

You May Depend Upon My Exertions: Robert Morris, the Revolutionary War, and Self-Sacrifice

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Robert Morris's actions during the American Revolution inspire us to be will in sacrifice on behalf of others?
- **Virtue:** Self-Sacrifice
- **Definition** – Self-sacrifice is purposeful action exchanging personal loss for the good of others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the actions of Robert Morris and his sacrifices for the cause of Independence during the American Revolutionary War. They will explore how his selfless actions with his finances helped to preserve the cause of Independence. Through his example, they will learn how they can act selflessly in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Robert Morris's actions during the American Revolution
 - Students will understand how acting selflessly can benefit those around you
 - Students will understand how they can act more selflessly in their own lives.
- **Background**

- Robert Morris was born in England in 1734 and was the son of a merchant. Morris immigrated to America in 1747, and his father sent him to apprentice with a Philadelphia merchant to learn the business. Morris had a head for the business and an instinct for seizing business opportunities. Because of his financial genius, he was made a partner in Willing, Morris and Company at only twenty-one years old. Morris married a woman from a prominent Maryland family, built a grand estate, and fathered seven children. He built up an impressive array of business contacts in the American colonies, the Caribbean, and Europe both within and outside the British Empire. He became the wealthiest man in the American colonies. When the Revolutionary War began, Morris dedicated himself to public service, and was appointed to the Pennsylvania Assembly and the Continental Congress. He supported the patriot cause of liberty and self-government but was a moderate in politics who initially opposed the movement for independence. He abstained from voting on the Declaration of Independence and signed it after it was adopted.

During the war, Morris served on a variety of committees in the congress including the important Committee of Secret Correspondence, which was responsible for reaching out to potential allies such as France for a military alliance as well as supplies, funds, and arms for the Continental Army which usually lacked all three. More significantly, Morris acted as a merchant in a private-public venture in which he routinely used his contacts to procure supplies for the army. In addition, he sacrificed his money throughout the war to keep it fighting from Washington crossing the Delaware to the Battle of Yorktown that effectively ended the war. By sacrificing his personal finances, he almost bankrupted himself during the Revolutionary War. Moreover, the American Revolution, contrary to what some historians argue, was not an attempt by elites to acquire property and wealth at the expense of the common people. Morris's life demonstrates that the elites often served the republic during the American Revolution to the great detriment of their personal finances. Morris for his part expended much of his wealth in the Revolutionary War and made some disastrous investments in land after the war that ruined him and forced him into debtor's prison for three years at the end of his life. Morris serves as an excellent example of an American who put the needs of his country above his own personal needs.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Merchant
 - Seize
 - Bankrupt
 - Debtors prison
 - Desperate
 - Musket
 - Impediment
 - Pledge
 - Recruit

- Redcoats
- Continental dollar
- Mutiny
- Obligations
- Prejudice
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Robert Morris?
 - What was Robert Morris’s contribution to the American Revolution?
 - How did the selfless acts of Robert Morris help to shape his identity?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Ellis, Joseph J. *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789*. New York: Knopf, 2015.
 - Fischer, David Hackett. *Washington’s Crossing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
 - Rappleye, Charles. *Robert Morris: Financier of the American Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.
 - Ver Steeg, Clarence L. *Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1954.

Handout A: You May Depend Upon My Exertions: Robert Morris, the Revolutionary War, and Self-Sacrifice

Background

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During the war, Morris served on a variety of committees in the congress including the important Committee of Secret Correspondence, which was responsible for reaching out to potential allies such as France for a military alliance as well as supplies, funds, and arms for the Continental Army which usually lacked all three. More significantly, Morris acted as a merchant in a private-public venture in which he routinely used his contacts to procure supplies for the army. In addition, he sacrificed his money throughout the war to keep it fighting from Washington crossing the Delaware to the Battle of Yorktown that effectively ended the war. By sacrificing his personal finances, he almost bankrupted himself during the Revolutionary War. Moreover, the American Revolution, contrary to what some historians argue, was not an attempt by elites to acquire property and wealth at the expense of the common people. Morris's life demonstrates that the elites often served the republic during the American Revolution to the great detriment of their personal finances. Morris for his part expended much of his wealth in the Revolutionary War and made some disastrous investments in land after the war that ruined him and forced him into debtor's prison for three years at the end of his life. Morris serves as an excellent example of an American who put the needs of his country above his own personal needs.

