1776

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MCCULLOUGH

David McCullough grew up in Pennsylvania, and later studied English literature at Yale University, where he learned from some of the greatest American writers of the era. He worked for *Sports Illustrated* and later the United States Information Agency. He published his first book, *The Johnstown Flood*, in 1968, to great success. Since 1968, McCullough has written dozens of acclaimed history books, including *Truman* (1993) and *John Adams* (2001), both of which won the Pulitzer Prize, and *1776* (2005). He's been married to Rosalee Barnes since the age of 17.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The primary historical event of *1776* is, of course, the Revolutionary War. Following the French and Indian War, which lasted from 1754 to 1763, the British Empire began to tighten controls over its American colonies, instituting heavy taxes (most infamously the Stamp Act of 1765). The British crown also increased its military presence in America, often forcing American families to provide food and lodging for British soldiers in their own homes, and at their own expense. By the late 1760s, there was broad support among Americans for an expulsion of British troops from America and a return to what had been the *status quo* prior to the French and Indian War. By the 1770s, this movement had erupted into a full-on war of rebellion. In 1776, the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, officially announcing their intentions to secede from the British Empire. The Revolutionary War ended with an American victory in 1783, due in large part to financial and military aid from France.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

David McCullough wrote *1776* as a companion to his previous, much longer biography, *John Adams* (2001), about the Founding Father and second president of the United States. In *John Adams*, McCullough writes about the Revolutionary War from the perspective of the idealists and politicians who organized it, whereas *1776* is more focused on the soldiers and generals who fought in battle. Readers interested in fiction based on the Revolutionary War might try the novels of Howard Fast, including *April Morning* (1961), *Citizen Tom Paine* (1943) and *The Hessian* (1972). In these books, Fast writes about many different facets of the Revolutionary War that McCullough addresses in *1776*. Another notable Revolutionary War novel is *Johnny Tremain* (1945) by Esther Forbes, set in Boston in the early days of the war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *1776: America and Britain at War*
- **When Written:** 2002-2004
- **Where Written:** Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., and New York City
- **When Published:** May 24, 2005
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, American history
- **Setting:** North America, 1776
- **Climax:** The Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 1776
- **Antagonist:** George III, the British Empire
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Awards galore. David McCullough is the winner of some of the most prestigious awards you can win as a writer: he's the recipient of a National Book Award, two Pulitzer Prizes, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation's highest civilian honor.

The voice of God. In addition to his talents as a writer, David McCullough is a highly sought-after narrator of films and documentaries. He's the narrator of the Academy Award-nominated film *Seabiscuit* (2003), among many others.

PLOT SUMMARY

In October of 1775, the Revolutionary War is just beginning. American "rebels" have fired on British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, and King George III of England proposes sending thousands of additional troops, including German mercenaries known as Hessians, to America to quell the uprising. George's policies prove controversial in the Houses of Parliament, but in the end the Members of Parliament approve George's plan. In doing so, they ensure that the Revolutionary War will be a long, bloody conflict.

Around the same time, the American army is assembled outside of the city of Boston. George Washington, the leader of the American troops, knows that he's facing a potential crisis. His troops, who hail from many different American colonies, are disorganized and inexperienced, and their morale is low. Washington himself isn't a particularly experienced military commander. He comes from a wealthy family in Virginia, where he runs a plantation. He has distinguished himself fighting in the backwoods during the French and Indian War in the 1750s

and 1760s. While Washington hasn't had military experience in years, he's extremely charismatic, and almost everyone who meets him personally feels a strong desire to earn his respect.

The American military at the time of the Revolutionary War is relatively meritocratic, meaning that even soldiers from modest backgrounds can rise in the ranks. One soldier, Nathanael Greene, comes from a working-class Rhode Island family. He hasn't had much of an education, but he's taught himself military strategy, and as a result he quickly earns Washington's respect.

Washington knows that the British army has occupied the city of Boston. He wants to strike at the British, but his generals—including General Charles Lee, with whom he served in the French and Indian War—caution him against attacking too soon. Washington reluctantly agrees to wait. In the meantime, the weather becomes very cold, and the soldiers begin to freeze and starve to death. Despite the cold weather, Washington sends Henry Knox (another young, talented soldier) on a mission to recover British cannons from the abandoned Fort Ticonderoga. Washington desperately needs these cannons, since his army is running low on gunpowder. In Boston, the British troops are commanded by the aristocratic General William Howe, a mediocre commander rumored to be too "soft" for his job.

After Knox returns from Fort Ticonderoga with the cannons, Washington develops a plan to occupy Dorchester Heights, the region just outside of Boston. In only one night, he and his men occupy the Heights and build strong fortifications. The British, realizing that their position in Boston is now insecure, have no choice but to pull out of Boston and sail to New York. This victory provides a major boost for the American troops, some of whom agree to reenlist in the army for all of 1776.

