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The Political Rise and Decline of Dr. Benjamin Rush

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Abstract

Benjamin Rush although being was one of the most prominent physicians and scientists in early America is best known for being a signatory to the Declaration of Independence. Maintained close relationships with three future Presidents of the United States yet had little role in politics following the Revolutionary War. This essay will examine Benjamin Rush's political rise and decline as well as suggest long term consequences of his absence from politics in the early formative years of the United States.

Introduction

This historical essay will examine the life and career of Dr. Benjamin Rush. Prior to and during the American Revolution Dr. Rush held prominent political and military positions, but politically was ostracized after the defeat of the British. This research set out to examine why Dr. Benjamin Rush did not hold important political positions in the newly formed federal government after the Revolutionary War. Considering Dr. Rush's progressive views socially and medically this essay will also examine the potential lasting impact on the United States of America that Dr. Rush's continuing presence in politics might have had.

Methods

Information for the project was gathered by reading three biographies: David Freeman Hawke's "Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly", Carl Binger's "Revolutionary Doctor: Benjamin Rush, 1746-1813", and Benjamin Rush's autobiography edited by George Corner, "The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His Travels Through Life Together with his Commonplace Book for 1789-1813".

Following the initial gathering of information further research was done by assessing primary source documents, primarily reading letters written by and to Benjamin Rush. A major source for these letters were those collected and published by L. H. Butterfield, "Letters of Benjamin Rush". This collection of letters consisted of transcripts of hundreds of letters pertaining to Rush. Another major source for primary documents was the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The Historical Society houses a collection of documents written by and to Benjamin Rush. This collection included letters to Benjamin Rush from future presidents of the United States, Washington, Jefferson, and Adams. These last two major sources provided a wealth of rarely examined information pertinent to the area of research.

Main Findings

Introduction

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was at the time one of the brightest budding politicians in the soon to be United States of America. He had all the qualifications to be a political power hitters for years to come but between the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the British surrendering at Yorktown Dr. Benjamin Rush fell off the political radar. This essay will serve to examine Dr. Benjamin Rush's political rise and fall, as well as to examine the potential lasting sociopolitical ramifications of Dr. Rush's later absence from political influence.

Early Life and Education

Benjamin Rush was born on December, 24 1744 in Byberry, PA. During Benjamin Rush's lifetime Byberry was an independent township in Philadelphia County. It was not until

the consolidation of Philadelphia County and the City of Philadelphia in the mid 19th century that Byberry became a part of the City of Philadelphia. At an early age, John Rush, Benjamin's father, moved the family into the city proper to become a gunsmith[1]. As was common in the 1700's John Rush owned slaves to assist with his gunsmith business. Even after John Rush's death in the summer of 1751, when Benjamin was 6-1/2, the family kept a slave as a family servant [2]. Prior to leaving for boarding school, Benjamin Rush, would not have known a life without slaves.

Benjamin Rush had great admiration for his mother, Susanna, saying "as a mother she had no superior in kindness, generosity, and attention to the morals and religious principles to her children" [3]. Although money was tight Susanna Rush understood the importance of her children receiving a formal education and sent Benjamin and his brother, Jacob, to Nottingham Academy. The founder of Nottingham Academy and future president of Princeton College, Samuel Finley, quickly became a father figure for and a major influence in Benjamin Rush's life [4]. Some years after Benjamin Rush left Nottingham Academy it was Finley who convinced Benjamin Rush to start a career in medicine rather than law. Rush had told Finley during a visit back to Nottingham that he had decided to go into law. Distressed by the news Finley successfully convinced Rush to reconsider medicine [1].

