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General Casimir Pulaski

An American Hero

Present at the Creation®

By

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President

Delivered at

Congressional Breakfast

Honoring

General Casimir Pulaski

Rayburn Office Building

U.S. Capitol

Washington, D.C.

March 6, 2007

When we think of the Polish contributions to the American Revolution inevitably, the names of Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski come to mind almost simultaneously. They are twinned in our memory and in our iconography. Yet, aside from the fact that they both gave their full measure of commitment to the cause of American freedom – Pulaski even giving his life – they are remarkably different and what they brought to America and what they left as legacy are also different.

They departed for America at a time when both Poland and Europe were on the eve of great crises. Kosciuszko, leaving behind personal disappointment, went seeking an opportunity to fight for his ideals. Pulaski, already a famous and brilliant guerrilla leader who had fought a bitter struggle in Poland against Austrian, Prussian and Russian troops for four years, fled with a price on his head. The Poland they left behind was about to become one of the important centers of revolutionary ideas.

The distinguished American historian of the Revolutionary period, Robert R. Palmer in his magisterial two-volume study The Age of Democratic Revolutions, wrote that only in three countries was there sufficient internal support to win a democratic revolution without outside help or intervention: France, the new United States and Poland. The Polish effort failed because its imperial neighbors, fearing “the Jacobins of the East”, as Catherine the Great called the Poles, invaded and dismembered Poland. But Poland did not disappear before giving Europe its first democratic constitution and the world its second, after the American Constitution, on May 3, 1791. The ideas, which shaped the Polish Constitution, were the legacy of the old Republic, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, with its religious toleration, elective kingship, local and national parliaments and broad rights and the new ideas of universal rights and human dignity of the Enlightenment, ideas which were widely abroad in Poland. Kosciuszko and Pulaski were both heirs of the developing synthesis of the older Republican tradition and the new Democratic ideology that was to animate the Polish struggle for liberty and independence.

Kosciuszko’s legacy was best represented by the tradition of the Enlightenment. His intense hatred of slavery and serfdom, his defense of the rights of Native Americans and his pure and unambiguous commitment to equality and human dignity reflected that heritage. He also brought with himself cutting edge military skills as an engineer, modern skills which were in short supply in the American Colonies.

Pulaski, on the other hand, brought to America another, older tradition, that of the Polish Republic. He represented some of its best and most noble characteristics including a hatred of tyranny and a deep dedication to a belief in the right of a people to govern itself. He loved liberty and understood the responsibility of free people to defend it everywhere no matter what the sacrifice. He himself had already sacrificed much for that cause by the time he sailed for



America. When word of his death reached Poland, one of his political enemies, King Stanislaw August, paid him the following tribute: "Pulaski died as he lived – a hero – but an enemy of kings".

Pulaski was heir to the tradition of the generations of indomitable Polish horsemen who for centuries held the eastern gate of Europe against Turkish and Tatar invasion. They fought, as they knew well, not just for themselves but the West. They were, as one scholar styled them, antemurale Christianis – the outer wall of Christendom. Pulaski gave that generous tradition a new face when he came to aid the American rebels. He told Benjamin Franklin, as he prepared to leave for America, "Wherever on the globe men are fighting for liberty it is as if it were our own affair." Later generations of Polish revolutionaries echoing Pulaski would fight all over the globe, "For your freedom and ours". Pulaski's service and heroic death in the cause of our freedom, because he believed the struggle is universal, is one of his legacies to our American tradition.

We need not detail his exploits here. Perhaps the greatest horseman in the colonies and the most experienced cavalryman in the American forces, he became the first general of the American cavalry. He is rightly remembered as the "Father of the American Cavalry". Later, entirely at his own expense, he created a combined arms unit of cavalry and infantry called Pulaski's Legion. One British opponent called the legion the "best cavalry the rebels ever had". For two years he served with great courage and distinction on northern and southern battlefields. He died of wounds suffered at the battle of Savannah in October 1779, leading an attack on British positions in the hope of saving a faltering American assault on the city.

His élan, his courage, his skill and his dedication to the American cause, including the commitment of his personal fortune and finally his heroic death of battlefield wounds, made Casimir Pulaski one of the most revered heroes of the revolution for generations of Americans. It is fitting that the discovery, thanks to the efforts of Mr. Pinkowski and his associates, of what appear to be his remains gives us an opportunity to revisit and honor again his legacy.

Pulaski's story has become a part of our national epic. It is hard not to think of the military history of the Revolution without recognizing his place in it. His story, however, is more than just a compilation of inspiring battle narratives. It is a story that gives our own history deep roots in another tradition. It bids us to remember that the Polish experience with its long struggle for liberty was, like Pulaski, present at the creation of our nation and, like he, became part it.

Pulaski was an emissary of the best of an older republican tradition that was dying under the hammer blows of modern, centralized, bureaucratic empires to the struggling new American experiment. He transmitted by his service, ideals and example some of its most noble values to us.



In closing let me rehearse George Washington's words about Casimir Pulaski shortly after he arrived. These were written to John Hancock and the Continental Congress:

Washington wrote:

"This gentlemen has been like us, engaged in defending the liberty and independence of his country, and has sacrificed his fortune to his zeal for those objects. He deserves from this a title to our respect"

In light of Pulaski's subsequent distinguished service, his death and the legacy he has left us and all free peoples who struggle for liberty, it is fitting, even at this far remove in time that we add to Washington's assessment, "and inclusion on our national rolls as a citizen of the United States" – a nation for whose birth he gave his life and to whose national life he bequeathed his and his Polish homeland's best ideals.

I thank you all for championing that cause.