Narrative

On Christmas Eve, George Washington faced one of the greatest crises while General of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. He was planning a desperate attack against the enemy that was encamped across the Delaware River in Trenton. But there was snow and ice on the ground, and many of his soldiers were hungry and wore rags instead of shoes. As a result, Washington sent a desperate and urgent messages to the John Hancock and the Continental Congress for supplies.

Congress immediately authorized Philadelphia merchant and delegate to congress, Robert Morris, and a few other merchants to procure supplies for the Continental Army. Morris sprang into action and quickly reached out to all of his business contacts. He secured 1,000 muskets and 856 blankets for the soldiers from the French and Dutch West Indies, and then hired wagon drivers to transport the supplies to the army and arrived on Christmas Eve. When another ship sailed into Philadelphia simultaneously, Morris quickly dispatched its cargo of 463 more blankets, 300 pairs of stockings, muskets, pistols, gunpowder, and lead to Washington. Properly armed, equipped, and fed, the Americans won a stunning victory at the Battle of Trenton, and Robert Morris deserved some of the credit. General Washington wanted to follow up his audacious attack on Trenton with another bold attack on the British at Princeton. Besides the fact that supplies were still short, Washington faced an even more pressing problem that many of the soldiers' enlistments were expiring at end of the month. Washington appealed to their patriotism but also somewhat rashly offered them a ten dollar bonus if they would stay for another month. On December 31, Washington naturally turned to Morris to help him with the situation. "The greatest impediment to our [attack] is, the want of provisions, some of the troops are yet on the other side of the river." He also told Morris about the promised bounty and complained that his pay chest was empty. "A new difficulty presents itself. We have not the money." Morris received the message and contacted every wealthy person and merchant he knew in the city. "I gave Mr. Wharton an order for 40 thousand dollars this morning and pressed him to attend most diligently to your supplies. I will send for him again [to learn] what is done and add springs to his movements if I can." Provisions flowed to the army on a train of wagons to help it accomplish its enterprise. Moreover, Morris persuaded affluent

citizens to donate money to pay the bounty. He may have even convinced one wealthy Quaker to dig up a chest full of gold and silver. Morris collected and sent the money that day not only for the bounty but to pay the network of spies that Washington kept on a secret payroll to keep track of British movements. Morris had again contributed to a grand American victory that preserved the patriot cause. He promised Washington, "If further occasional supplies of money are necessary, you may depend upon my exertions either in a public or private capacity."

Indeed, throughout the rest of the war, Morris followed through on his promise and dedicated his efforts to securing supplies and arms for the army. In addition to fundraising and recruiting other supporters, he also contributed significant personal resources to the war effort. In 1778, a French fleet arrived in America after the Franco-American Alliance had been signed. Morris supplied the fleet during its time in America. In the brutally cold winter of 1780, the army was suffering from desperately low supplies and the soldiers had not been paid in months. Morris secured thousands of barrels of flour so that the army could have bread and pledged his personal credit. "I found myself immediately impressed with the strongest desire to afford you relief." Morris appealed to several friends who together were responsible for supplying the army throughout the summer and fall of 1781. Morris personally cut checks himself to fund the army to help propel it to victory in 1781. He sent much-needed funds to Nathaniel Greene's poorly-clad and underfed army fighting in the Carolinas during the key victories at Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse. More significantly, Morris paid for Washington's troops to travel from New York to Virginia, and then funded the Yorktown siege. The Battle of Yorktown resulted in the surrender of 5,000 redcoats and led to American victory in the war. Still, the war was not officially over for two more years and the condition of American finances and the state of the army collapsed.

The Continental dollar was not worth the paper it was printed on because of rampant inflation. Morris was now the Superintendent of Finance and depreciated the currency by a ratio of 40 to 1. The soldiers and officers of the army had not been paid in months and in some cases years. Their discontent was rising, and there were several mutinies. Morris was outraged by the injustice towards the patriots who served in the army. In the spring of 1783, he agreed to pay the army for three months out of his own pocket. He paid out what would be \$750,000 in today's money and was nearly bankrupted by the generosity. "My personal credit, which thank Heaven I have preserved through all the tempests of the war, has been substituted for that which the Country has lost." Morris sacrificed for the country and the cause of liberty by spending his personal fortune.

Morris was strongly committed to honoring financial obligations with honesty and good character. "I will never be the Minister of Injustice. He lamented, "To increase our debts while the Prospect of paying them diminishes does not consist with my Ideas of integrity." Morris thought that happiness was rooted in virtue, character, and principle. "Happy is that man who has judgment and fortitude to preserve a proper medium of conduct throughout the eternal conflict between passion, prejudice, and principle." Therefore, he sacrificed his personal wealth so that American would win their independence and liberty.