

The American Revolution's Crossing Into Nationhood

by Stu Rosenblatt

Washington's Crossing

by David Hackett Fischer

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David H. Fischer's book on George Washington's heroic crossing of the Delaware River and the subsequent campaigns in late 1776 and early 1777 is an important and timely addition to American historiography and military strategy. His account is both a serious appreciation of the amazing stratagem that led to the preservation of our nation in its very infancy, and a much-needed correction to the many myths and half-truths that have circulated concerning Washington's remarkable military achievement.

Fischer develops with great depth the campaigns and flanking maneuvers that established Washington's credentials in fact as "first in war." This Jersey campaign, both the controlled, fighting retreat, and then the bold counterattacks, are a classic example of strategic defense, an anticipation, if smaller in scale, of the Russian campaign against Napoleon.

Lyndon LaRouche recently compared Washington's New Jersey campaign with the great examples of military *Entschlossenheit* of Frederick the Great, U.S. Grant, George Patton, and others. Washington and his very able corps of general officers, led a small and barely trained army of volunteers against the most powerful military machine in the world, the combined forces of the British Empire and the Hessian Landgraf. He defeated them in three successive battles in just

over a week, and followed these victories with a three-month-long campaign of asymmetric warfare, creating the basis for winning a protracted war.

Fischer's book unearths much new and valuable material either never published or never put in its true historical context. He also debunks numerous falsehoods, not the least of which is the spurious charge that Washington able to defeat the Hessians at Trenton in large measure because of the German army's drunkenness. This lie was circulated immediately after the battle by the "official" British historians seeking to deflect blame from themselves for the disastrous loss on Christmas Day.

Fischer never treats the Delaware Crossing as a single event. He sees the entire four-month campaign in New Jersey as a unity, a continuously escalating military-strategic operation, and in fact locates the *punctum saliens* of Washington's entire drive in the less well-known Second Battle of Trenton which took place on Jan. 2.

This review will address the key contributions Fischer has made to correct the smokescreen erected surrounding the military and political history of the period, and will identify some of the major achievements of Washington, his generals, and the talented "youth movement" that comprised the army.

Debunking the Myths

Fischer's book tackles and discredits the numerous myths that have circulated ever since the heroic crossing of the Delaware and the surprise attack on Trenton on Christmas Day, 1776. He demonstrates that Washington's success was not due to luck of circumstances, but rather to superior military deployment and keen insight into the strategic consequences



Emmanuel Leutze's depiction of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" captures the drama of the Revolution's determination. Contrary to myth, General Washington thoroughly understood and deployed the concepts of strategic defense, a republican idea that the British, by nature, had to reject, thereby losing the war against forces inferior in number and firepower.

of his actions. From the outset, Washington was fighting an enemy superior in numbers, in many cases at a 2:1 disadvantage, and in classical military training. Yet Washington and his remarkable staff outmaneuvered their enemy at every point.

Fischer starts from the assumption that the First Battle of Trenton was not the most important event of the campaign, or even totally decisive. Rather, he situates it as the initial point of an escalating counterattack against the British and Hessian occupation of the Jerseys, New York, and Rhode Island.

In his description of the Trenton battle, Fischer dispels the myth of a rugged crossing, followed by a surprise attack on a clear day against an enemy that had been carousing and drinking the previous day, as both British authors and American Howard Fast have reported. Giving due praise to the toughness and courage of the Hessians, Fischer instead describes the cumulative effect that two weeks of non-stop attacks by a combination of Washington's regulars and the Jersey militias had on the Hessians' morale and mental acuity. Washington's Christmas Day attack came on the heels of relentless militia probes that left the Hessians battle-wearied, but, as Fischer documents, not inebriated.

The weather, beginning with the Christmas Eve night of the crossing and continuing into the battle, engulfed Washington's march in a violent Nor'easter, packing powerful winds, hail, and blinding snow. The intense storm masked his approach, contrary to the fantasies of British authors who seek to blame the Hessians for the American success. Moreover, as Fischer details, the British and Hessian high command failed to heed the call of Hessian Col. John Rall, commander of the Trenton garrison, for reinforcements on the eve of the

battle. The British contempt for the Continentals' fighting capability caused them to commit the worst of military blunders—underestimating your opponent—and thereby prevented them from sending troops to the besieged garrison, thus sealing Rall's defeat.

