. The Revolution successfully won, he threw himself into commerce where, as the historian Robert F. Jones observed, "early in his career, even while he was in the Convention, he showed his enduring tendencies to mix public business with

private profit, and to take on more than either his energy or his other duties allowed."¹⁹ Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson was far less charitable, dubbing Duer "King of the Alley"²⁰ for his sleazy backstreet commercial dealings. After a six month stint as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, a post that Hamilton created for him even though no other Cabinet department at that time had an assistant, Duer departed for the more profitable career as entrepreneur. Numerous business pursuits immediately followed, among them land speculation in Ohio and Maine, which eventually led him to bankruptcy and, ultimately, debtor's prison.

Duer acquired an army contract for supplying all necessary rations to the posts and expeditions in the Ohio, a contract originally awarded by Alexander Hamilton to Theodosius Fowler of New York on October 28, 1790, and Fowler later transferred it to Duer on January 3, 1791. The circumstances of this transfer were most unusual. Though it

occurred at the beginning of 1791, Fowler did not officially notify the Government of the transfer until April 7, absurdly late considering the urgency and criticality of the supply mission to the coming campaign. Stranger still, Secretary Knox was already corresponding with Duer, not Fowler, as the contractor well before the official notification. And finally, immediately upon receiving the official notification, Hamilton sent Duer \$30,000 along with a promise of an additional \$20,000 in forty-five days' time.²¹ There seems to be little doubt that this development was, to Hamilton and Knox at the least, not a surprise.

Hamilton and Knox might be forgiven for entrusting the military supply business for a high priority expedition to a close friend and confidant if that friend discharged his responsibilities and the expedition was consequently a success. But Duer, distracted by other business interests and greedy for quick profits to stave off creditors, was a miserable failure. Quartermaster Hodgdon, ostensibly the overseer of the contractor's efforts, did not even arrive at the Fort Washington staging area until after the army had actually departed for the campaign, leaving St. Clair himself to rectify the shoddy equipment provided by Duer by using the limited number of tradesmen in frontier Cincinnati.

On September 17, 1791, St. Clair, having received written orders from Secretary Knox, "in the name of the president, in the most positive terms, to press forward the operations," orders that "no officer could have undertaken it upon himself to decline,"²² began moving northward with approximately 1500 troops—regulars, levies and militia—to again seek out and destroy the Indian town of Kekionga. Progress was slow through the heavily forested Ohio frontier, and by November 4 they had only covered 90 miles. Near the banks of the Wabash River, at a place that would later be known as Fort Recovery, they made camp. At dawn the next morning they were attacked by a combined Native American force of Shawnee and Miami who nearly surrounded and virtually annihilated them. After four hours of desperate fighting, St. Clair led a break out action that allowed a few survivors to escape the battlefield. American casualties were shocking: 918 killed, 276 wounded, or 95% of the combat forces on the battlefield.²³ The United States Army would never again suffer so high a percentage of combat casualties in a single battle.²⁴

Washington Administration Reaction and First Congressional Investigation

On the evening of December 9, 1791, President Washington received word of the Ohio disaster via courier while attending one of his wife's social events in Philadelphia. Containing his anger until the affair was concluded, as his personal secretary Tobias Lear later recalled, the president displayed a furious private outburst at the news, railing against St. Clair's failure to heed his advice against surprise attack but finally calming down so his defeated general would "have justice." The following Monday he sent a notification to Congress, advising them in terms that a future generation might call "spin":

It is with great concern that I communicate to you the information received from Major General St Clair of the misfortune which has befallen the troops under his command. Although the national loss is considerable according to the scale of the event, yet it may be repaired without great difficulty.²⁵

The Second United States Congress wasted no time in addressing this issue when they reconvened in March 1792. News of the defeat had spread rapidly across newspapers all over the nascent nation, even the *Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer* which the morning after the courier notified Washington included a list of the notable casualties.²⁶ There was a public demand for corrective action. On March 27, 1792, the House of Representatives entertained a debate on whether "the President of the United States be requested to institute an inquiry into the causes of the late defeat of the army."²⁷ Immediately, objections came from the floor, expressing angst over impugning Washington's conduct and the possibilities of a pointless witch hunt.