In 1759, at the age of 13, Samuel Finley determined that Benjamin Rush was ready to enter college. It was decided that Benjamin would attend the college of New Jersey [5], which would later be renamed Princeton College. In Benjamin Rush's first year in college the school hired a new president. The new president, Samuel Davies, would become another life-long influencer for Benjamin Rush. At the time of Davies' death Benjamin Rush called him "a

father” and “a genius” [6]. Samuel Davies was a prominent leader during the first Great Awakening. The first Great Awakening was a movement which encouraged followers to commit to a higher standard of personal morality. Many leaders of the Great Awakening and specifically Samuel Davies taught and advocated for greater equality between different races, a radical idea at the time. Prior to employment at the college Samuel Davies had written about his warm feeling for the enslaved “neglected negroes.” He wrote that the enslaved people were “as capable of instruction as the white people” but were not given the opportunity due to their enslavement [7]. Rush would have certainly been exposed to these teachings by Davies and these teachings showed themselves in some of Benjamin Rush’s social and political beliefs later in his life.

Following graduation from college and after Samuel Finley convinced Benjamin to pursue medicine he began an apprenticeship with Dr. John Redman. John Redman was a prominent physician in Philadelphia and allowed Benjamin to learn the trade of medicine under his leadership for more than 5 years. Following the apprenticeship and the encouragement of many physicians in Philadelphia including his mentor, Dr. Redman, Benjamin Rush agreed to continue his medical education in Europe. Institutions of medical education in the colonies were non-existent until 1765. Young physicians hoping to get the best education would travel to Europe for instruction. Benjamin Rush decided on the, University of Edinburgh, which was one of the most prominent medical school in the world at the time. After two years of studying there and a year visiting London and Paris, Benjamin Rush returned to Philadelphia with the hopes of starting his career as a physician. In August of 1769 Benjamin Rush began to see patients on his own at his newly formed medical practice.

Political Rise

Prior to medical school Benjamin Rush had begun to delve into politics. He had begun to sow the seeds for his future rise to political prominence. In two letters written in November of 1765 Benjamin Rush expressed his dislike for the newly passed Stamp Act [8]. The Stamp Act was a direct tax on the colonies which required any printed good to be printed on paper that was “stamped” indicating it had been produced in London. This paper was heavily taxed and the Stamp Act was disliked by the colonists, including Benjamin Rush. This hatred by Benjamin Rush for the Stamp Act and Britain's control over the colonies would lay the foundation for Rush's future role in politics after medical school. Benjamin Rush wrote about his observations of government while he was in Europe. He wrote about the “absurdity of hereditary power” and that “no government can be rational but that which is derived from the suffrages of the people who are the subjects to it” [9]. While, observing a Royal dinner in Paris, Rush, again wrote with disgust about the French Royal family, “Let such as maintain the Divine Right of Kings come and behold this Monarch, setting on a couch with a common prostitute, picked up a few years ago from the streets of Paris” and wrote that he saw future King Louis XVI pull of piece of half chewed food from his mouth and throw it to the floor [10]. King Louis XVI would be executed by guillotine less than 30 years after Benjamin Rush watched him during his visit in Paris.

During Benjamin Rush's time in Europe, Benjamin Franklin was living in London as a representative of Pennsylvania. After medical school while Benjamin Rush visited London he reached out to Benjamin Franklin in the hopes of “being introduced by him to some of his friends” [11, 12]. Benjamin Rush's hope came true, with Benjamin Franklin introducing Rush to many nonconforming writers, artists and politicians only furthering Benjamin Rush's dislike for the British government. During this time in London Benjamin Rush sent a letter to his brother,

the contents of which were later published in the Pennsylvania Journal in 1769. The letter urged Americans to purchase American made products rather than British or other foreign products. He wrote, “banish forever [foreign products] from our tables.” He went on to say “we consume too little of [American] manufactures to keep them employed the whole year round” [13].