By April of 1776, Washington and his troops have marched into New York. In many ways, New York poses a threat to Washington's troops: the population is heavily Loyalist (i.e., supportive of King George III), and the city is vulnerable to naval attack from many different directions. By the early summer, British ships have landed near New York, and seem posed for an invasion. In mid-August, the British land on Long Island and begin to advance toward the city. Washington, wrongly thinking that the British have sent just a few thousand troops to Long Island, suspects that the British are planning another invasion along the Hudson and sends only half of his forces out to Brooklyn to fend off the British. In Brooklyn Heights, the Americans suffer a crushing defeat. Pushed back to the edges of Brooklyn, Washington engineers an impressive escape: in only one night, he and his men sneak into boats along the shores of Brooklyn and flee into upper New York before the British even realize they've retreated. Here, as in many other scenes from the Revolutionary War, the British hesitate and squander the chance to defeat the American troops once and for all.

Now based in upper Manhattan, the Americans await the next British strike. General Howe orders the British ships to attack via Kips Bay, and in the fight that ensues, the British forces drive the Americans back to Harlem Heights. Soon afterwards, a fire breaks out in the city of New York, destroying more than a quarter of the city. It's been suggested (and the British forces at the time believe) that Washington ordered the fire to prevent the British from utilizing New York's resources. However, this has never been proven.

In Harlem Heights, Washington again faces a crisis. He's almost surrounded by the British, and many of his men desert. By November 1776, Washington's troops have drawn back to Fort Washington, located on Manhattan along the Hudson River. Washington concocts a plan that involves dividing his army into four groups. One group, headed by General Lee, will stay along the Hudson; another will go north; another, headed by Washington, will go into New Jersey; and a fourth, headed by Nathanael Greene, will defend Fort Washington. However, the British forces easily take over Fort Washington while Greene is out on an expedition with Washington. This is a crushing loss for Washington, and he begins to think less of Greene.

By the end of November, Washington has brought his remaining troops into New Jersey. Most of his men are exhausted and dispirited, and even his friend and personal secretary, Joseph Reed, privately begins to doubt Washington's abilities to lead. Meanwhile, General Howe argues with his generals about how best to proceed. Howe chases Washington's troops further into New Jersey, but stops suddenly, allowing Washington's forces to escape. The American army experiences another major setback when General Lee is captured by the British. The American forces are on the verge of collapse. Washington's allies in Philadelphia, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, are forced to leave Philadelphia for fear of a British invasion.

At the end of December, Washington enacts a final, daring plan. On Christmas Day, he and his men cross the cold, miserable Delaware River and sneak into Trenton, New Jersey, where a group of 2,000 Hessians is celebrating the holiday. The next morning, in the Battle of Trenton, Washington's forces successfully overpower their opponents. This is a huge victory for the American side, restoring the soldiers' faith in Washington's leadership abilities. Washington scores a second major victory when he launches a surprise attack against British forces outside of Princeton, New Jersey.

1776 is usually remembered as a glorious year for America. But in fact, it was a grim and troubling time for those Americans that fought. In 1783, with the help of the French military, Washington's army will go on to defeat the British forces, ending the war and winning independence for America.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

George Washington – George Washington is the central character of *1776*. One of the only Founding Fathers who played an active role in fighting in the Revolutionary War, Washington was widely regarded as an intimidating yet charismatic and inspiring leader. He comes from a prominent family in Virginia, and he's one of the richest men in America (though he's not, as it's often said, the richest). At the time when the book is set, he's relatively young (only in his forties), but he's already had an impressive military career fighting against the French. While McCullough seems to respect Washington greatly, he emphasizes Washington's flaws as well as his virtues. Washington is a talented strategist, but he's inexperienced in commanding a large army. (his only military experience has been with smaller, more agile forces). Washington is, above all, a realist, who assesses his options soberly and pragmatically. And yet he can be foolish and overly ambitious. For example, during his time commanding the American forces stationed in New York, his rashness leads directly to the death and capture of thousands of American soldiers. In all, McCullough's portrait of Washington is more nuanced than that usually found in American history books. Washington is a talented man, McCullough suggests, but he's not perfect. Although he makes major tactical errors and frequently doubts his own abilities, he ultimately succeeds in defeating the British and wins a name for himself as one of the great heroes of the Revolutionary War.

General William Howe – Beginning in 1775, General William Howe is the general commander of the British forces in America. Howe comes from a powerful British aristocratic family, and his brother, Admiral Lord Richard Howe, is also an important figure on the British side of the Revolutionary War. Howe is an experienced politican and military commander, but he's rumored to be a soft and ineffective leader whose aristocratic background has made him indulgent to a fault. Howe's defining quality, as McCullough depicts him, is his caution. On multiple occasions, McCullough notes that, had Howe pressed his advantage over George Washington's troops, he could have defeated the American rebels and ended the Revolutionary War with a British victory. Instead, Howe tends to proceed slowly, giving Washington (his scrappier, more agile opponent) ample time to retreat, regroup, and ultimately outmaneuver him.

