

# Henry Knox and the Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy

Stephen J. Rockwell

As the Officer who is at the head of that [War] department is a branch of the Executive, and called to its Councils upon interesting questions of National importance[,] he ought to be a man, not only of competent skill in the science of War, but possessing a general knowledge of political subjects, of known attachment to the Government we have chosen, and of proved integrity.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote President George Washington to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in January 1794. Washington was expecting the resignation of his trusted former artillery commander and longtime secretary of war, Henry Knox, who had shepherded the War Department through the Confederation government, across the gap between the Confederation and government under the Constitution, and through tense negotiations and major military losses with Indian nations in the South and the Old Northwest. In writing to Pinckney, Washington emphasized how complex the job of a department head had become, just a few years into the new government. The successful department head required policy expertise, political acumen, general wisdom, networked loyalty to the government and its other officials, and personal integrity.



Secretary of War Henry Knox

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<sup>1</sup> George Washington to C. C. Pinckney, January 22, 1794, quoted in Harry M. Ward, *The Department of War, 1781–1795* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 179.

Pinckney turned the job down.

Knox had set effective and lasting precedents for departmental leadership, helping to establish the executive branch department head as a critically important player in the new government. Knox's tenure aligns closely with the creation of what is today called "bureaucratic autonomy." Agencies and officials enjoying autonomy lead in policy innovation and design: they stake out ideas and establish agendas, they build coalitions, they change minds. Policy is set deeply enough to exact costs from opponents seeking to alter those directions. Autonomy allows administrators to behave entrepreneurially to set policy and then to innovate incrementally.<sup>2</sup> In the 21st century, bureaucratic autonomy can be controversial, as opponents of government action oppose and resent the independent actions of autonomous agencies and departments. But bureaucratic autonomy is not new to the American state: it was accepted and built by the nation's founders. Recognizing the autonomy of the War Department under Henry Knox offers a portrait of a vibrant and active federal bureaucracy in the republic's earliest days.

### **Bureaucratic Autonomy**

Scholars have defined bureaucratic autonomy by highlighting different aspects of the concept. For political scientists Philip Selznick and James Q. Wilson, "external autonomy" refers to situations in which agencies enjoy few political constraints imposed from outside the agency, and in which the agency enjoys a monopoly jurisdiction, or the lack of bureaucratic rivals performing the same or similar tasks.<sup>3</sup> Wilson wrote that autonomy means "not freedom of action but relatively undisputed jurisdiction."<sup>4</sup> Daniel Carpenter, in his influential book *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*, highlights the ability of an executive agency or department enjoying bureaucratic autonomy to make decisions and carry out its choices even when opposed by other interests, especially elected leaders, who wish otherwise. Carpenter contends that bureaucratic autonomy exists when administrative agents take actions consistent with their own wishes, to which politicians and organized interests defer even though they would prefer that other actions, or no actions at all, be taken.<sup>5</sup> Autonomy lies in *leverage*, Carpenter writes—the ability of the department's agents to take action is related directly to the deference of other actors.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 182.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 183n.

<sup>5</sup> Carpenter, *Forging*, 4.

For Carpenter, autonomy prevails when agencies establish political legitimacy through reputation and networks. Reputation is grounded in the organizational capacity to undertake actions effectively. Reputations are socially rooted, and assisted by the presence of monopoly jurisdiction or the absence of competitors. Reputations are also built through ties that extend across classes, parties, and sections. Autonomy, then, is most likely to be present when the agency enjoys political and reputational legitimacy among many players, regions, and interests.<sup>6</sup> These relationships and reputations—or political legitimacy—induce politicians to defer to the agency even when they prefer otherwise.

Agencies and departments that enjoy bureaucratic autonomy are in position to innovate.<sup>7</sup> “Under these conditions [of political legitimacy],” Carpenter writes, “politicians grant agency officials free rein in program building. . . . They even welcome agencies in shaping legislation itself.”<sup>8</sup> Importantly, for Carpenter, autonomy has active results: “*minds change* due to bureaucratic persuasion and coalition-building.”<sup>9</sup> He concludes that “genuine bureaucratic autonomy exists when agencies take the decisive first moves toward a new policy, establishing an agenda or the most popular alternative that becomes costly for otherwise recalcitrant politicians and organized interests to ignore.”<sup>10</sup>

While studies of bureaucratic autonomy have furthered our understanding of policy innovation and entrepreneurial action taken by agencies and departments, most scholars have located the rise of bureaucratic autonomy in the Progressive or New Deal eras.<sup>11</sup> In *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*, for example, Carpenter refers to the pre-Progressive Era state as a “clerical state,” characterized by executive departments that lacked the ability to plan or to innovate, and were therefore devoid of bureaucratic autonomy and entrepreneurial action.<sup>12</sup> Henry Knox’s tenure as secretary of war, and the activities of the early War Department, illustrate that bureaucratic autonomy emerged within the constitutional system in its earliest days.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33–34.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 34 [italics in original].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, James Q. Wilson, “The Rise of the Bureaucratic State,” reprinted in *Current Issues in Public Administration*, 6th ed., ed. Frederick S. Lane (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999); Carpenter, *Forging*, 47. See also John A. Rohr, *To Run a Constitution: The Legitimacy of the Administrative State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), especially the Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, *Forging*, 37–64.