After leaving Europe and coming back to Pennsylvania, Rush focused mainly on his medical practice from 1769-1773. In the year 1774, when smallpox was ravaging the City of Philadelphia, Benjamin Rush volunteered with a society that inoculated the poor [14], inoculation being a precursor to vaccination where immunity would be induced by scratching the patient's skin with powdered scabs from an infected patient. Benjamin Rush also treated poor Caucasians and Negroes at his own clinic and would treat patients even if he anticipated no payment in return. Benjamin Rush wrote that one day he had seen sixteen patients and only “charged but one of them” [15]. Some of the principles with which Benjamin Rush practiced medicine were far ahead of their time. For example the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act, the current law in the United States of America which requires patients seeking treatment at an emergency room be treated and stabilized, was only passed into law in 1986. Rush could have easily and had every right to refuse treatment or refuse to even see a patient but believed it was his moral obligation to help everyone. These beliefs likely stemmed from what he was taught by his mentors Samuel Finley and Samuel Davies. Rush had even eulogized Samuel Davies by saying one of the most important lessons Davies had taught him was to allow “equally free access to his person” regardless of whether they were rich or poor, Negro or white [8].

As with the issue of poverty, Benjamin Rush was also extensively involved with the issue of slavery. The Quakers, a significant group in Pennsylvania, had long been against slavery and enlisted the help of Benjamin Rush, a Presbyterian, to recruit other Presbyterians to support a new law in the Pennsylvania legislature which would double the tax on importing a slave [16]. In order to gain support for this idea Benjamin Rush wrote and distributed a pamphlet. Instead of signing his name at the bottom he simply attributed the pamphlet to “a Pennsylvanian.” Benjamin Rush opened the pamphlet with “slavery is so foreign to the human mind, that the moral faculties, as well as those of the understanding, are debased and rendered torpid by it” [17].

What is curious about Benjamin Rush’s views on slavery is that he grew up in a slave owning family and for at least a period of 10 years Rush owned a slave. The exact timeline of when Benjamin Rush purchased his slave is unclear. It is unknown whether Rush had owned a slave at the time he became involved in the anti-slavery movement or if he purchased one after he became involved. Writing the pamphlet anonymously may indicate that he had already owned his slave and did not want to be called a hypocrite. Regardless, some years later on February 24th, 1788 Benjamin Rush agreed to release his slave. He wrote in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society’s Manumission Book “I, Benjamin Rush of the City of Philadelphia, doctor of physic, having purchased a Negro slave named William of Captain David McCullough, and being fully satisfied that it is contrary to reason and religion to detain the said slave in bondage beyond such a time as will be a just compensation for my having paid for him the full price of a slave for life, I do hereby declare that the said William shall be free from me and from all persons claiming under me, on the twenty-fifth day of February on the year of our Lord one

thousand seven hundred and ninety four. In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal on this twenty-fourth day of May one thousand seven hundred and eighty eight” [18].

Again, Benjamin Rush’s actions raise an eyebrow. In his statement he is agreeing to release his slave, but not for another six years after the slave had worked enough time to offset the amount Benjamin Rush had initially paid for him. Benjamin Rush did follow through with his agreement to free his slave William although when the time came when his medical practice was not doing well, he was in debt, and had no legal obligation to do so [19]. After William’s release he stayed on working for Benjamin Rush as a paid servant. Even after William stopped working for Benjamin Rush he was welcome into his home anytime he was in Philadelphia. Rush went on to anonymously write more essays about slavery, two of which were reprinted outside of Philadelphia [20].

When it was eventually found out that Rush had written these essays, his medical practice initially experienced a large slump in the number of patients. Initially he went from an average of 80 patients a month to just 37 patients in January of 1774. Some of his regular patients did not want to be seen by Benjamin Rush any longer due to their differing opinion about slavery. This “was but transitory” Benjamin Rush wrote in his journal and autobiography. His practice soon found a new clientele from his newfound fame from his anti-slavery publications [21]. Soon after Benjamin Rush began to receive notoriety for his anti-slavery pamphlets and as his medical practice began to stabilize, tensions between the colonists and the British began to rise. Benjamin Rush’s thoughts on the Boston Tea Party, are unknown. This is strange that such a prolific writer has no known letters or journal entry on such an important event. In September and October of 1774 the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. Although, Benjamin