Joseph Reed – Joseph Reed is the personal secretary to George Washington. As a result, he sees a side of Washington's personality that few people ever do. When Washington is frightened or uncertain about the future of the Revolutionary War, he confides in Reed, whom he thinks of as a close friend and confidant. Throughout *1776*, Reed's opinion of Washington is an important barometer of the overall success of the American war effort. At first, Reed idolizes Washington, describing him as superhuman and almost impossibly charismatic. But as the year wears on, Reed begins to question Washington's military leadership, and in a letter to General Charles Lee, he admits that he's begun to doubt Washington's aptitude as a commander. Reed continues to serve as Washington's secretary and friend for many years to come, but this act of betrayal tarnishes his relationship with Washington.

General Charles Lee – General Charles Lee is an old friend and fellow general of George Washington. During the early stages of the Revolutionary War, he's Washington's second-in-command. However, Lee is headstrong and arrogant, and as 1776 drags on, he begins to question some of Washington's military decisions, claiming that he could have done a better job commanding the American troops in New York and New Jersey. Lee even corresponds with Washington's close friend and secretary, Joseph Reed, claiming that Washington is indecisive and weak. Despite his occasional arrogance and disloyalty, Lee is a talented general and an important asset for the American cause, and when he's arrested at the end of 1776, it's a major setback for Washington and his troops.

Nathanael Greene – Nathanael Greene is a young soldier on the American side of the Revolutionary War. He hails from Rhode Island, and grows up teaching himself about reading, writing, and military strategy despite his family's modest means. In the early days of the Revolutionary War, he quickly impresses George Washington with his intelligence and initiative. As McCullough points out, Greene is emblematic of the American values that the Founding Fathers celebrated: he's young, ambitious, idealistic, and hard-working. While Greene disappoints Washington on occasion—for instance, failing to defend Fort Washington from British attack—he's a key figure in the early stages of the American war effort, and one of the few American soldiers who fights with Washington from 1775 until the end of the war in 1783.

Henry Knox – Henry Knox is one of the key commanders on the American side of the Revolutionary War. A Bostonian by birth, Knox joins the American side in 1775 and quickly becomes impressed with George Washington's charisma and capable leadership. Knox gains Washington's respect by recovering important British artillery from the abandoned Fort Ticonderoga. He continues to fight alongside Washington until the end of the war in 1783, and his faith in Washington's leadership never seems to falter.

King George III – King George III is the leader of England during the Revolutionary War. Although he was a hugely important figure in the British war effort, he's a relatively minor character in *1776*, appearing only at the beginning and end of the book. While George is often remembered as a "mad king," due to the dementia he suffered toward the end of his life, he was a popular, well-respected ruler during the 1770s, when the

book is set. It was George III who ordered that additional troops be sent to secure the American colonies in 1775, thereby putting an end to any possibility of a peaceful solution to the conflict with the colonies.

General Henry Clinton – Henry Clinton is General William Howe's second-in-command for the early years of the Revolutionary War. He's an intelligent, experienced general, although he struggles to prove himself to Howe, failing mission after mission. Clinton begins to resent Howe, openly complaining about him in front of other officers. He accuses Howe of being too slow-paced and methodical to a fault. In the end, Howe replaces Henry Clinton as his second-in-command with General Charles Cornwallis.

Admiral Lord Richard Howe – Admiral Lord Richard Howe, the brother of General William Howe, is also an important figure on the British side of the Revolutionary War. He's tasked with controlling the naval resources of the British offense, making him especially key during the Siege of New York in the summer of 1776, when his leadership and command of maritime strategy prove crucial in an important British victory.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lord Sandwich – The First Lord of the Admiralty under King George III.

Edmund Burke – A prominent Scottish politician and intellectual, notable (and, in Britain, controversial) for his support for the American cause during the Revolutionary War.

John Burgoyne – One of the three generals who King George III sends to wage war against the American rebels in 1775.

Duke of Grafton – A Member of Parliament and former Prime Minister who opposes King George III's decision to send troops to America.

John Dyke Acland – A Member of Parliament who supports King George III's decision to send troops to America.

George Johnstone – A Member of Parliament who opposes King George III's decision to send troops to America.

Charles James Fox – A legendary British politician and orator, notable for being the only Member of Parliament to support both the French and the Americans in their revolutionary causes.

Edward Gibbon – A famous British historian, politician, and orator whose most famous work is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, still one of the greatest works of classical scholarship.