### The War Department under Henry Knox

No one ever thinks of elected leaders such as James Madison or William Maclay as the architect of American Indian policy, as the father of the American military establishment, or as the designer of the American financial system. It is instructive that such appellations are usually tied to department heads like Henry Knox and Alexander Hamilton.



An ox team hauls cannon toward Boston during the Siege of Boston.

Knox came to the War Department at a propitious time. He had made his early reputation by dragging captured British cannon down to Boston from Fort Ticonderoga, battling the New England winter and shepherding the cannons across mountains and frozen lakes and rivers early in the Revolutionary War. Knox set the cannons up in Dorchester, overlooking the British in Boston Harbor, securing and protecting Washington's position. Knox enjoyed a long and successful run as the nation's artillery commander and served as one of Washington's closest advisors throughout the war. Seen as an exceptionally competent administrator and leader, Knox married a record of effectiveness and expertise<sup>13</sup> with a jovial manner that secured friends across regional and political lines.<sup>14</sup> With his wartime experience and a penchant for socializing, Knox organized the Society of the Cincinnati, endearing

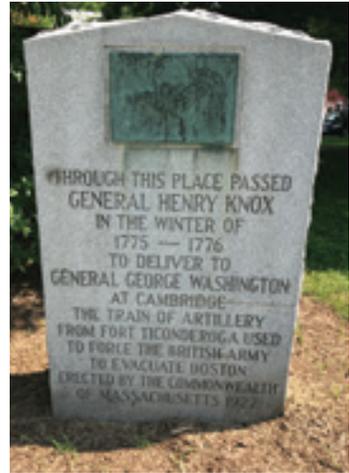
<sup>13</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 9, 102; North Callahan, *Henry Knox: General Washington's General* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), 32, 74–76.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 9, 116, 154–66; Callahan, *Knox*, 103, 132, 133, 152, 168–69, 228, 235, 242–55; Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Beginnings of the Military Establishment in America* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 10–11.

him to many veterans and Federalist leaders.<sup>15</sup> As he moved into the new government, Knox maintained close ties to the era's leaders—and not only to Federalists, but to future Republicans and Jeffersonians as well. Knox enjoyed a strong personal network and could rely on his professional reputation for leverage with Congress, many of whose members he had been working with from the early days of the war.

Knox was first appointed secretary of war in March 1785, under the Articles of Confederation. Historian Harry Ward sees the War Department as the connecting link between government under the Articles and government under the Constitution. As Congress drifted in the period between the Constitutional Convention and the formation of the new government, the War Department under Knox provided stability and continuity. Knox handled correspondence about military and diplomatic matters on the new nation's borders, dispatched troops, and worked to maintain (in the North) and establish (in the South) national supremacy.<sup>16</sup>

Ward writes of the first years under the Constitution that, “during this formative period the role of the Secretary of War was of primary importance in setting precedents for the operation of the Executive and in putting into proper alignment the separation of powers.”<sup>17</sup> The Department's multiplying tasks, growing reputation, and extending networks allowed for an expanding role in designing and establishing new policies and strategies.<sup>18</sup> By the time he was



The site through which Henry Knox delivered captured cannon to General Washington.

<sup>15</sup> Callahan, *Knox*, 155, 210–26; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 13; see also Thomas Jefferson, “Memorandums on a Tour from Paris to Amsterdam, Strasburg, and back to Paris,” March 3, 1788, reprinted in *Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 632. According to Callahan, 27 of 65 delegates at the Constitutional Convention were members, and all but one of the leaders of the Ohio Company were members. Matching Carpenter’s attention to how networks transcend regions, Callahan writes that “[T]he Society was a group whose interests transcended state boundaries and who [sic] sought to break down the political and psychological barriers that existed between state and state.” (223)

<sup>16</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 82–98.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 102; on Knox as an innovator, see Ward, *Department of War*, 89, 105, 180.

<sup>18</sup> On the unique turf occupied by the War Department, see, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 101–2, 161. On Knox’s expertise in action, see, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 76–78. For examples of Congress and other officials asking for Knox’s advice, from the Revolution through his tenure as Secretary of War, see, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 84–85, 102; Callahan, *Knox*, 152; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 42.

through, Knox's initiatives and innovations would include not only West Point but the office of inspector general for the Army, the use of sites outside of major cities for national arsenals, the creation (initially by administrative action) of the Navy, and the building of an integrated system of coastal defense fortifications along the East Coast.<sup>19</sup>

Knox secured bureaucratic autonomy for the War Department in two critically important areas: the direction of Indian policy and the organization of the American military. Indian policy lay at the heart of America's plans to establish security on its borders and manage expansion westward. The makeup of the military cut through debates about the relative merits of militias and standing professional armies; the size of the forces; and matters of recruitment, training, and funding. In both areas, Knox deployed his and his department's reputation and expertise to win battles over the direction of policy that prevailed in the face of contrary opinions in Congress and among the public. The War Department quickly, and lastingly, established itself as the key player in such matters, securing its role long into the future. Knox forged bureaucratic autonomy early, effectively, and enduringly.