Mr. W. Smith observed that this was the first instance of a proposition on the part of the House to inquire into the conduct of officers under the control of the Executive. In this view of the subject, the resolution proposed could not but be considered as an impeachment of the conduct of the First Magistrate.....they [advocates of investigation] seem to discover a disposition to go into a similar mode of conduct with the National Assembly of France, who spent a whole night examining a drum major.²⁸

Further objections and issues were debated. Select committees to investigate were proposed. A real practical constraint was identified. The House wanted the work done expeditiously in order to recess in May, giving them but six weeks, and many of the key witnesses were either dead or 800 miles away in Ohio country. At last by a resolution of 44-10, the House launched the first congressional investigation in

American history, with a committee "empowered to call such persons, papers and records as may be necessary."²⁹ The call for this information triggered another first a few weeks later—the first meeting of the president's highest department heads, later simply "the Cabinet." Washington considered this request, mindful as always of the precedent his actions could set. Over a course of two meetings with Edmund Randolph, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Henry Knox, Washington decided to permit War and Treasury Department documents to be copied and handed over to the House, while asserting the right to withhold information in the future that might endanger "public good"; hence, the birth of executive privilege.³⁰

The House met its calendar goal and issued a report May 8, 1792, right before recessing. Having indeed received all the requested documents, representatives conducted a thorough and objective examination of the events, carefully chronicling the actual conduct of the campaign, the battle itself, and the personnel and logistical preparations beforehand. Not surprisingly, a significant input to the committee's work was a lengthy report from St. Clair himself who had hurried back to Philadelphia after recovering at Fort Washington, met with the president and requested from him a court martial (a request denied) in order to compel a public examination of the facts and clear his name, something of paramount importance to eighteenth-century gentlemen. The committee's conclusions of the "principal causes" for the defeat were:

1. the Congress itself, for passing appropriations so late in the year as to make a summer campaign virtually impossible;
2. "the gross and various mismanagements and neglects in the Quartermaster's and contractors departments"³¹; the report itself is replete with complaints from eyewitnesses on the shoddy clothing and equipment provided the troops; and,
3. "want of discipline and experience in the troops."³²

No blame was assigned to expedition field commander St. Clair, but notably absent from Congress's report was any exoneration or even mention of St. Clair's superior, Secretary Knox. As for the president himself, the committee was careful to provide him a clear and unqualified exculpation "that the failure of the late expedition can, in no respect, be imputed to his conduct."³³ St. Clair felt utterly vindicated while Knox was furious.

Political Fallout and Second Investigation

A chance encounter between St. Clair and Knox on the streets of Philadelphia that summer led to a testy exchange. While St. Clair was relieved that the public outcry had calmed and he personally had only suffered the loss of his major general's commission, Knox was furious that the report clearly implicated him. He told St. Clair, "No sir, that [report] must be rejected."³⁴ Knox suffered the further humiliation of having the Treasury Department under Hamilton assume control of all military logistics, despite having already removed Quartermaster General Hodgdon for incompetence.³⁵

When Congress reconvened that November to debate the report, Knox and Hamilton supporters were poised to counterattack. They needed to be. Congressman Fischer Ames warned that the report "appears to be the beginning of an arrangement preparatory to impeachment; on whom this should fall, he should not presume to say."³⁶ Congressman Jonathan Dayton launched a clear assault against St. Clair himself, "the failure was owing to the misconduct of that gentleman."³⁷ That line of inquiry was overtaken when Speaker of the House Jonathan Trumbull introduced a letter from Secretary Knox and a memorial from former Quartermaster Hodgdon. Knox decried the House report as "very injurious to my reputation" and demanded an opportunity of redress, a claim that irked the investigating committee who pointed out the inquiry was open to the public and to any and all inputs.³⁸ After considerable debate, the House decided to essentially re-open the investigation to include this information and amend or replace their report as needed.

The Hodgdon memorial was reviewed and entered into the record. Hodgdon claimed "My astonishment on reading the report, the Committee will easily imagine – instead of approbation I was charged with "mismanagement and neglect" and my Official Conduct assigned as one of the causes of our misfortune!"³⁹ Charged with delivering munitions and supplies to the army – clothing, tents, tools, food and horses – that were not only late but of inferior quality, the final House report stated Hodgdon relied heavily on biased sources. "Mr. Hodgdon has produced to the Committee a number of *ex parte* affidavits and certificates to prove that these several articles were furnished in sufficient quantity and of good quality. Most of these affidavits, however, were made by the manufacturers of the respective articles or persons in the employ of Mr. Hodgdon."⁴⁰ Hodgdon also failed to appear at the staging base, Fort Washington, in a timely manner to

inspect the incoming equipment and ensure preparations were in place for the St. Clair campaign.