Lord George Germain – A British general and politician who King George III appoints to the British war effort against America.

John Adams – One of the Founding Fathers and the second president of the United States, John Adams is a key figure in the Revolutionary War, but a comparatively minor figure in *1776*: he appears mainly in his capacity as a useful ally for George Washington on the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

John Hancock – One of the Founding Fathers, famous for signing the Declaration of Independence in large, flamboyant letters.

Thomas Jefferson – One of the Founding Fathers and the third president of the United States, Jefferson was the principle author of the Declaration of Independence. Like many of the most famous figures in the Revolutionary War, Jefferson is a minor character in *1776*.

John Locke – An English philosopher whose political writings had a major influence on Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers.

Katherine Littlefield – The wife of Nathanael Greene.

John Greenwood – A teenage fife player who joins the American forces in the Revolutionary War.

John Washington – The great-grandfather of George Washington and the founder of the Washington family's plantation in Virginia.

Augustine Washington – The father of George Washington, who died when his son was only eleven years old.

Martha Dandridge Custis / Martha Washington – The wife of George Washington, and later the first "First Lady" of the United States.

Benjamin Franklin – One of the Founding Fathers, Franklin signed the Declaration of Independence and was later a key negotiator with France.

Elizabeth Loring – A Boston Loyalist who, according to rumor, had an adulterous affair with General William Howe.

Crean Brush – A Boston Loyalist who receives permission from the British army to collect valuables from Boston locals in return for worthless certificates from the British crown.

Thomas Paine – One of the Founding Fathers and author of the famous pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which argued for American independence from the British Empire. Paine is one of the few Founding Fathers who witnesses military action during the Revolutionary War.

Archibald Kennedy – A New York land speculator who built the Kennedy Mansion, a famous house where George Washington stays during his time in New York in the summer of 1776.

General William Alexander / "Lord Stirling" – An important American general, descended from Scottish aristocracy, Stirling plays an especially critical role during the American army's time in New York. He is captured by the British in Brooklyn but later released in a prisoner exchange.

Thomas Hickey – A Loyalist New Yorker who's executed for

allegedly trying to assassinate George Washington.

Captain James Paterson – A British soldier who meets with George Washington in New York to offer peace terms.

John Sullivan – An American commander who is appointed by George Washington after Nathanael Green becomes dangerously ill.

Major Alexander Scammell – An American soldier who nearly ruins George Washington's plan to retreat from Brooklyn in secret by misinterpreting one of Washington's orders.

General Thomas Mifflin – An American commander who nearly ruins George Washington's plan to retreat from Brooklyn in secret by recalling his troops from the frontlines too early.

Edward Rutledge – One of the Founding Fathers and a member of the Continental Congress.

Mrs. Robert Murray – An American woman who, according to legend, invites General William Howe to tea and delays him from ordering further attacks upon the American troops in New York.

Colonel Thomas Knowlton – An American commander who organizes a counterattack on British troops in New York.

Nathan Hale – An American spy who's executed for burning New York after the American troops leave. It has been suggested, but never proven, that Hale was working on George Washington's orders.

Captain William Demont – An American soldier who defects to the British side, bringing with him the plans to Fort Washington.

General Charles Cornwallis – A British commander who replaces Henry Clinton as the second-in-command to General William Howe.

Johann Gottlieb Rall – A Hessian officer whose drunkenness and obliviousness on Christmas Day of 1776 indirectly leads to an American victory in the Battle of Trenton the next day.

Dr. Benjamin Church – The head surgeon for the American troops, who is later revealed to be a British spy.

Lord North – The British Member of Parliament who arranges the hiring of German mercenaries, or Hessians, in the Revolutionary War.

John Wilkes – The Lord Mayor of London.

THEMES

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MILITARY STRATEGY

In *1776*, David McCullough studies the early months of the Revolutionary War from the perspective of British and American military commanders. In this sense, his account of the war is strikingly different from that found in most history textbooks. Many American historians emphasize the idealistic, philosophical side of the conflict: the Founding Fathers' belief in independence and democracy. While McCullough mentions this side of the war on many occasions (and has written about it extensively, most notably in his biography of John Adams), for most of *1776* he chooses to emphasize the strategic, military side of the war. More than anything else, his book is an extremely thorough look at Western military strategy in the late 18th century.