### **Indian Policy**

Knox designed and instituted a policy strategy in Indian affairs that continues to define U.S.-Indian relations in the 21st century: diplomacy and negotiation, backed by force. Recognizing the United States' precarious military and economic position immediately after the Revolution, the opposition of Indian nations to being treated as conquered peoples, and the injustices of naked conquest, Knox's strategy in Indian affairs eschewed the Confederation government's early focus on aggressive acquisition of lands from Indians. Instead, Knox argued that the new republic should acquire lands through honest dealings, trades, and negotiated agreements. Ever a nationalist expansionist, Knox also understood that a professional national military could bolster diplomacy with the threat, and sometimes exercise, of force. Knox outlined his vision as early as June 1789, offering a choice between "raising an army, and extirpating the refractory [northwest] tribes entirely," or "by forming treaties of peace with them, in which their rights and limits should be explicitly defined, and the treaties observed on the part of the United States with the most rigid justice, by punishing the whites, who should violate the same." Knox added that, if depredations persisted after sincere efforts

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<sup>19</sup> Callahan, *Knox*, 126, 298–304. On coastal defense, Callahan relates how it was Knox who recommended that Washington secure support from state governors, to inoculate the plan against state interests that might see it as encroaching on state prerogatives.

to make peace, then “the United States may with propriety inflict such punishment as they shall think proper.”<sup>20</sup>

Knox’s vision relied on national supremacy in Indian affairs and in the management of westward expansion.<sup>21</sup> At the heart of this was a system of treaties that the United States would sign with Indian nations. Indian treaties in the early republic generally acknowledged some level of reciprocal sovereignty, set out criminal justice and adjudicatory rules, and provided for exchanges of lands and goods and services.

The treaty system enhanced bureaucratic autonomy in several ways. First, the system quickly came to locate most decision-making and authority in the executive branch. President Washington’s famous visit to the Senate, to get advice and consent on an Indian treaty, resulted in the executive branch subsequently exercising strong leadership in negotiating treaties with minimal input from Congress.<sup>22</sup> The incident also has a rarely told side note that casts light on the critical role of the secretary of war’s independent reputation and influence. In dismay, the main chronicler of this meeting, Senator William Maclay, put Knox’s status into perspective when he wrote, “I thought I confirmed every argument I advanced [against Washington and Knox], either from the constitution of Pennsylvania or from the Constitution of the United States. But a sentence from Secretary Knox is of more avail than all the constitutions in the United States.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Knox to Washington, June 15, 1789, in *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, vol. 4, part 1 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1832) [hereinafter, *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*], 13. See also *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress*, ed. Charlene Bangs Bickford and Helen E. Veit (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 5: 1283 [hereinafter DHFFC]; *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 60–61. See also Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 44–62; Colin G. Calloway, *The Victory with No Name: The Native American Defeat of the First American Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 53–54, 57, 66–68, 72–73, 106–8, 157ff.

<sup>22</sup> Washington and Knox had visited the Senate to expore how the “advise and consent” requirement that the Constitution mandates in treaty-making would work in practice. Washington met an unprepared group of senators in a noisy room, creating a frustratingly useless discussion that Washington perceived as a waste of time. Thereafter, Washington and later presidents would generally submit completed treaties to the Senate for after-the-fact approval, instead of trying to engage the Senate in the nuts and bolts of writing the treaties themselves. *Abridgment of the Debates of Congress from 1789 to 1856* (digital reprint, by General Books, Memphis, TN) [hereinafter, *Debates*], 1: 12–14; *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling and Helen E. Veit (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 128–32. See also Ward, *Department of War*, 109–12; Callahan, *Knox*, 278.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Callahan, *Knox*, 278.

Second, the executive authority baked into the treaty system quickly found its way to Knox and his field officers. The Senate delegated to the president and the secretary of war the power to make policy across the frontier, affecting thousands of people. They were establishing the authority of executive branch officers to make decisions on policy issues from physical boundaries to criminal justice adjudication, from rules governing traders to the ability to settle disputes and punish offenders. Importantly, Congress did so based upon the recommendations of the president and the War Department—exactly how Carpenter describes autonomy’s role in defining the boundaries of legislation beyond simply acquiring discretionary authority.