Another element of the second House investigation was the interrogation of several key witnesses—officers present at Fort Washington and on the campaign with first-hand knowledge of the events. The House invited Knox, St. Clair and Hodgdon to also participate in these interviews to ensure all sides were fairly represented. First called was the inspector general of the army, and direct subordinate to Knox, Colonel Mentgetz who had reviewed all facets of St. Clair's army both at Fort Washington and on the actual campaign at Fort Hamilton. Mentgetz testified that the muskets, holdovers from the Revolutionary War, were often broken and required frequent repair which was attributable to their poor handling by troops, not to the quartermaster. Asked about the quality of the gunpowder supplied by Hodgdon, he testified he had tested it himself with his pistol and found it good. Artillery experts later stated it was too weak for cannon. By contrast, he had seen tents that failed to keep out rain, cartridge boxes that were "old and unfit," and camp kettles that were inadequate. The discipline and training of the troops, excepting the First Infantry Regiment, was poor to nonexistent; he characterized the new six-month draftee levies as "having no discipline at all."⁴¹

Even more damaging to Hodgdon's case was General Harmar who, having retreated to Fort Washington and remaining there past the time of St. Clair's departure, "heard numberless complaints among the officers of the ill conduct of Mr. Hodgdon"⁴² and the shoddy equipment, clothing and forage he supplied. Major Ziegler, who led a relief column from Fort Washington to aid the survivors of the battle, testified next. He was extremely critical of all aspects of the quartermaster. The axes provided were so poor Ziegler simply purchased his own. The clothing was so poor the levies arrived "almost naked," and even hospital stores were so bad they actually made the soldiers sicker. During the campaign the soldiers were forced to subsist on half rations even though they were constantly engaged in the most physically demanding work imaginable. Ziegler asserted "from my own experience I never saw such a degree of trouble thrown on the shoulders of any general as I have served with, as upon general (sic) St. Clair, from the absence of the quartermaster"⁴³.

The committee also uncovered significant irregularities in the contractor, William Duer, who had been allowed to assume the army

supply contract without providing a bond to either the Secretary of War or to Treasury to guarantee performance. What made this decision particularly egregious was the fact that Duer was a partner with Knox in land speculations and had just left the Treasury Department as Hamilton's assistant.⁴⁴ Duer had spent a considerable part of the army contract funds on land speculation by "economizing" on the contract, such as providing venison versus beef as the meat ration or corn in lieu of flour.

The committee completed its second and final report on February, 1793. Essentially, this served as an addendum of errata to the original report, adding in details or correcting errors of fact (e.g., the exact day a contract was awarded). None of the original report's conclusions were overturned. Then the entire matter was dropped for reasons that remain unclear. Perhaps Hodgdon, who had many influential friends in Congress and appealed to them for aid in recovering his damaged reputation, succeeded in squelching the matter. More likely, members of the House feared further action, besides legislating another, much greater expansion of the army, might lead to very difficult questions about the commander-in-chief himself or possibly even impeachment, as Fischer Ames warned after the initial report publication, something absolutely no one wished to see happen.

Re-Assessing the Role of National Leadership in the Defeat

Before addressing the role of national leadership, it is important to note that the performance of General St. Clair himself was hardly perfect. Not known in the Revolutionary War as a brilliant tactician or battlefield leader, in this disastrous campaign he made several significant errors in judgment not recognized in the House inquiry. Probably the most significant was his failure to fully apprise Knox prior to leaving on campaign on the true state of unreadiness of his army, both in terms of troop training and logistics. Quite to the contrary, on the eve of his departure he assured Knox that "every possible exertion shall be made to bring the campaign to a speedy and happy issue."⁴⁵ While this statement was certainly true—during the inquiry Major Ziegler in particular mentioned St. Clair's diligence at Fort Washington in addressing the quartermaster's shortfalls—it missed the larger issue of the remaining deficiencies which would ultimately prove to be critical in the army's failure and ultimate destruction. These deficiencies were obvious to others, including St. Clair's predecessor General Harmar who, while still at Fort Washington as St. Clair departed, predicted the campaign would end in defeat.⁴⁶ St. Clair's desire to please his chain of

command outweighed what should have been his better judgment: the campaign should be delayed at least until spring after the troops had received more training, better equipment and much needed discipline. St. Clair also failed to accurately gauge his own physical readiness. He spent most of the campaign incapacitated by gout and was in fact in bed at the moment the battle began, unable to even dress himself.⁴⁷ Finally, St. Clair can be faulted for failing to adequately fortify his encampments, even while deep in enemy territory which led the army to be vulnerable as the battle commenced.⁴⁸



The roles of Secretary Knox and of President Washington in this terrible defeat is far more puzzling and has escaped the attention of historians of the period and biographers of these great men, scholars who scarcely mention this sad episode in their writings if they mention them at all.⁴⁹ That America's two most experienced military leaders committed such glaring errors in strategic judgment almost defies belief

and they were far more instrumental in the ensuing disaster than St. Clair's missteps.