The first important point that *1776* makes about 18th century warfare is that, at least by contemporary American standards, it's strikingly clumsy, disorganized, and capricious. Throughout the book, readers may be surprised by the number of accidents or avoidable blunders on both the American and the British sides of the Revolutionary War. On both sides of the war, there are major lapses in intelligence and communication. The American army, headed by George Washington, often gets faulty information about the British. In New York, Washington's faulty intelligence about the impending British invasion of Long Island leads to his troops' crushing defeat. Similarly, it's suggested that, had a drunken Hessian (i.e., German mercenary) officer named Johann Gottlieb Rall read the emergency message he receives on the night of Christmas, 1776, the Americans might not have defeated their opponents at the Battle of Trenton the next morning. Both sides of the war are often at the mercy of the weather or the terrain. After crossing the Delaware, many of the American troops' guns stop working, since they're too wet. Furthermore, fog, wind, and rain prevent American and British troops from carrying out their maneuvers successfully. In short, the faultiness of Western technology (particularly artillery and information exchange) acts as a major obstacle for 18th century soldiers.

But *1776* also contrasts the military strategies favored on both sides of the Revolutionary War, suggesting that the British favor a slower, more methodical approach to warfare than do their American opponents. At many points in the book, McCullough notes the frustrating slowness of the British side, commanded by General William Howe. In New York and New Jersey, Howe has multiple opportunities to push his advantage and attack George Washington's forces, potentially ending the Revolutionary War with a British victory. Instead, Howe chooses to proceed slowly, allowing Washington's troops to recover from their setbacks. In part, *1776* suggests that Howe's methodical style of warfare is symptomatic of Howe's own personality. But at the same time, it's also suggested that Howe's style reflects the conventional 18th century wisdom about warfare. Howe believes that his army's ultimate goal

should be to confront Washington's troops head-on, preferably on a large, open plain, and defeat them for good. For the most part, he's uninterested in small, precise assaults on the enemy's forces—assaults of this kind aren't considered an important part of 18th century European military strategy. In striking contrast to the British war effort, George Washington favors a looser, faster-paced style of warfare that seems more modern than Howe's style. From 1775 to 1776, Washington organizes the overnight invasion of Dorchester Heights outside of Boston, the overnight retreat from New York into New Jersey, a surprise attack on the British forces in Trenton, and a surprise attack on British forces at Princeton. While not all of these surprise maneuvers are successful, they suggest that Washington's approach to warfare, when compared with Howe's, is less methodical, less concerned with classical ideas about what a battle "should" be, and more open to improvisation. Without ever suggesting that the Americans' style of warfare is right or wrong, *1776* suggests that the Americans' victory against the British in the Revolutionary War was a milestone in the history of military strategy, paving the way for more agile, recognizably modern forms of war.

LEADERSHIP

In addition to detailing the history of the Revolutionary War, *1776* studies the qualities of leadership on both sides of the war. By painting intimate, psychologically nuanced portraits of the British and American military leaders during the war, the book offers some important points about the nature of effective leadership. In part, *1776* suggests that the best leadership is a reflection of natural charisma and talent. First and foremost, McCullough advances this theory of leadership by describing the career of George Washington. Especially in the first half of the book, McCullough praises George Washington's almost preternatural ability to inspire people and win their obedience. Washington, as hundreds of his contemporaries reported, seemed almost superhuman in person, and commanded attention with ease. He radiated calmness and wisdom, and as a result he could inspire people to fight bravely. *1776* describes Washington's influence on two New England commanders in particular: Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox. Both Greene and Knox idolized Washington, and showed tremendous initiative throughout the war in part because Washington inspired them to greatness. The link between charisma and good leadership seems particularly strong when *1776* contrasts Washington with his British counterpart, General William Howe. Howe is regarded as a brave leader, but he's described as a dull and unimpressive person. McCullough seems to suggest that the difference between a good leader and a mediocre leader—and, one could argue, between victory and defeat—is charisma, which some people have and some people don't.

But *1776* doesn't just argue that good leadership is a product of effortless charisma. A good leader must also be a good politician. He or she must know how to manipulate other people's thoughts and emotions. For example, George Washington doesn't succeed in commanding his troops simply because he's charming. Rather, he succeeds in part because he's able to convince the Continental Congress to continue funding his army at every step of the way. He also succeeds in part because he's a talented orator, who makes electrifying speeches that persuade his troops to be brave and fight to the death. Again, *1776* emphasizes the importance of politics and persuasion by contrasting Washington with Howe: where Washington is compelling, Howe is a dull orator with no talent for "firing up" his troops. But of course, there's a limit to what politics can accomplish. At the end of the day, *1776* shows, good leaders need to prove that they're *effective* leaders by getting some victories under their belts. Otherwise, all their charisma and persuasiveness amounts to nothing. As 1776 drags on, George Washington loses battle after battle, and as a result, he begins to lose his men's loyalty. Thousands of his troops desert or defect, and even his secretary and close friend, Joseph Reed, begins to doubt his capacity to lead. Only when Washington wins two back-to-back victories at the end of 1776 does he begin to regain his men's confidence and become an effective leader once again. There is no single factor that defines good leadership, *1776* suggests. A good leader relies on a mixture of charisma, political savvy, ingenuity, talent, and sheer luck.