Third, the success of the treaty system and of the administrative process set up to support it enhanced the Department’s reputation for effectiveness. For example, historian Harry Ward writes that in the South, after North Carolina ceded its lands to the federal government in 1790, Knox’s careful networking with southern leaders and his forceful promotion of national supremacy left the “administration of Indian affairs along the southern frontier . . . entirely under the jurisdiction of the War Department.”<sup>24</sup>

Knox and the War Department’s agents also designed the interconnected policies and regulatory schemes that supported the broader strategy, crafting a suite of initiatives for trade licensing and regulation, reciprocal criminal justice and adjudicatory systems, and combinations of military and civilian field agents and private-sector proxies to carry out policy. Knox, with President Washington’s active support, used detailed reports and communications with congressional committees to secure a rapidly developing set of policies to support the goals of a negotiated, managed expansion westward. Trade and intercourse acts established broad licensing and bonding requirements for traders, laws governed the sales of arms and alcohol, treaties established rules for criminal justice enforcements, adjudication, and punishment. The role of Indian superintendents and territorial governors evolved and expanded. A network of field agents was assigned to diplomatic and other duties among the Indian tribes, to promote “civilization” initiatives like farming and vocational training and to manage programs providing for indemnities and compensation programs for Americans who lost property to Indians. After debating the executive’s broad policy proposals and then codifying them in law, Congress delegated the details and oversight to the president and the War Department.

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<sup>24</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 161.

The 1790 and 1793 Indian Trade Acts are good examples. The 1790 act asserted federal preeminence over the states by requiring federal participation in all land sales from Indians, and it delegated to the president and his subordinates vast authority over Indian trade and a host of other matters.<sup>25</sup> The act's first clause stated that "no person shall be permitted to carry on any trade or intercourse with the Indian Tribes without a license for that purpose under the hand and seal of the Superintendent of the department, or of such other person as the President of the United States shall appoint for that purpose."<sup>26</sup> The clause mandated that a \$1,000 bond be offered by an applicant for such license. Congress granted Indian affairs superintendents "full power and authority" to rescind licenses, through a trial process; merchants found to be violating the regulations or trading without a license would see their goods and merchandise seized and split 50-50 between the United States and the person prosecuting.<sup>27</sup> Congress expanded this law in March 1793. The revised law sought to prevent whites from intruding on Indian lands by authorizing large fines of \$1,000 or a year in prison. Crimes committed by whites in Indian country or against Indians would be punished, bolstering similar provisions in treaties, over the opposition of many representatives in Congress.<sup>28</sup>

As the field agents of the War Department took on increasingly complex and interrelated tasks on the frontier, they developed competencies in policy and a sense of mission—they developed what James Q. Wilson calls *internal* bureaucratic autonomy.<sup>29</sup> Tied together by clear, shared goals, the recipients of careful instructions, and the beneficiaries of higher-level trust in exercising discretionary authority in volatile contexts, field operators in the War Department quickly developed a sense of shared purpose. Soldiers and civilian field agents built reputations for themselves and for their department that, while not always stellar, cemented them as expert sources of information in distant contexts. To the extent that they were effective—at setting up treaties and signing agreements, at removing white squatters, at catching Indian and white criminals, at settling contested land disputes, at establishing U.S. authority in distant regions—to the extent that the field agents had success, the reputation

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<sup>25</sup> DHFC, V: 989.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 988.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 988–99.

<sup>28</sup> Prucha, *Great Father*, 89–114. These provisions would be repeated and expanded in subsequent years; see, for example, the 1796 act built upon Washington's efforts in 1795. Prucha, *Great Father*, 102–4.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 182.

of the War Department grew and its networks expanded. Its ability to get its way against opposition increased.<sup>30</sup>

A good example of Knox's ability to sway outcomes in Congress is seen in the way he led Congress away from direct military approaches to Indian affairs and toward the treaty system and its subsidiary policies and regulations. He offered a report, submitted by Washington to Congress in 1789, that projected impossibly high costs for a policy of subduing Indians by force. Knox's report to Washington on subjugating the Northern Indians detailed the need for 2,500 men and \$200,000, an enormous sum at the time.<sup>31</sup> Knox's estimate for enforcing peace in the South was even more dramatic, estimating a need for close to 3,000 soldiers and \$450,000—the equivalent of more than \$12 billion in 2015—for less than a year's activity.<sup>32</sup> The cost and the manpower required in both cases were prohibitive. Congress ultimately supported Knox's preferred option, which focused much more on diplomatic efforts and land purchases.<sup>33</sup>

Knox often used this technique of suggesting an alternative but undercutting its viability as a way of creating support and momentum for a more-favored option. Maclay, in fact, exposed Knox's tactic in 1789 in the context of the militia debates. But Knox's ability to deploy this tactic to such good effect, and as often as he did, relied on his status as a respected expert—his reputation for good judgment, effectiveness, and winning all helped him shape the final results in the direction he favored, even against strong opposition in Congress and at times among the public.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Other examples also show the War Department operating effectively against opposition from Congress (Ward, *Department of War*, 103–17, 158–60), leading officials (Ward, *Department of War*, 132–33), and the public (on the unpopularity of Knox's war plans for the Northwest, see, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 116ff.; Callahan, *Knox*, 314–37; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 116–19). DHFFC, 6: 2028–29; *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 65–68, 70, 71; *Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series*, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1987) [hereinafter *Papers of George Washington*], 2:196–98; see also Calloway, *Victory*, 71. St. Clair toured the Northwest Territory in 1790, establishing county governments in places such as Vincennes, Kaskaskia, and Cahokia. Dale Van Every, *Ark of Empire: The American Frontier, 1784–1803* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 217. Cf. Carpenter, *Forging*, esp. ch. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Van Every, *Ark of Empire*, 213.