Underestimating the enemy.

Washington, who as a young Virginia militia officer had served as a staff officer under General Braddock during the latter's terrible 1755 defeat in western Pennsylvania, personally witnessed Indian warriors annihilate British regulars, one of the best disciplined and equipped troops in the world. Yet he derisively called the Native Americans of Ohio "banditti" and believed a token force of mostly militia could defeat them even on their own ground. He persisted in regarding the Native Americans as mere bandits even after they readily defeated the first American expedition under Harmar in 1790. Only after the massacre of St. Clair's troops did he come to fully grasp the strategic situation—"We are involved in actual war!"⁵⁰—and begin to act accordingly.

Insufficient manpower and training time.

In a report to Congress as early as June 1789 on the Indian situation in the Ohio country, Knox wrote:

By the best and latest information, it appears that, on the Wabash and its communications, there are from 1500 to 2000 warriors. An expedition against them, with the view of extirpating them, or destroying their towns, could not be undertaken with a probability of success, with less than an army of 2,500 men. The regular troops of the United States on the frontiers, are less than six hundred; of that number, not more than four hundred could be collected from the posts for the purpose of the expedition. To raise, pay, feed, arm, and equip 1900 additional men, with their necessary officers for six months, and to provide everything in the hospital and quartermaster's line, would require the sum of 200,000 dollars; a sum far exceeding the ability of the United States to advance, consistently with a due regard to other indispensable objects."⁵¹

The St. Clair expedition never numbered more than 1500 men, a thousand less than Knox estimated was required to perform the mission with "a probability of success." Moreover, save for one regiment of regular infantry, the rest of this army consisted of one regiment of brand new regulars and six-month levies, all with less than six months' service and very little real training or discipline, plus the undependable militia. Fifteen years earlier both Washington and Knox had seen first-hand how difficult it was to train and discipline a true Continental Army, a process that had taken years. How could they expect a combat-ready force to be assembled in a few months?

Inadequate logistics support.

Similarly, both Washington and Knox had seen during the War for Independence the struggles the Continental Army had experienced in creating and maintaining a supply chain. Washington had been forced to appoint his most capable general Nathaniel Greene as quartermaster general because ongoing issues with supply reduced his ability to conduct operations and even the army's continued existence. Many of the specific issues Washington experienced then—poor clothing, questionable gunpowder, and insufficient food—were precisely the same ones experienced by St. Clair. The supply issues in the Ohio Country were even more daunting than they had been during the Revolution. Save for the tiny hamlet of Cincinnati, there was no local civilian industrial base to draw upon for material support. Transportation was more onerous: the distance from Fort Pitt to Fort Washington was almost 300 miles on an Ohio River that was not always navigable. Yet in their strategic assessment neither Washington nor Knox seemed to take

these considerations into account, preferring the most optimistic view possible.

In June 1791, just months before the expedition began, Secretary Knox confidently wrote to St Clair's deputy, General Butler, "From the activity of Mr. Hodgdon and his ample funds, I have no doubt that all things in the quartermaster's department will be prepared in due season"⁵². In actuality, of course, Hodgdon was very much late in arriving on site and the supplies he acquired were generally of inferior quality. Right before the expedition began, Knox essentially dumped all logistics responsibilities upon St. Clair himself, telling him "that if the contractor's arrangement should be deficient...such deficiency should be supplied by your orders."⁵³

Arbitrary timetable for operations.

Despite these manpower and logistics challenges that should have been readily anticipated by the national leadership, Washington continued to press for a summer campaign, having desired a D Day of July 10, 1791, even though the appropriation for the funding of this new army had just passed in March.⁵⁴ When that date passed without action, since neither all the troops nor all the supplies had arrived yet at Fort Washington, the commander-in-chief's impatience became clearer and clearer. On August 25 Knox wrote in separate letters to St. Clair and also to his deputy, General Butler who was still at Fort Pitt, "The President of the United States laments exceedingly the detention of troops on the upper Ohio...everything will be put in motion upon the arrival of the rear [remainder] of your troops under Major General Butler."⁵⁵ On September 1, Knox wrote again: "The President enjoins you, by every principle that is sacred, to stimulate your operations to the highest degree, and move as rapidly as the lateness of the season will possibly admit."⁵⁶ St. Clair interpreted this, not unreasonably, as a direct order to move, regardless of his readiness for campaign.