IDEALISM VS. PRACTICALITY

Right away, *1776* draws an important contrast between the two sides of the American Revolution. On one hand, the revolution is the product of Enlightenment values. The Founding Fathers, one could argue, are motivated by their philosophical commitment to the principles of freedom, democracy, and self-determination, as epitomized in the Declaration of Independence. Classrooms and books about the revolution usually emphasize this side of the Revolutionary War. But, as *1776* immediately makes clear, the revolution wasn't just about abstract principles. Many of the soldiers who fought under George Washington were just looking for a steady job, or thought that a British invasion would interfere with their abilities to make money and support their families. Throughout the book, practical considerations, such as paying his troops, occupied much more of George Washington's thoughts than did the abstract principles of democracy. In short, *1776* poses an important question about the Revolution War: to what extent were soldiers motivated by their ideals, and to what extent were they just acting out of ordinary, practical self-interest?

From the beginning, *1776* emphasizes the practical, concrete side of the Revolutionary War, suggesting that realism was the

deciding factor in the success of the American war effort. The Americans who chose to fight alongside George Washington often did so because it was the practical, sensible decision and provided them with good wages. American troops tended to hail from working-class backgrounds. They needed to support themselves and their families, and they recognized that the military provides them with food, money, and opportunities for social advancement. While some of these soldiers, such as Nathanael Greene, were genuinely inspired by their hatred for British rule, many more acted out of economic necessity. It's a mark of the American soldiers' realism and practicality that so many of them defected, deserted, or refused to reenlist when conditions were especially poor. As 1776 dragged on, soldiers encountered all kinds of unforeseen obstacles. Many died of "camp fever," others died of starvation, and still others froze to death. Moreover, the American army was short on funding, meaning that Washington couldn't always afford to compensate his troops. For all these reasons, hundreds of soldiers deserted, and thousands more refused to reenlist when their time was up. Had political idealism been of central importance to the American troops, then far more of them would have chosen to weather the obstacles and remain in the army. By the same token, it's a mark of the soldiers' practicality that many of them chose to reenlist after the Continental Congress authorized Washington to pay his soldiers their wages upfront. In other words, it was often cold, hard cash—not the Enlightenment values that supposedly motivated the Revolutionary War—that convinced so many American soldiers to stick together and continue fighting for their country.

McCullough acknowledges that abstract political ideals did play a role in the American side of the Revolutionary War. George Washington was an effective military leader in part because he was able to inspire his soldiers to embrace political values such as freedom and equality. Furthermore, McCullough argues that the Declaration of Independence, with its celebration of self-determination, gave the American troops a further motivation to fight against their British opponents: they weren't simply fighting for their pay, they were fighting for their country. Nevertheless, *1776* shows that political idealism proved most impactful when it was *combined* with strong economic motivations. Idealism by itself was rarely enough to inspire the troops. McCullough also suggests that ideals were more influential for generals and other commanders, such as Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox, than they were for foot soldiers. In general, commanding officers tended to be more financially independent than their military inferiors, meaning that they had the luxury of embracing political ideals where foot soldiers had to prioritize securing food, shelter, and wages for themselves and their families. Commanding officers were also less likely to be killed in battle, further skewing their motives away from the practical and toward the idealistic. Ultimately, *1776* suggests that the Revolutionary War, while partly motivated by democratic idealism, was fought and won by practical, realistic people who wanted to survive and make decent wages. This point may not be particularly surprising. Still, it's important to stop and consider the realistic, practical aspect of the war effort, rather than focusing on the idealistic side, as many history classes do.

COLONIAL SOCIETY

In *1776*, David McCullough provides a lot of detail about the structure of the American military during the Revolutionary War. But he also suggests that the military was itself a reflection of American society at the time. Based on his depiction of the American military, McCullough suggests that American society in the late 18th century was beginning to embrace principles of egalitarianism, meritocracy, and class mobility to an unprecedented degree. The American military offered opportunities for advancement to people who could prove their talent through hard work. McCullough shows that George Washington favored ambitious, talented officers such as Henry Knox and Nathanael Greene, who earned Washington's trust because of their military successes, and were rewarded with rapid promotions. Greene and Knox's ascension is particularly striking since both men came from low- or middle-class backgrounds. Greene in particular was from an impoverished family—a fact that Washington seems not to have held against him during the war. The American army's emphasis on social mobility and meritocracy contrasts markedly with the structure of the British military around the same time: the most powerful people in the British military tended to be aristocrats who'd won their positions through money and social status, rather than talent or proven track records. (See "British Society.")

