

In David Hackett Fischer's book Washington's Crossing, he paints a very detailed portrait of the events surrounding one of the most famous battles in American history, the crossing of the Delaware River by George Washington and the Continental Army. This event has been the subject of a famous painting by Emanuel Leutze which has cast about many stories and myths involving dollar bills being tossed to discover the direction of the wind, as well as the myth that Washington stood up on the boat as he crossed the river. The reality of the situation was much different and Fischer takes the reader on the journey of the British and the Continentals. He focuses on the men who make up each army, the leaders of each army and the importance of each and every decision, and ends with an explanation of the implications of this campaign on each side and on the revolution in general.

Fischer begins the book with detailed descriptions of both sides of the conflict, and throughout the story he continues to refer to the hardships each side faced. In his description the reader learns facts not taught in schools, for example, British command posts were bought or awarded via aristocratic position, and did not necessarily have anything to do with skilled commanding or working through the ranks. Additionally, it is pointed out that the British commanders fighting against the rebels were actually quite sympathetic to the American cause and were trying to work things out amicably without major battles, casualties, or a permanent rift between England and the colonies. This is a point that is rarely taught at the secondary level. One is taught the British commanders were out to pulverize the colonies, and although the administrative powers that be in London felt that way, the British here in America felt otherwise, and acted differently. This level of sympathy proved to be detrimental in delaying the British from properly

preparing for an attack. A detailed description of the British Regulars and the Hessian soldiers is also given. Each group is skilled and impeccably trained. Conversely, the Continental Army was not trained at all.

The Continental Army was not professionally trained and this proved to be one of George Washington's greatest challenges. Washington and some others had military experience fighting under the British in the French and Indian War, but overwhelmingly, the Continentals were inexperienced. They could not march or make formations and thus they often lost to the British. The Continental side was comprised of colonial militiamen and each group brought their own homegrown way of doing things. Washington had a hard task of taking men from different regions and colonies and trying to unite them under one rule. The feeling of unity for these men was still far off in the future and for the time being; Washington simply had to improvise as best as he could. Additionally, the Continental Congress did not work to improve Washington's situation with regards to his troops. The men were not being paid regularly so morale was often low. Also provisions were in high demand and short supply, and this too contributed to a demoralized feeling that fostered resentment and desertion. In answering to the resentment, Washington won the respect of his men by suffering along side them. They would actually see the mythical hero George Washington in battle beside them and this diminished the resentment, but the desertion was a different problem. Washington had very little recourse in the case of desertion. He could not misuse what valuable manpower he did have at his disposal tracking down deserters. Again, he had to make due with what he had. When one considers that the Continentals won this war at all, it truly is amazing given the dismal circumstances they were facing.

Throughout the book one learns that it was really a matter of leadership that was the key to being successful. George Washington had the ability to inspire by example. He adopted one cardinal rule that superseded all the rest and made everything work. This rule was simply respecting the men. Washington mastered and practiced this rule in dealing with the men and as a result, they followed orders, became part of the strategy, and worked themselves through difficult times to get the job done.

One of the key tactics Fischer exposes about Washington was his great ability to gather and make use of intelligence. George Washington relied heavily on the intelligence he was receiving from his men, spies, and other various sources. He encouraged all of his command staff to do as much reconnaissance as possible and even looked to the fairer sex to use their charm on the British, and extract pertinent details to assist him in making the most effective decisions possible. One mistake could have meant the surrender of the entire war, and the British were counting on the inferior Continental Army to make that misstep. These intelligence gathering efforts made it possible for George Washington to make the best decisions available to him and thus pull off what can only be considered a miracle. He was working with less skilled, but more motivated men, and in war, the side that has the greatest desire to win can prevail under the harshest conditions as Fischer's description illustrates. The British lack of motivation to outright win seems to have been a problem from the top down.

Leadership in the British army was lacking. Leaders were present, but it seems at every turn bad decisions just kept piling up and the result of all the bad decisions was not only a major loss but also a permanent turn of events for the British. For example, the decision to underestimate their enemy prevented them from gearing up in enough time to

stop the offensive carried out by the Continental Army. This importance of leadership was the integral part of the outcome of this battle. George Washington's leadership was also to be admired because his ego was not a problem. He took his council with his inferior officers seriously and would listen to all of their opinions, weigh what was proposed, and make his decisions from there. The British commanders surrounded themselves with inferiors who would agree with their decisions. Other suggestions were not considered and disregarded. This narrow minded approach proved to be damaging to the outcome of the battle for the British. Another deficiency for the British was their occupation practices. The British foraged, and plundered when their supplies ran low in the winter. They stole from the townspeople, starved them, and threw them out of their own homes. They took their belongings, and pillaged their homes of precious heirlooms. The most graphic details described by Fischer were the rapes that were committed by Hessians and British soldiers alike. It is easy for the modern mind to believe that war crimes are a 20<sup>th</sup> Century invention, but Fischer does an amazing job a dispelling this myth, and familiarizing the reader with the British infractions as well as the American blunders. American also plundered and foraged when supplies ran low, but George Washington's famous code of conduct kept his men from going too far.

The author goes on to describe the preparation for the surprise attack in great detail. One gets an in depth knowledge of the number of boats, paddles, and guns the Continental Army had and the challenge it would be to get across the river. Fischer even describes the river as a character in the book. The message is clear that accomplishing this task would be taxing, but if successful it could be a boon for the Continental Army and the revolutionary cause. As the history books have reported, the Continentals crossed

the river, took the British by surprise, won the battles of Trenton and Princeton and altered the course of the war and the cause.

The last part of the book deals with the impact of the victory on each side and the war. The British no longer underestimated the Continentals, and began to think of more self-protective strategies. Their morale took an irreparable hit. The British also became more brutal in their treatment of their enemies. Conversely, the Continental experience was all positive. They became inspired, and their morale was boosted to the point that the gathering of troops was no longer a problem. They focused on gathering even more intelligence, and the cause became more defined for the colonists. After these battles, it became clear there was no going back, and a permanent separation was imminent. The troops became better soldiers, and Washington became a national symbol. This experience turned the tide of the war.

This book was excellent. Fischer is a terrific writer, and the book was as enjoyable as his Paul Revere's Ride. The book was well-written, and the maps were extremely helpful in telling the story. As well, the book dispelled a few myths, such as the belief that the Hessians were drunk and thusly could not react to the attack. It highlighted the mistakes each side made, as well as each side's success. The book was fair and balanced in it's portrayal of each side. On the negative side, at times the book was too detailed, and in the minutia one could become confused. At times it also seemed repetitive in making his points, but overall this is a book that lovers of history would enjoy.

This book will help me as a teacher insofar as supplementing my own knowledge. I certainly think it is above the high school reader in many ways, but what I have learned

will help me to better articulate the story. It will be good to dispel the drunken Hessian myth that is perpetuated by many history textbooks. Also I will enjoy sharing what I learned about the sympathetic British commanders and how their goal was to end all of this amicably because they understood the viewpoint of the colonists. The compassion of the British commanders is a story most high school students do not know. I found the maps in this book useful to tell the story in more effective manner. Lastly I would use this book to supplement the movie The Crossing done by A&E. I show this movie each year to my students, and each year they learn from it, and so if what I have ascertained from reading this story can give them an even deeper grasp of the events, all the better for their US History knowledge.

Book Review **Washington's Crossing**

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