Difficult as the first crossing was, the return crossing of the now-iced-over Delaware was even more arduous. Washington's decision to cross back to Jersey one day later was even more stunning.

Realizing the likelihood of a British counterattack, after their humiliating loss on Christmas Day, the exhausted Continental Army, now down to 3,300 troops as against the 12,000 British-Hessian force, spent two frozen days ferrying across the river from Dec. 29-31. However, Washington's bold leadership inspired militias from all over the Mid-Atlantic region to join him, and his numbers swelled to nearly 7,000 on the eve of the Second Battle at Trenton Village.

Reflecting his long years of military campaigning and having precise insight into the likelihood of a British headlong attack against him, Washington staked out a strong defensive position in front of the Assumpink Creek and awaited the British assault. In a military move that foreshadowed Lazard Carnot's later usage of massed artillery for offensive operations, Washington positioned his field guns in perfect interlocking fields of fire, thus making up for his lack of numbers.

Fischer proves that the second conflict of Trenton was the *punctum saliens* of the campaign, for the British held numerical superiority and had veteran troops arrayed against the barely tested Continentals. This fact has been barely covered in history books, and Fischer's rectifying this mistake is quite simply admirable.

Washington's troops defeated each attempt of the British



“Pennsylvania Associators,” as this branch of the irregular militia was known, wore plain brown or gray uniforms without distinction as to social ranking. Their worth lay in their dedication to mission, not what title preceded their birth.

to cross the bridges and attack his army. Three times Washington repelled the British, thus sealing his victory in the battle. With their backs to the icy Delaware River, and no chance of escape, had the Continentals lost that fight, they would have been destroyed. One Rhode Island private captured the drama: “On one hour; yes, on forty minutes, commencing at the moment when the British troops first saw the bridge and creek before them, depended the all-important, the all-absorbing question whether we should be independent States or conquered rebels.”

Fischer then brings to light another extraordinary moment of this campaign, in chronicling Washington’s amazing night march from Trenton to Princeton on Jan. 1. Washington realized that British General Cornwallis would outflank him following the British defeat that day, and so, that evening, Wash-

ington created a diversion, enabling him to steal a night march of his entire army up to Princeton, six frozen miles away from Trenton. His troops marched with no sleep, his baggage train was routed elsewhere to ensure total mobility, and Washington was forced to construct a bridge over which to haul his cannon en route to Princeton. On the morning of Jan. 3, Washington engaged the British rear echelon at Princeton under the startled command of Gen. Charles Mawhood. Many of Washington’s troops had undergone two successive night marches, for others, three, foreshadowing Sherman’s and Grant’s marches 90 years later.

In a fierce fight against British regulars, Washington personally led his troops on the battlefield and achieved yet another remarkable victory. Not pausing to savor his success, Washington marched his troops first to Rocky Hill and then to Morristown, outpacing the now-confused and shocked British army.

Whereas even the second-best historians focus on the twin victories at Trenton and Princeton, Fischer points out how Washington used the victories to his advantage, by following up in what Fischer calls the Forage Wars. His book is unique in giving high significance to these sustained battles. From January until late March 1777, Washington’s Continental Army, with perhaps 2,500 active troops, collaborated with the insurgent New Jersey militias to relentlessly wage attacks on the numerically superior British and Hessian troops camped in the Amboys, the winter base from which the enemy deployed to forage for supplies while awaiting the “spring campaigns.” The ongoing conflicts, which comprise a classic use of People’s War, rose to the level of significant battles. Washington won most of the skirmishes, which demonstrated the growing confidence and military prowess of Washington’s regular and irregular troops.

Finally, contrary to the popularized mythology, the significance of the array of campaigns between December and March was not “symbolic.” Washington’s army inflicted very real material and psychological damage to the occupying armies. In August 1776, the combined troop strength of the British-Hessian force was 31,000 effectives. By April 1, 1777, this force had been reduced to 23,000, but due to wounds and illness, only 14,000 were actually fit for duty! Supplies were low, uniforms were in disrepair, and the once-proud invading army was on the defensive.