Rush was not an official member of the Congress but he observed and closely followed the proceedings. Benjamin Rush had the opportunity to welcome some of the delegates as they were arriving to Philadelphia. One carriage in particular that Benjamin Rush got to, boarded on the outskirts of town and rode the remainder of the way into town, carried two Massachusetts delegates. One was Robert Treat Paine (future signatory to the Declaration of Independence) and John Adams (also a future signatory and Second President of the United States). This encounter was recorded by John Adams himself in his diary, where Adams described Benjamin Rush as “soft, polite, insinuating, adulating, sensible, learned, industrious, indefatigable” [22]. In the short carriage ride Rush either made a good enough impression or was just in the right place at the right time because John Adams and his cousin Samuel Adams agree to stay with Benjamin Rush in his home for a few days while they acclimated to Philadelphia and searched for long term housing for the duration of the First Continental Congress [23]. As calls went out for delegates to serve in the Second Continental Congress, Benjamin Rush noted in his autobiography, that he “continued a spectator only” [24]. It can only be speculated as to why he was not strongly considered initially for the Second Continental Congress, but this is likely due to the fact that he had only recently become involved in political issues, had a busy medical practice, and through his anti-slavery pamphlets was considered too progressive for the old hands of colonial politics. They may have been wary to let a political stranger like Benjamin Rush into their inner circles.

As the Second Continental Congress began Rush rekindled acquaintances from the First Continental Congress and tried to meet as many new members as possible. During this time Benjamin Rush created and cemented friendships and acquaintanceships which would shape the

rest of his life. Charles Lee who was staying with John Adams would become a general in the Continental Army. Rush would communicate with Charles Lee throughout the war. John Adams was someone who Benjamin Rush would correspond with for the rest of their lives. Benjamin Rush supported John Adams and his idea of independence even when the idea of independence from the British was not favorably looked upon [1].

Benjamin Rush even treated one of the delegates, Patrick Henry. Benjamin Rush inoculated Patrick Henry against smallpox in July of 1775 [24]. Patrick Henry is famous for the quote “Give me liberty or give me death” as well as being the first Governor of Virginia. Henry would go on to play a major role in Benjamin Rush’s life by forwarding to George Washington an anonymous letter written by Benjamin Rush critical of Washington. Benjamin Rush briefly met George Washington during the first Continental Congress and again met with him at a coffee shop. After meeting with Washington, Benjamin Rush, decided to write an editorial to a local newspaper in support of Washington [1, 24]. Soon after, George Washington, was named the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. In celebration of the appointment a party was held and Benjamin Rush was invited. Benjamin Rush specifically remembered the party because it would be the first time he met Thomas Jefferson [25]. Another acquaintance Benjamin Rush made in the early days of the Second Continental Congress was Horatio Gates. Gates was an ex-British military officer and general in the Continental Army. Horatio and Benjamin Rush would begin corresponding with each other during the war, often time being critical of George Washington. In about two years’ time Benjamin Rush had gone from a relatively unknown doctor with a scanty medical practice to a political insider with personal relationships with three

future presidents and numerous governors, military generals, and with a thriving medical practice.

Benjamin Rush would continue to advance his career in politics. On February 16, 1776 he was elected to Philadelphia's Committee of Inspection and Observation, his first elected political position [26]. At the start of July 1776 Rush was still not a member of the Continental Congress. On July 15, after the Declaration of Independence had been ratified but still unsigned, the Pennsylvania Assembly voted to send a new delegation of members to the Continental Congress. Benjamin Rush was selected as one of the new members [27]. It only took Benjamin Rush two days to work up the courage to speak before Congress and another ten days before he gave a full-fledged speech [28, 29]. Both of these speeches relating to the Articles of Confederation, specifically whether states should vote on issues by state or by individual representatives. Benjamin Rush was in favor of voting by individual representatives. John Adams writing in his diary recalling Rush's speech wrote "voting by number of free inhabitants will have one excellent effect, that inducing the colonies to discourage slavery and to encourage the increase of their free inhabitants" [30]. Benjamin Rush is saying that with the Articles of Confederation allowing each state to have one vote regardless of the number of inhabitants there would be no incentive for states to free slaves.