But even if colonial American society was *more* equitable and meritocratic than certain other Western societies at the same time, it was far from perfectly equitable or meritocratic. Colonial America was still an aristocratic society in many ways. Even George Washington, a living symbol of American democratic values, in many ways behaved and was treated like a European aristocrat. Until the 1770s, Washington lived the life of a wealthy English lord, and even after he became president he was known as "His Excellency." Furthermore, Washington was often described as being innately superior to everyone around him—a description that arguably has roots in 18th century notions about the inherent superiority of the nobility. Colonial America was also a fundamentally racist society. The meritocracy enjoyed by Greene and Knox didn't extend to the African American soldiers who fought on the American side. Indeed, Washington, a slave-owner himself, originally didn't want African Americans serving in his army, but was forced to compromise because he desperately needed troops. In all, the American military—and American society in general—took some important steps toward realizing more egalitarian ideals such as meritocracy and social mobility, even

if it remained mired in antiquated ideas about race and class.

BRITISH SOCIETY

Just as *1776* paints a picture of colonial American society, it paints a picture of British society of the 18th century, as reflected in the structures of the British military. From the beginning, David McCullough emphasizes the rigid class structures and social hierarchies of the British military. On one end of the social hierarchy, British foot soldiers knew their place and obeyed their commanding officers. If lowly British soldiers were given opportunities for social advancement, *1776* doesn't mention them. By all appearances, the British military mirrored British society, in which working-class people were given few opportunities to move above their station. On the other end of the hierarchy, British generals were often appointed for their aristocratic rank in society, rather than for their talent as commanders. Many of the key commanders in the British war effort, such as General William Howe, weren't brilliant tacticians by any means. They'd won their posts not simply because of their abilities but because they were from powerful, well-connected families. British society of the 18th century still subscribed to the view that aristocrats were inherently superior to "common people" by virtue of their heritage. Seen in this way, the structure of the British military—whereby second-rate people got the best jobs largely because their aristocratic roots—represented exactly what American revolutionaries such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine saw themselves as protesting against.

The British social system had plenty of advantages and disadvantages when compared with the slightly more meritocratic, upwardly mobile American social system of the same era. The British military—and arguably British society in general—was better organized and more disciplined than its American counterpart. This became obvious after the British army's clash with Washington's troops in Long Island and Brooklyn: the British forces' superior organization and training led them to a victory that was among Washington's first great humiliations in the war. At the same time, however, the British military structure had the disadvantage of being too rigid and inflexible to prove effective. Time and time again, the British army squandered opportunities to defeat Washington's troops once and for all. As McCullough shows, British commanders were often unable to defeat Washington in battle simply because they were forced to await further instruction from General William Howe. On a similar note, the rigid organization of the British military discouraged British soldiers from fighting to the best of their abilities, since without many opportunities for advancement or distinction, soldiers didn't have much of an incentive to perform beyond the bare minimum of what was expected of them.

In sum, what was true of the British military in 1776 was true of British society in 1776: Britain's strict social hierarchy and dearth of class mobility impeded the country's success. It's important to keep in mind that Britain was probably *more* meritocratic and egalitarian than some other 18th century European nations. Nevertheless, British society and its military by extension were more rigidly hierarchical and socially stratified than fledgling American society. Partly as a result, McCullough implies, Americans were able to summon the motivation to defeat their bigger, stronger opponent and win the Revolutionary War.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CONTINENTAL FLAG

There are few overt symbols in *1776*. One exception, however, is the flag of the Continental Army, which George Washington unfurls toward the end of 1775 while his troops are camped outside of Boston. The flag, which features thirteen red and white stripes symbolizing the thirteen American colonies, is very similar to the flag of the United States of America (which won't appear until 1777). In this sense, the Continental Army flag symbolizes the growing cultural unity of the American army and American society in general. In late 1775, the American army is still a disorganized and untrained group of soldiers from different colonies, but it's gradually becoming a singular, unified force, bound together by a common ideology of freedom, self-sufficiency, and meritocracy.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *1776* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

[King George III] had denounced the leaders of the uprising for having American independence as their true objective, something those leaders themselves had not yet openly declared.

Related Characters: King George III

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of the book, McCullough describes the speech that King George III gives to the Houses of Parliament in October of 1775. At the time, George III is a young, powerful monarch, and he's confident that his army will be able to wipe out the recent uprising in the American colonies. And yet George's speech before the Houses of Parliament is reckless and poorly thought-out. In it, he criticizes the American rebels for defying his authority, and rashly claims that they're trying to separate from Britain entirely.