<sup>32</sup> *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 25; Van Every, *Ark of Empire*, 193–94. Inflation calculation based on Oregon State University Inflation Conversion factors, available online at <http://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/spp/polisci/research/inflation-conversion-factors-convert-dollars-1774-estimated-2024-dollars-recent-year>.

<sup>33</sup> Ward gives Knox credit for influencing the general direction of the innovative Northwest Ordinance, as well: Knox's report on peace and justice and collaborative treaty-making had been submitted just days prior to the Ordinance's passage. Ward, *Department of War*, 68–70.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 279; Callahan, *Knox*, 172–73.

To appreciate these examples as evidence of bureaucratic autonomy, we should remember that this policymaking environment was highly contentious. Knox's administrative initiatives overcame opposition within the legislature and among other organized interests. The War Department's independent actions regularly conflicted with the desires of state and local leaders and members of Congress. War Department policy affronted elected officials for different reasons. Those wanting a more muscular deployment of force decried the efforts at peaceful negotiations and treaties. Those who abhorred the violence and bloodshed of battle and confrontation opposed the increasing size and multiplying deployments of the army.

Opposition to administrative actions flowered among the general public, as well. People who wanted to settle on lands not yet ceded by Indians, for example, saw the military and civilian arms of the War Department—and their efforts to remove white squatters from unceded Indian lands—as the heavy hand of big government. Knox wrote to the president of the Confederation Congress as early as 1786, making clear *his* decision—not Congress's, and not that of people on the frontiers—that

The propensity of lawless men to establish themselves on the public lands . . . [encourages] an opinion that the right of an adventurer is superior to all others. These sentiments require vigor by communication and unless opposed with decision in the first instance will overwhelm the western territory with such incumbrances as to annihilate at once the interest and Government of the United States.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the nation's interest, as defined by Knox, trumped that of the frontiersmen overstepping boundaries established by the national government—more specifically, the War Department. Such trespassers and scofflaws would be quickly, and decisively, opposed.

In all of these contexts, Knox and the War Department operated as autonomous players. They innovated, they outlined policies that Congress codified in legislation, they defeated opposition, they changed minds. When faced with an absence of clear congressional direction, approval, or oversight, they made decisions and took action independently. By the end of Washington's presidency in 1797, administrative changes, adjustments to policies, and the creation of new executive

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Ward, *Department of War*, 61. Generally, on squatters, removals by the United States, and U.S. efforts that conflicted with people on the frontier, see Ward, *Department of War*, 60–62, 73.

initiatives like the factory system—what historian Richard Kohn calls “Creating the Peace Establishment”<sup>36</sup>—illustrate that the War Department’s leadership and autonomy had taken hold.

### **Organization of the Military Establishment**

The second major issue through which Knox developed bureaucratic autonomy at the War Department involved decisions regarding the makeup of the American military itself. During and after the Revolution, Americans debated the relative benefits and risks of entrusting national defense to a professional, national military, on one side; to a system of state and local citizen militias, on another; or to a hybrid version including both. While many Federalists and professional soldiers, veterans of the Revolution, saw benefits



Henry Knox, general and artillery commander in the Revolutionary War.

in the stability, training, and accountability of an established national military, others saw the threat and danger of a professional force at the beck and call of political leaders, especially a single president who also served as commander-in-chief. Revolutionary War veterans took up sides, as Continental Army soldiers and militia veterans relied on their experiences, good and bad, to inform their positions. But where militia advocates saw flexibility, localized motivation, and reserve forces in waiting, called upon only when needed, professional soldiers like Baron Von Steuben and Henry Knox saw militias as a slapdash, unpredictable, unprofessional, and hard-to-control *mélange* of motives and independent decisions about when, where, and why to fight. For Knox and others, national defense could not rest on such a decentralized force.