Whether this was the true motive for Rush's argument or if he was just trying to get more votes for his own state of Pennsylvania is unclear. In his speech he specifically addresses this idea saying, "I would not have it understood that I am pleading the cause of Pennsylvania. When I entered that door, I considered myself a citizen of America" [31]. Benjamin Rush's argument did not sway any votes, but must have made some impact. The best sources for the content of

Rush's speech are the journals and notes of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In addition, only a few days later Benjamin Rush was assigned to a committee investigating defective gun powders made for the army. He was added to the medical committee, whose current job was to oversee the army hospitals.

On August 2, 1776 two short weeks after Benjamin Rush found out he was going to be a participant of the Continental Congress he cemented himself as a founding father of the United States of America by signing his name to the Declaration of Independence. Just to the right of John Hancock's signature and just above Benjamin Franklin. At just 31 years of age some would argue Benjamin Rush had reached his political peak, not a small peak by most any definition. Some would argue that Benjamin Rush was just in the right place at the right time to be elected to the Continental Congress and was never destined for greatness. That the trajectory he took after the signing of the Declaration of Independence was par for the course. Instead it will be argued here that Benjamin Rush took calculated political risks which ultimately backfired spectacularly.

Political Demise

By February of 1777 Benjamin Rush was the chair of the medical committee in Congress, but February also marked the end of his term in Congress. As chair of the medical committee he worked closely with George Washington to keep the Army hospitals working as efficiently as possible. The goal was to keep soldiers as healthy and battle ready as quickly as possible. After, publically attacking Pennsylvania's new Constitution which was passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly, the Assembly not unsurprisingly, did not vote Benjamin Rush to another term in Congress. Rush wrote little publically or in his private correspondences about his failure to

receive another term but did write his wife saying “welcome this storm of popular rage! I shall kiss the rod that smites. I was never so weary and never languished more for the sweets of domestic life than since I parted last from you.” [32] Here Benjamin Rush is trying to make the best of a negative situation. Benjamin Rush having been voted in by the Assembly knew he would need to be re-elected but still publicly criticized the assembly’s work and ultimately suffered the consequences.

Whether it was political inexperience, hubris, or he truly disliked the new Pennsylvania Constitution so much he could no longer stay quiet is unclear. Considering, Benjamin Rush’s choices to criticize, a pattern appeared of Benjamin Rush’s “shoot first ask questions later” attitude. However, for the moment Rush still held a considerable amount of political equity. He was still well known and in some cases well-liked by many important political figures; he was young, and ran a highly regarded medical practice.

Benjamin Rush in April of 1777 wrote and published an essay about preserving the health of soldiers in the Army. This essay was given the front page of the Pennsylvania Packet and put pressure on Washington to make changes to military hospitals [33]. Also, during April, Benjamin Rush being free of his duties in Congress was appointed Surgeon General of the Middle Department. The Middle Department was the region where most of the major battles of the war were expected to take place and where George Washington would keep his army. Of note, Benjamin Rush was overlooked for the appointment of Director General, which was the highest medical position in the Army. The position of Director General went to William Shippen, who at the time was a rival of Benjamin Rush and soon to be a political enemy.

Following the Battle of Brandywine in September of 1777 a truce was arranged between the colonists and the British. During this period doctors from both sides were allowed to cross the lines to treat their wounded who had been captured. Benjamin Rush was able to go into the British camp to treat wounded American soldiers. Benjamin Rush, who already did not like the state of American Army hospitals and how the war in general was being run, got to see first-hand how the British Army ran. The highly funded and highly trained British Army impressed Benjamin Rush, but infuriated him further as to why the American Army could not be run similarly. He wrote to Adams, who was still in Congress, that “Order and contentment” as well as discipline was found inside the British camp [24]. At this point Benjamin Rush who had previously publically published essays asking for the appointment of George Washington as the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army began to sour towards Washington.

