

Frederick William von Steuben, Letter from New Windsor (July 4, 1779)

Abstract

Educated for military service in Prussia, Frederick William von Steuben (1730–94) distinguished himself as a general in the American revolutionary army. His talents, and the recognition they won from George Washington, allowed for his rapid rise through the ranks. The publication of this letter in *Schlözers Briefwechsel meist historischen und politischen Inhalts* [*Schlözer's Correspondence of a Mostly Historical and Political Nature*] underscored the Enlightenment's advocacy of the "career open to talent." It also provided an opportunity for enthusiastic statements about the liberal ideals of the new American republic.

Source

Camp off New Windsor, on the North River, July 4, 1779

The more flattering such distinctions must appear, the more sacred are my obligations to make myself worthy of them. As far as my bodily and mental powers avail, I will exert myself incessantly to promote the accomplishment of the desire of a nation which has honored me with such unlimited confidence. No difficulty, no pain, no danger can or shall check my energy or zeal. The sphere of my activity is immense; about the eighth part of the world will be benefited by the success of our cause. Thanks be to God, there is every reason to be confident of it. I should be happy to die for a nation that has placed such confidence in me. Thus far will my exertions have been successful, and I may well say that the confidence of the army in me is increasing every day. At the battle of Monmouth, last year, I commanded on the left wing of the first line, and I was fortunate enough to decide the day to our advantage. And in all the skirmishes of the last and the present campaign, I am happy to say that every soldier was full of bravery when fighting under my command. Last winter I drew up the ordinance regulating the infantry and cavalry, which was immediately adopted and published.

[...]

I am now making a tour to inspect all the regiments and to introduce the regulations adopted in my ordinance. Every thing [sic] passes on very well. I am now the fifth general in rank; the prospect is indeed bright enough to gratify any ambition, unless, perhaps, a fever or half an ounce of lead interrupt my course. After two or three years' toil and exertion, dear friend, we shall meet, perhaps, in Paris, and settle the point whether we shall lunch together in Europe or in America. O, dearest friend, why have we thus idled away our time? Two years' labor, in disregard of danger and hardship, may open a fair prospect to a man of energy! Experience has proved it, and I can't forgive myself my former indolence.

What a beautiful, what a happy country this is! Without kings, without prelates, without blood-sucking farmers of the revenue, and without a lazy nobility! Here every one feels happy. Poverty is an unknown evil. It would be too circumstantial to give you a description of the happiness of this people!

[...]

Source: Friedrich Kapp, *The Life of Frederick William von Steuben, Major General in the Revolutionary Army*. New York: Mason Brothers, 1859, pp. 655–656.

Source of original German text: Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, “Brief aus Neu Windsor vom 4. Juli 1779”, in August Ludwig, *Schlözers Briefwechsel meist historischen und politischen Inhalts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1780, pp. 331–33; reprinted in Jost Hermand, ed., *Von deutscher Republik 1775–1795. Texte radikaler Demokraten*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1968, pp. 40–41.

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