And so it was that Knox, as secretary of war, faced crosscutting cleavages on another issue of major and lasting significance. Debates and positions linked up with disagreements about grand strategy and national expansion. Many easterners opposed the risk and expense of fighting in the West, while westerners were often angry at peace overtures, the primacy of commercial interests, and the use of regular military instead of local militias. This meant that the Washington administration’s strategy of pursuing treaties and diplomacy backed by selected applications of military force generated widespread opposition—for

<sup>36</sup> Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, ch. 9.

easterners it was too costly, for westerners it was too soft and simultaneously too overbearing.<sup>37</sup>

Knox faced a fractured policy environment riven by ideological tensions, regional interests and issues, and nascent partisanship. Such a situation was fertile ground for the forging of bureaucratic autonomy. As the War Department became the expert organization dealing with issues of recruiting, support, and strategy, Henry Knox became the voice of expertise. Knox put his social networks, political acumen, beloved character, and veteran professional opinions to work. He became the effective, multifaceted leader of a largely autonomous executive department, inspiring Washington's description in his appeal to C. C. Pinckney quoted at the top of this article.

In 1790, 1792, and 1794, a fractured Congress and a volatile, fragmented public moved further toward following Knox's lead in the design of the American military establishment. Knox led not by fiat and not by rogue unilateralism—his policy successes were often sanctioned and codified by Congress. Instead—and as Carpenter anticipates—what Knox brought to bear as he assembled and deployed his resources was *leverage*. He was trusted, listened to, and relied upon, even by those who disagreed or sought that other decisions—or no decisions—would be taken. As the years passed, Knox anchored national primacy in policymaking for the military and for the strategies that would secure borders and promote expansion. Moreover, in Wilson's terms, Knox secured autonomy in internal decision-making—Congress would enact Knox's vision, and the War Department would acquire from Congress vast grants of discretionary authority over the details. It would fill in those details itself, based on its own expertise, with limited interference from state, federal, or private competitors.<sup>38</sup>

The War Department under Knox served as liaison between the president and the Congress, improved its reputation for success and effectiveness in carrying out its tasks, and regularly acted as the designer and advocate of innovative ideas and directions. Knox's leadership and expertise became the driving force behind the War Department's burgeoning autonomy.

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<sup>37</sup> Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 116–19.

<sup>38</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 57–63, 85ff., 102–6, 143, 147–48; Callahan, *Knox*, 71, 203ff., 238–41; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 116–43, 170–78; Andrew J. Birtle, "The Origins of the Legion of the United States," *Journal of Military History* 67 (October 2003). Birtle discusses the roots of the legion concept and offers an intriguing discussion of Knox's use of the term "legion" as a rhetorical device designed to influence debate: 1250ff.

**Autonomy on Display: The St. Clair Investigation and Its Aftermath**

Gen. Arthur St. Clair's defeat in 1791 shocked the new nation. After years of planning, St. Clair watched as a pan-Indian confederacy met the Army in the Old Northwest and inflicted close to one thousand casualties on the U.S. force. The Indians left the field with the Army's cannons, rifles, ammunition, tents, horses, and drums.<sup>39</sup>

A heated investigation followed, as Congress searched for reasons to explain such an overwhelming defeat. Considered a "national tragedy," the loss shook confidence in Washington as a national hero and in the viability of the American experiment itself. St. Clair's defeat threatened to cripple the Washington administration midway through its first term.

Yet all of the rancor, probing, and second-guessing melted away on the heels of an internal investigation conducted by Secretary of War Knox. Knox reassured Congress and the American people that the defeat originated in fixable problems: the nation needed better supply chains, shrewder planning, different tactics, and reorganization of the military. The details of administration were at fault, according to the administrators—and they could be fixed by better management, designed and implemented by those same administrators. Knox outlined the measures that needed to be taken.

Even as Congress criticized failures in contracting, preparation, and provisioning as contributing to the loss, the members accepted Knox's articulation of the issues and his recommendations for addressing them. This controversy illustrates how Knox and others in executive departments came to outpace Congress as the designers and implementers of planned, effective public policies. Congress would debate and occasionally probe, but it would be the nation's public administrators who, from the beginning, would steer the government's course.

The investigation of St. Clair's defeat offers a window into the quick success of Knox's effort to forge bureaucratic autonomy at the War Department. Congress had immediately launched its own investigation, sparking resistance from the executive branch and the first discussions of executive privilege. Some of the investigatory efforts were sincere; some aimed to weaken the Washington administration and dilute the Federalists' efforts to create a strong and centralized government at the national level. St. Clair's defeat could be used to argue against centralized power

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<sup>39</sup> Calloway, *Victory*, 125.

and against a professionalized army, while eroding the reputations of their most prominent advocates: Washington and Knox.<sup>40</sup>

As before, Knox used his networks, his expertise, and his department's status as the indispensable player in such matters to cut through the fragmentation and focus the direction of policy. His explanation of the event—blamed upon poor logistical support, a late start, and raw troops—carried the day. While Congress's final report has sometimes been interpreted as a rebuke of Knox's leadership,<sup>41</sup> Congress focused primarily on the troops' lack of preparation, the lateness of the season for the maneuvers, and problems with contractors, supply, and provisioning. The attention to Knox and Washington was indirect, focused on the pressure they put on St. Clair to forge ahead, even in the face of St. Clair's reservations. In the end, rather than excoriate the leadership or seek to remove Knox or Washington—what one might expect had Congress lacked trust in their expertise and judgment—Congress gave the executive team what they wanted: more troops, another chance to handle the situation in the Old Northwest, and continued discretion to decide how and when to do so. Congress continued to let the executive set policy, and they enacted Knox's remedies—better organization, more professional soldiers, a bigger army, and another attempt under the direction of a national leader, this time Gen. Anthony Wayne.<sup>42</sup>