Benjamin Rush had encounters with other military generals where conversations were had with less than flattering comments made about Washington. For example, in December of 1776 Benjamin Rush had a conversation with Joseph Reed, a colonel during the Revolutionary War, about Washington. Joseph Reed told Rush that Washington “was only fit to command a regiment” [35]. Another example occurred in the spring of 1777 when Benjamin Rush met with Horatio Gates, a general in the Army. Horatio Gates echoed what Joseph Reed had mentioned about Washington to Rush some months earlier. Gates went on to mention to Benjamin Rush that Patrick Henry had also been critical of Washington [1]. After hearing these multiple criticisms of Washington and seeing first-hand the differences between the British and American militaries it is not difficult to understand Benjamin Rush’s decision to start being critical.

Rush began to be critical of Washington in the fall of 1777, Horatio Gates had just won a series of decisive battles at Saratoga, whereas Washington had just been out maneuvered at the Battle of Brandywine losing approximately 1,300 soldiers, more than double what the British has lost. Rush was by no means alone in his criticism of Washington, but the manner in which he went about his criticism could be classified dishonorable, not a manner with which someone would want to build a political relationship. Benjamin Rush wrote to John Adams on October 1, 1777 saying “my dear friend, we are on the brink of ruin” and went on to criticize Washington, saying almost any officer could take the Army at Washington’s disposal and win the war [34].

During October of 1777, Benjamin Rush wrote a handful of letters to John Adams. Adams at this time was Rush’s closest acquaintance in Congress. Some letters seemed to almost lobby for Washington to be replaced with Horatio Gates. Of note, Rush’s October 21, 1777 letter called Washington’s men an “unformed mob” but called Gates’ men “a well-regulated family” [36]. Rush’s criticism did not stop with Washington and his soldier but extended to William Shippen and the state of the military hospitals.

In August of 1777 Rush said that the military hospitals had “great order, cleanliness, and the most perfect contentment” but by October of the same year Rush was writing Adams saying of Shippen that he was “both ignorant and negligent of his duty” [36, 37]. Benjamin Rush in the next month wrote multiple Congressional representatives complaining of the conditions of the hospitals and the army as a whole. In one letter Benjamin Rush even went so far as to say “you may make any use you please of this letter and my name with it” [38]. Rush in attacking high ranking political and military figures was asking specifically for his name to be attached to his complaints. Rush began to bypass, even more so than he had before, the hierarchical structure of

the military. He began to invite high level political figures to come tour the military hospitals so they could see conditions for themselves.

One political figure Rush convinced to come tour a hospital was Governor William Livingston of New Jersey. The tour influenced Livingston so much so he wrote a letter to George Washington with concern for the military hospitals. Rush, still unsatisfied on December 26, 1777 wrote George Washington a letter [39]. After not receiving a response, within a week, Rush decided to personally travel to speak before Congress to resign his position as regional Surgeon General. Rush was acting very erratically and spending little time before acting on his impulse. Many of the letters he sent attacked his direct superior William Shippen as well as attacking the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. Rush spent a week traveling to Yorktown, where congress was currently meeting after evacuating Philadelphia. Just prior to resigning he had second doubts and decided to remain in his position, saying to his wife in a letter that it was “the obligations I owe my country” [40]. Benjamin Rush was committed to getting back to his duties as Surgeon General of the Middle Department, which he, for close to two weeks, had abandoned as he took his time traveling to resign in front of Congress.

Benjamin Rush at this time was not the most liked man politically, but he still held a high ranking military position and still had many strong political ties with powerful people. His next miscalculation surely sealed his fate to never return to the highest level of political positions. Having discussed with Horatio Gates several months earlier and being told that Patrick Henry was not a fan of George Washington, Benjamin Rush decided to write a letter to Patrick Henry. Henry at this time was the governor of Virginia and at best could be considered an acquaintance. In the letter Benjamin Rush criticized the military’s leadership, criticized the military’s medical

department, praised Horatio Gates, and very vaguely, without saying his name, attacked Washington. Rush said of Gates “he has shown us what Americans are capable of doing with a GENERAL at their head.” Rush would go on to write “a great and good God hath decreed America to be free, or the _____ and weak counselors would have ruined her long ago” [41]. The blank space was intended be filled with commander in chief or general. The letter ended unsigned and with no indication that Benjamin Rush had written it.