Selecting a physically incapable field commander.

Washington knew of St. Clair's problems with gout as early as 1783 and Knox himself acknowledged St. Clair's recurring medical issues as preparations were made for the campaign. St. Clair himself was often incapacitated during the expedition because of it—most notably the morning of the battle itself. Leading an expedition into the wilderness was an arduous task that required a completely fit field commander. Knowing his medical condition, Washington and Knox should have selected someone else.

Cronyism in selection of the quartermaster and army contractor.

Knox's and Alexander Hamilton's selections of old friends and business partners Samuel Hodgdon as quartermaster and William Duer as army contractor clearly show a favoritism fathomable only if they had they performed their duties well—which they most certainly did not. Their ineptitude (Hodgdon) and outright corruption (Duer) burdened a sick and overextended St. Clair even further.

It is one of the more unfortunate facts of American history that this little known episode, which has had such important repercussions, is still mainly known—if it is known at all—as "St. Clair's Defeat."⁵⁷ The responsibility for this disaster went well beyond the field commander to the highest levels of the nascent American government. Some of the lessons from the failure seem never to have been learned at all.

¹(Calloway 2015, 48-50)

²(Ford 1890)

³(Meek 1911)

⁴(Knox 1832) Letter June 7, 1790

⁵(Knox 1832) Letter August 24, 1790

⁶(Denny 1859) p. 140

⁷(Sword 1985) p. 121 (citing *The Papers of George Washington*)

⁸(Lowrie 1832)

⁹(Fitzpatrick 1915)

¹⁰(St Clair 1882) p. 216

¹¹ Ibid

¹²(Knox 1791)

¹³(Sargent 1791)

¹⁴(Denny 1859) p. 161

¹⁵(Calloway 2015)p. 78

¹⁶(St Clair 1882) p. 217

¹⁷(Hamner 2006)

¹⁸ Ibid, letters May 1 and June 21, 1791

¹⁹(Jones 1992) p. 207

²⁰ Ibid, Preface p. x

²¹(Hamilton 1791)

²²(Arthur M Schlesinger 1983) p. 10

²³(Feng 2014)

²⁴ Space limitations prevent a complete description of the St. Clair campaign and battle, traditionally named "St. Clair's Defeat" but in recent scholarship more often "the Battle of the Wabash." See Bibliography for excellent resources on these details

²⁵(Washington 1792)

²⁶(Copy of a Circular Letter from Brig General Scott 1791)

-
- ²⁷(US House of Representatives 1792) p. 490
- ²⁸ Ibid p. 491
- ²⁹ Ibid p. 494
- ³⁰(Hogeland 2017) pp. 181-83
- ³¹(Representatives 1792) p. 39
- ³² Ibid, p. 39
- ³³ Ibid p. 39
- ³⁴(Arthur M Schlesinger 1983) p. 13
- ³⁵ Ibid
- ³⁶(Representatives 1792) p. 680
- ³⁷ Ibid p. 679
- ³⁸ Ibid, p. 682
- ³⁹(Hodgdon 1792)
- ⁴⁰(Representatives, Committee Report February 15 1793) p. 43
- ⁴¹(US House of Representatives 1793)
- ⁴² Ibid
- ⁴³ Ibid
- ⁴⁴(Representatives, Committee Report February 15 1793)
- ⁴⁵ (Clair 1791)
- ⁴⁶(Denny 1859) p. 153
- ⁴⁷ His inability to don his own uniform probably saved his life, as the Native Americans were told by their leadership to ensure any American wearing officer rank be killed first
- ⁴⁸ St Clair did conduct regular reconnaissance. One of the great unknowns of "St Clair's Defeat" is why the deputy commander, General Butler, did not pass along to his commander the reconnaissance report from the night before the battle that a large number of Indians were seen nearby. Butler was killed the next day during the fighting.
- ⁴⁹ A typical example – James Thomas Flexner's *Washington: The Indispensable Man* contains only 3 sentences about this entire affair in 402 pages of biography
- ⁵⁰(Sword 1985) p. 203
- ⁵¹(Knox, Report of Henry Knox on the Northwestern Indians 1789)
- ⁵²(Knox, Letter to General Butler, June 9, 1791 1888)
- ⁵³(Knox, Letter from General Knox to General St Clair, August 25, 1791 1888) p. 232
- ⁵⁴(Arthur M Schlesinger 1983) p. 13
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 232
- ⁵⁶(Arthur M Schlesinger 1983) p. 13
- ⁵⁷Recent scholarship, appropriately, seems to prefer "Battle of the Wabash."