Congress did exact some cost for the defeat, primarily in shifting much of the military's purchasing, procurement, and payment systems to Hamilton's Treasury Department. That shift eroded the War Department's autonomy, making it in some ways dependent on Treasury and making the military the victim of unclear and overlapping administrative processes and decisions. The change narrowed the Department's autonomy, as some decisions would now be made outside of its own jurisdiction.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from that, though, Congress had nowhere else to turn in 1792—illustrating the rapid crystallization of the War Department as the focus of unique information, expert advice, and innovative policy design. Knox's strategy continued, with

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<sup>40</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 138–41.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Calloway, *Victory*, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 142–44; Calloway, *Victory*, 142–44, 151–52. The report itself is reprinted in Arthur St. Clair, *A Narrative of the Campaign Against the Indians* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1812), 59–79.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 59–60, 118–25, 127–28, 132, 143–44, 152; for other examples of confusion in administration, see 70.

the Washington administration diligently working for negotiated, diplomatic solutions with the Indians, even as it prepared a bigger regular army for possible future engagements. Congress would meet the executive branch's requests for more troops, and it would make no moves to remove or otherwise punish the administrators at the center of the defeat. St. Clair was exonerated by Congress; Knox and many others remained at their posts, amid some reshuffling of men and offices to make the department better organized and more efficient. These internal changes would, for the most part, be directed by Knox himself.<sup>44</sup>

The importance of St. Clair's defeat in understanding the early forging of bureaucratic autonomy is profound. In the wake of the nation's worst, most devastating military disaster, Congress relied upon the same policy developers and managers to move forward. In the aftermath, Congress chose continued reliance upon the expert judgment, track records, and reputations of Washington and Knox. Knox had established the War Department as the decider, with autonomy that could survive the worst disaster imaginable.<sup>45</sup>

### **Evaluating Knox's Achievement in Bureaucratic Autonomy**

The development of bureaucratic autonomy at the War Department was not inevitable. Public administration theory points out that the ability of an executive officer to set mission and establish an agency's culture is at its peak at an agency's beginning, and Knox certainly took advantage of that. But it would be wrong to assume that the War Department faced no rivals in vying for authority over military organization and Indian policy. Competing approaches abounded, with widespread support—for a militia system, or a system of reserves; for a more aggressive Indian policy, or for one driven by state, not national, authorities. Proponents occupied beachheads in Congress, in other federal departments, and in state governments. Administrative leadership might have come to reside in any of these places, with dramatic effects upon the course of U.S. development. Congress might have tried to hold more tightly to its policy-making authority, which might have proven disastrous for the development of a strong and nimble federal government. Another department, such as Treasury, might have commandeered control over expansion policy, with different, but similarly dramatic, changes to

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 138; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 123–24; Birtle, "Origins," 1255–56.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of acknowledgments of Knox's reputation for effective administration, and the fast expansion in tasks and responsibilities undertaken by Knox and by the War Department, see, for example, Ward, *Department of War*, 83, 88–89, 99–112, and the conclusion at 184 in which Ward summarizes the condition of the War Department as Knox exited; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 10–11; Callahan, *Knox*, 168–69, 242.

the nation's history. Finally, bureaucratic autonomy, if it developed at all, might have been located in state governments—with, again, profound impacts upon the nation's development. Knox won out over these alternatives and their proponents. The emergence of a national expansion policy centrally located in the War Department was in no sense a foregone conclusion in 1789.

An instructive example lies in the person of Benjamin Lincoln. Under the Articles of Confederation and during the Revolution, congressional committees proved unable to focus effectively on the details of provisioning, procurement, recruiting, and other matters affecting the military. Congress, though, proved reluctant to cede control over decision-making. Congress first established a series of boards to oversee such matters, but these boards lacked clear authority, clear focus, and effectiveness. Over a period of about five years, Congress slowly moved in the direction of executive departments. While Knox was serving as Washington's artillery commander, Congress chose Benjamin Lincoln to be the nation's first secretary at war.<sup>46</sup>

Lincoln left a mixed record after two years as secretary. He served effectively as a focal point for questions, and as a liaison between Congress and Gen. George Washington during the war. Lincoln was well-liked, and the Department's tasks expanded as a result. It assumed unique jurisdiction in some areas, especially in those dealing directly with the organization and development of rules and regulations to govern the military. Its roles in financing, spending, and procurement, however, were muddled up with the work of the Finance Department, and much of the War Department's authority in relationship to the militias and state governments remained unclarified.<sup>47</sup> In these early years, Lincoln did not try to concentrate power, and he did not try to chart innovative new policy directions. His quietness allowed the new position and the evolving department to exist without generating jealousy in Congress, creating a meager operation clearly subordinate to the political branches, weak and uncertain in its tasks and not certain to survive the ending of the war.