Historians do not need to wonder whether Patrick Henry understood the blank space and that the quote as a whole was meant to criticize Washington because Patrick Henry immediately forwarded the letter to George Washington. There was an amazingly quick response, Benjamin Rush wrote his letter to Patrick Henry on January 12, 1778 in Yorktown, PA and sent the letter to Patrick Henry in Virginia. By January 31, 1778, Washington who currently was with his troops stationed at Valley Forge for the winter was writing a response to Patrick Henry thanking him for his loyalty. Washington went on to write that he was aware of “a malignant fraction had been for some time forming to my prejudice” [42]. The comments made in the anonymous letter would have been hint enough to Washington as to the true author. Additionally, Washington being the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and Rush the Surgeon General of the Middle Department would have seen numerous communications from Rush and the handwriting would have been an additional clue.

If the war had turned out differently or if Washington had not gone on to become the political juggernaut maybe some of Benjamin Rush’s actions could have been forgotten. If the anonymous letter fiasco was not enough, at the same time Patrick Henry and Washington were communicating unbeknownst to Rush, Rush was going before Congress hoping to get his

supervisor Shippen removed for what Rush believed was poor handling of the military medical services and wasting the public's money. A Congressional committee consisted of five members, whom Rush considered to be friends, heard Rush's complaints. The committee felt that Shippen and Rush would never be able to work well together and that Rush should be the one to resign [43].

This news was given to Rush by John Witherspoon. Rush considered Witherspoon a close friend and someone who, while Rush was in Scotland, was convinced to come to America to become the president of the College of New Jersey.

On January 30, 1778 Rush resigned, writing to congress "finding it impossible to do my duty any longer in the department you have assigned me in your hospitals in the manner I would wish, I beg the favor of you to accept of the resignation of my commission" [44]. The resignation request was accepted unanimously. If to add insult to injury after Rush had resigned, a letter arrived from John Adams. Adams was currently in Europe representing America. Benjamin Rush had written to Adams when he was initially considering resignation and before he had written the anonymous letter. In the letter Adams wrote to Rush he encouraged him not only to not resign but also to be more patient in general. Adams wrote "Patience! Patience! Patience! The first, the last, the middle virtues of a politician" [45].

Benjamin Rush at this point took a few weeks trying to figure out what to do with his life, for the past three years he had spent either most of his time or all of his time with politics or in the military. He eventually came to the conclusion to abandon any shot he had at returning to the military and even decided to abandon medicine. He wrote his father in law, Richard Stockton, who was a lawyer. Richard Stockton according to Benjamin Rush in his autobiography

promised him to be “admitted to practice in a year, or in two years at the furthest” [46].

Benjamin Rush had planned to study law and live in Princeton where his father-in-law had influence. General Clinton of the British military gave the civilians of Philadelphia orders to evacuate. Benjamin Rush and his family, who were still in Philadelphia at the time, were driven south to Maryland by the military action. This delayed and ultimately prevented Rush’s career change.

By the summer of 1778, Benjamin Rush was back in Philadelphia determined to revive his medical practice. For the moment Benjamin Rush had little to no involvement in politics. This is not to say Benjamin Rush ruined his political career entirely. He would go on to be a leader in Pennsylvania's ratification of the United States Constitution in 1788 [47]. He also helped establish Dickinson College, was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and was one of the founders of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, the oldest private medical society in the United States [48, 49, 50].