Highlights of the Campaign

Moreover, Fischer brings to light some of the major accomplishments of Washington’s campaign. He does grasp, and his work conveys the power of ideas and how they affected the citizen-soldiers and the new nation as a whole. Exemplary is his presentation of the role of Thomas Paine. He communicates Paine’s relationship to the army, the impact of his *American Crisis* paper on the battles in December and beyond. Fischer also explores Paine’s role in shaping Ameri-



British Maj. Gen. James Grant was in charge of the British and Hessian forces in New Jersey in that fateful December of 1776. Fischer writes, "This officer was highly skilled in the art of pleasing his superiors, but was despised by men who served under him. He had a particular contempt for his American enemies and German allies."

can policy toward the conduct of the war and the army in those very crucial months.

He also provides masterful descriptions of Washington's intensely relaxed war councils, conducted in the spirit of Friedrich Schiller, the Americanist "Poet of Freedom," and the crucial contributions of many of his key generals throughout the campaign. Fischer sharply contrasts how ideas flowed freely in Washington's war councils, to the arbitrarily rigid, oligarchical method of Cornwallis and the Howe brothers, which resulted in the dismal failures of the imperial armies.

Fischer also really expands upon the military achievements of the Continental Army. He appreciates Washington's method of *Auftragstaktik*, continuously improvising within the bounds of his situation, to shift the dynamic of the war against the superior British. He points to the remarkable night march to Princeton to demonstrate Washington's use of speed to outflank the enemy. Similarly, Fischer demonstrates how Washington had a growing appreciation for military intelligence of all types, and points out the striking evolution, from his amateurish operations in New York, which cost Nathan Hale his life, to developing very sophisticated networks in the Jersey campaign. Fischer even revisits the likelihood that Betsy Ross was an American intelligence agent who played

an important "diversionary" role that helped to guarantee the success of the Battle of Trenton.

A military historian, Fischer highlights the truly remarkable work of Gen. Henry Knox, self-taught in his understanding of artillery firepower and deployment, in developing the American artillery forces as an indispensable component in the success of the Revolutionary War effort. Knox actually gave the Americans a numerical advantage in deployment of field pieces over the British, and he deployed them with deadly accuracy. The precise use of American artillery provided the margin of difference in both Battles of Trenton, and the Battle of Princeton. This use of "force multipliers," to use a modern term, guaranteed the overall success of the campaign. Not lost on Fischer was the genius of Capt. Alexander Hamilton, head of the New York artillery, who deployed magnificently in all the battles.

Equally of extreme importance is Fischer's unearthing of seemingly spontaneous role of the Jersey, Pennsylvania, and other militias. The real impetus for the crossing at Trenton was the campaign, already several weeks old, of the Jersey militias prior to Washington's staff ever conceiving of the brilliant attack. The second battle at Trenton was initiated by the Pennsylvania Associators of John Cadwalader, and later joined by Washington. The Forage Wars were already well under way by the Jersey militias before Washington sent in his Continentals to help direct the effort. The American Revolution in this, its infant phase, exemplified a "mass strike process" as Lyndon LaRouche has written about it in history.

In closing, Fischer goes to great lengths to demonstrate the humanitarian goals of the Revolution itself. Although he does not seem to really appreciate the deeper republican values or ideas that guided the Revolution, which is a serious shortcoming of this book, he does grasp the powerful humanitarian ideals of the revolutionaries. They were out to create a republic at odds with the decadent, inhuman world of the European oligarchy. For the Founding Fathers, all men, even the enemy, were created in the image of the Creator, and were equal.

Fischer is truly moved by the commitment of all the leaders, from John Adams to George Washington, that the American military not replicate the bestial behavior of the British and Hessian armies in perpetrating "European-style" atrocities on both civilian collaborators of the rebels and on the enemy combatants. Fischer details Washington's unhesitating compassion toward all captured soldiers, British or Hessian, and his understanding that they were, in many cases, conscripted into the vile undertaking. At every point, Washington went out of his way to not only treat the enemy in a civil manner, but also to try and recruit them to the American cause. By the war's end, notes Fischer, 23% of the Hessian troops in America chose to make the United States their home.

A fitting close to a very useful book.