

An Assembly of Demigods

James McHenry

Henry Laurens to Alexander Hamilton, Philadelphia, July 29, 1779

In addition to the lines which I troubled you with the day before yesterday by Colonel, or should I say, Dr. McHenry, he is an honest Man, with either, or without any Title. . . .

Nathanael Greene to Samuel Huntington, Philadelphia, October 30, 1780

It is my earnest wish to have Dr. James McHenry with me as an Aide de Camp upon the Southern command. He is a young Gentleman of ability; and perfectly acquainted with the nature of the business from his having been long in the family of the Commander in Chief.

Nothing but a Majority [i.e., a rank of Major] will engage him in this service. He will be so useful and necessary to me on the command, from the nature of the business which I shall have to transact, that I shall be made exceedingly happy if Congress would be kind enough to honor him with that rank.

I am sensible that there are objections which may be urged against it; but I flatter myself the occasion, as well as the merit and claim of the Gentleman from his having been in the Army from the beginning of the war, will be considered sufficient reasons to remove them.

George Washington to James Madison, Newburgh, N.Y., April 22, 1783

Major McHenry, formerly an Assistant Secretary to me, & afterwards Aid de Camp to the Marquis de la Fayette, informs me, that, Congress are about to appoint official Secretaries for their Ministers abroad; & expresses a wish to go in that character to the Court of Versailles—or London.

Justice, if I could divest myself of the inclination to serve this Gentleman, would compel me to represent him as a Man of Letters & abilities,—of great integrity, sobriety & prudence. In a word, a Man of strict Honor; possessing all those good qualities (without a bad one that I am acquainted with) necessary to fit him for such an office. He would, I am persuaded, render the Minister with whom he might be connected, very happy in the appointment, as he is of an amiable & obliging temper. His property too lies in this Country.

William Pierce: Sketches of Members of the Constitutional Convention, 1787

Mr. McHenry was bred a physician, but he afterwards turned Soldier and acted as Aid to Genl. Washington and the Marquis de la Fayette. He is a Man of specious talents, with nothing of genius to improve them. As a politician there is nothing remarkable in him, nor has he any of the graces of the Orator. He is however, a very respectable young Gentleman, and deserves the honor which his Country has bestowed on him. Mr. McHenry us about 32 years of age.

James McHenry to Alexander Hamilton, Near Baltimore, February 17, 1795

I have built houses, I have cultivated fields, I have planned gardens, I have planted trees, I have written little essays, I have made poetry once a year to please my wife, at times got children and at all times thought myself happy. Why cannot you do the same, for after all if a man is only to acquire fame or distinctions by continued privations and abuse I would incline to prefer a life of privacy and little pleasures.

Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, New York, November 5, 1795

McHenry you know he would give no strength to the administration but he would not disgrace the Office—his views are good—perhaps his health &c. would prevent his accepting.

Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz: *Travels through America*, April 15, 1798

Mr. Wolcot, secretary of the Treasury Department, is a very proper officer for this position. The same can not be said of Mr. M'k Henri, secretary of the War Department. Perhaps he lacks neither good will nor integrity, but he does lack the necessary knowledge for his position. The erection of forts, the building of the navy, the distribution of military forces, the maintenance of discipline among the soldiers, all are in his province; however he is not, as it is said, either a geographer or a soldier, or sailor.

Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, Philadelphia, July 29, 1798

But, My Dear Sir. There is a matter of far greater moment than all this which I must do violence to my friendship by stating to you; but of which it is essential you should be apprised. It is that my friend, McHenry, is wholly insufficient for his place [as Secretary of War], with the additional misfortune of not having himself the least suspicion of the fact! This generally will not surprise you, when you take into view the large scale upon which he is now to act. But you perhaps may not be aware of the whole extent of the insufficiency. It is so great as to leave no probability that the business of the War Department can make any tolerable progress in his hands. This has been long observed; and has been more than once mentioned to the President by members of Congress. He is not insensible, I believe, that the execution of the department does not produce the expected results; but the case is of course delicate and embarrassing.

My real friendship for McHenry concurring with my zeal for the service predisposed me to aid him in all that he could properly throw upon me. And I thought that he would have been glad in the organization of the army and in the conduct of the recruiting service, to make me useful to him. With this view I came to this City & I previously opened the way, as far as I could with the least decency. But the idea has been thus far very partially embraced and tomorrow or the next day I shall return to New York without much fruit of my journey. I mention this purely to apprise you of the course of things and the probable results. It is to be regretted that the supposition of cooperation between the Secretary at War and the principal military officers will unavoidably throw upon the latter a part of the blame which the ill success of the operations of the war department may be expected to produce. Thus you perceive, Sir, your perplexities are begun.

Rufus King to Alexander Hamilton, London, December 19, 1798

McHenry is an infant in *detail*.

Oliver Wolcott, Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, Philadelphia, April 1, 1799

We have no President here, & the appearance of languor & indecision are discouraging to the friends of government. Mr. McH_____ does the best in his power—yet his operations are such as to confirm more and more a belief of utter unfitness for the situation. The President has been informed of the disorders in that Department yet there appears no disposition to apply any correction.

Oliver Wolcott, Jr. to Fisher Ames, Philadelphia, December 29, 1799

I do not know whether you are acquainted with Mr. McHenry; he is a man of honor and entirely trustworthy; he is also a man of sense, and delivers correct opinions when required, but he is not skilled in the details of Executive business, and he is at the head of a difficult and unpopular department. The diffidence which he feels, exposes his business to delays, and he sometimes commits mistakes which his enemies employ to impair his influence.