In addition, during his presidency Thomas Jefferson personally wrote to Benjamin Rush. Congress had just approved the Lewis and Clark expedition and Jefferson wrote to ask Benjamin Rush about information that may be medically useful during the expedition and what type of inquiries the expedition should make of the Native Americans. Jefferson wrote on February 28, 1803 “it would be very useful to state for him [Lewis] those objects on which it is most desirable he should bring” and “I ask the favor of you to prepare some notes of such particulars as may occur in his journey and which you think should draw his attention and inquiry” [51].

By all measures and in comparison to most politicians in the country's history Benjamin Rush had an amazing political career. Following his “downfall,” but it could be argued Rush

underperformed politically compared to the trajectory he was on in the summer of 1776.

Benjamin Rush was young, politically connected, intelligent, and at the right place at the right time, but his political miscalculations and attacks on George Washington proved to be too much to establish himself at the highest levels of politics. Benjamin Rush did not have the political influence he could have and what he surely desired.

Discussion

The absence of Benjamin Rush from political influence during the young nation's most impressionable period surely had lasting effects. During the time in which he lived, Benjamin Rush had some of the most progressive views on slavery and access to medicine for all socioeconomic classes. These issues have persisted in one form or another to modern day. To this day groups continue to work towards ensuring political, educational, social, and economic equality for all races and sexes. Furthermore, today the health care system in the United States of America is paradoxically often referred to as both the best health care system in the world, all while not accessible by a significant proportion of the population. This essay does not attempt to argue that if Benjamin Rush would have remained politically relevant that many of America's problems would have been solved 240 years ago, but it is difficult to imagine that things would have been worse. If the young nation would have had an advocate for the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and for more universal access to healthcare for all citizens during those earliest sessions of congress or in the president's cabinet then maybe small policy changes could have started. Small policy changes made over 200 years could have had an exponential effect for modern policy.

By the end of the Revolutionary War, George Washington was at the height of political approval. In April of 1789, Congress met in a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives to vote for the first President of the United States. There were 69 representatives present each with two votes, one intended for President and one for Vice-president. George Washington received the maximum number of votes possible, 69, while John Adams received 34. The third place, John Jay, received 9 votes.

Benjamin Rush was still close with John Adams, but having lost much of his political capital with George Washington, surely realized the error of his ways. In 1778 when Benjamin Rush, was obsessed with criticizing George Washington while the Continental Army was essentially starving at Valley Forge, Rush could never have imagined the scenario which had unfolded. Although never known to do so, if Benjamin Rush would have simply held his tongue or gone about his criticisms in a more professional and appropriate manner, he would have emerged from the Revolution as one of the most prominent political figures. In comparison to the representatives from Pennsylvania elected to the first Congress, Benjamin Rush had about the same amount of notoriety if not more than those elected and this was close to a decade after his resignation from his military position. Throughout the early years of the federal government there was no strong advocate for public health. The earliest recognizable forerunner for the modern Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps was called the Marine Hospital Service was not created until after George Washington was president [52]. Signed into law by John Adams in 1798 the Marine Hospital Service was established to assist sick and disabled Seamen and had a limited scope. Over the decades the Marine Hospital Service slowly evolved and expanded into the Department of

Health and Human Services and U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps as the country's needs changed. The first United States Congress had only 90 members, 26 Senators and 64 Representatives. Just one strong advocate for any particular issue would have had tremendous power to influence legislative measures. If the obsession and drive of Benjamin Rush to improve the military hospital conditions were channeled towards implementing improvements or catalyzing the advancement of public health, health education, slavery, or African-American rights untold changes to the United States and its healthcare system might have been realized.

Conclusion

Benjamin Rush lived an amazing life, in which he traveled the world, received the best available education of the time, signed the Declaration of Independence, served as a Surgeon General during the Revolutionary War, was the friend to the first three Presidents of the United States, and helped to found organizations and a college which still exist more than 200 years later. Benjamin Rush held views towards medicine and slavery that even 50 years after his death would still be considered to be progressive. Unfortunately, the true potential of Benjamin Rush's political influence was never realized.

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