Lincoln resigned his office in October 1783, and the War Department drifted for a year and a half, run by assistant secretaries, until Knox was appointed secretary in March 1785.<sup>48</sup> Knox's leadership in developing the War Department's

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<sup>46</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 1–12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–21, 23–29.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–48, 66–68.

autonomy, his reputation and social networks, and his policy innovations blazed a fundamentally different path for the War Department than that whittled out by Benjamin Lincoln.

The War Department's new autonomy had staying power, too, despite Congress assigning some of its responsibilities to the Treasury Department following St. Clair's defeat. The activities of mezzo-level managers and field operators were barely affected by new requirements to send expense receipts to a different department. These officers still signed treaties and worked through details at their discretion; the Treasury had little to say about military maneuvers and organization; and the factory system, licensing requirements, and so on would be run by—and largely designed by—War Department officials, as matters of policy, for many years. Congress would continue to accede to the War Department's recommendations for Indian policy. As early as 1793, changing the boss at the top of an executive department had little effect on what personnel throughout the organization actually did. They continued to act, often upon their own wishes, even though other officials and organized interests would have preferred otherwise.

The policies that Knox had argued for and secured also endured. Historian Richard Kohn concludes that after his election as president, Thomas Jefferson in essence endorsed Federalist military theory,<sup>49</sup> and it is difficult to discern much difference in Indian policy between the Washington and Adams administrations on one side of the “Revolution of 1800” and the Jefferson and Madison administrations on the other. Despite years of arguing against many of Knox's initiatives, Thomas Jefferson and his team continued the treaty system and the use of the military to back up diplomatic efforts. Big government efforts to administer trading houses, to license traders, and to regulate land, alcohol, and weapons sales would continue and expand under secretaries of war such as Henry Dearborn. Jefferson would oversee the creation of one of Knox's most important pet projects, a professional military academy at West Point.<sup>50</sup> Knox's nationalism and his efforts to build the War Department and secure its autonomy in decisionmaking about Indian affairs, westward expansion, and the nature of the American military would be lasting. His success is perhaps best seen in the extent to which the Jefferson and Madison administrations learned to love and enable the Department of War.

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<sup>49</sup> Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 138. Birtle argues that despite the reduction in the size of the Army in 1796, and Washington's problems in preserving the legionary structure as a result, the idea and its application continued in the field: Birtle, “Origins,” 1260 and 1260, n.19.

<sup>50</sup> Callahan, *Knox*, 72, 73–74, 155–56; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 44, 302–3.

## Conclusion

Knox's personal stock declined over the course of Washington's presidency. His cordial ties to Jefferson frayed in the debates over national power that eventually led to Jefferson's resignation and to the first party system. His status as Washington's right-hand man declined as Hamilton's influence in the nascent cabinet increased. And as meetings over major policy issues became matters for the several department heads to discuss together, Knox's privileged role as expert-on-the-scene became diluted. He began to suffer more slings and arrows from opponents in Congress and among the public, especially those frustrated by the series of losses and missteps that culminated with St. Clair's defeat.<sup>51</sup>

As Knox's star faded, he dropped away from our Jefferson- and Hamilton-centered histories of the early republic, though the War Department endured. St. Clair's defeat and Knox's report resulted in a bigger, better military, still predominantly run by Knox. Wayne would lead Knox's beefed-up army to victory over the Northwest Indians in 1794, and Wayne would negotiate the landmark Treaty of Greenville in 1795. On the civil front, Congress would pass another Trade and Intercourse Act in 1796, enshrining such Knox initiatives as civilization programs, a not-for-profit network of government trading houses, and revised licensing and regulatory schemes—the details for which were delegated to the executive branch and then down through the War Department.



President Washington's cabinet: (left to right) President Washington, Secretary of War Henry Knox, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and Attorney General Edmund Randolph

<sup>51</sup> Ward, *Department of War*, 118–25.

Knox's role in the development of bureaucratic autonomy is easy to miss, and it is easy to overlook the extent of planning and innovation in his initiatives and arguments. The basic structure of the military, and the basic outlines of policy governing Indian affairs and westward expansion, were creations largely of Henry Knox. Knox collaborated with other executive leaders, like Hamilton, in deploying the new executive departments to promote and secure key facets of the American republic—national supremacy in matters like defense, westward expansion, and finance; and the idea in and of itself that the executive department would be entrepreneurial and autonomous, applying its expertise through networks and reputation to design and implement public policies. The quick accession to bureaucratic autonomy by founders such as Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Knox suggests the deep and well-founded roots of bureaucratic autonomy in the American system of government.

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