Historians still debate whether George III was correct in assigning these intentions to the uprising in America at such an early stage. As the passage points out, none of the Founding Fathers had openly spoken or written about seeking independence from the British Empire at the time when George III accused them of meaning to do so. Many of the so-called American rebels saw themselves as fighting to restore the *status quo* by standing up against an over-imposing British military force, but were not necessarily opposed to America's status as a loyal colony of the British Empire. Therefore, some have argued that George III's speech served to radicalize the American Revolutionaries further by overstating the extent of their treachery. In this way, the king's speech may be thought of as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

❝ Nathanael Greene was no ordinary man. He had a quick, inquiring mind and uncommon resolve. He was extremely hardworking, forthright, good-natured, and a born leader. His commitment to the Glorious Cause of America, as it was called, was total. And if his youth was obvious, the Glorious Cause was to a large degree a young man's cause.

Related Characters: Nathanael Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter begins with a vivid description of Nathanael Greene. As the passage suggests, Greene is a good example of the kind of soldier who thrived during the Revolutionary War on the American side. He comes from a humble background, and he doesn't have much in the way of a formal education. Even so, Greene is ambitious and hard-working, and he's proven himself to be a fast learner. He's young, but so are many of the key figures in the American Revolution. The passage suggests that the American Revolution was in many ways a reflection of American values of hard work, good will, and determination to succeed, while European society at the time placed more emphasis on inheritance, aristocracy, and the continuation of tradition. Thus, the American Revolution wasn't only an uprising against the British Empire itself; it was also an uprising in defense of the American virtues embodied by figures like Nathanael Greene.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ There had been sickness aplenty from the start, deadly "camp fever," which grew worse as summer went on. Anxious mothers and wives from the surrounding towns and countryside came to nurse the sick and dying.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Early on, the book calls attention to the derelict quality of life for George Washington's troops during the Revolutionary War. Many 21st century Americans think of the Revolutionary War as a glorious, even glamorous battle for the ideals of freedom and democracy. The reality, McCullough shows, is much harsher. Washington's troops were frequently starving, and many of them didn't even have enough clothes to keep warm. There were frequent outbreaks of disease in Washington's encampments, which must have been particularly terrifying because few people knew what caused many diseases. In short, the passage conveys one of the key points that *1776* advances: the Revolutionary War is too often depicted in glamorous terms, when in reality it was a long and miserable conflict.

❝ He knew how little money was at hand, and he understood as did no one else the difficulties of dealing with Congress. He knew how essential it was to the future effectiveness of the army to break down regional differences and biases among the troops. But at the same time he struggled with his own mounting contempt for New Englanders.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40-41

Explanation and Analysis

McCullough begins to describe the life and character of George Washington, the most famous figure in the American Revolution, and the central character of *1776*. Right away, McCullough paints Washington as a politician. He's the supreme commander of the American military during the Revolutionary War, but this entails much more than simply ordering his men to fight. Washington must also negotiate with the Continental Congress—the organization headed by many of the Founding Fathers—that provides Washington with the funds he needs to pay his troops. Furthermore, Washington must preserve a sense of unity and common values among his soldiers. This is particularly difficult because, at the time, there's isn't a strong sense of a distinctly American identity. Instead, the different soldiers in Washington's army have strong regional ties that lead to rivalries: the Southerners hate the New Englanders, for example. Even Washington himself is guilty of these biases. In order to unite his men and win the war, Washington needs to build unity, negotiate effectively with the Continental Congress, and overcome some of his own biases.

❝ He was a builder by nature. He had a passion for architecture and landscape design, and Mount Vernon was his creation, everything done to his own ideas and plans. How extremely important all this was to him and the pleasure he drew from it, few people ever understood.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter goes on to describe George Washington's character in more detail. One of McCullough's most important points about Washington is that, for most of his life, he lived like a European aristocrat. This may seem particularly odd in light of the fact that Washington went on to become a living symbol of American democracy. And yet, until the age of forty, Washington was a wealthy Virginian slave owner who wore only the finest clothes, went fox hunting, and put on numerous plays. It was only later in life that he took up the cause of fighting against the British Empire.

However, as this passage makes clear, Washington's early life as a Virginian aristocrat was to come in handy during his military career in 1776. Washington has a lifelong passion for building things: he trained as a surveyor, and he loved great architecture. Throughout 1776, Washington uses his skills to design fortifications against the British forces, at one point erecting strong fortifications outside of Boston in just one night. In that sense, Washington's background as a plantation owner from Virginia goes on to influence his style as a military commander.

❝ In restraining Washington, the council had proven its value. For the "present at least" discretion was truly the better part of valor.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In late 1775, Washington and his army are camped outside of the city of Boston, which has been seized by the British military. Washington, knowing full well that his men are facing a long, cold winter, wants to attack the city as soon as possible. However, when he confers with his generals, his generals talk him out of the attack. As they point out, the British will be expecting, and even hoping for, a sudden American attack. It's better to wait for warm weather, when the American troops will stand a better chance of success.

The passage could be interpreted to show Washington's weaknesses as a general. While he's a respected figure, Washington doesn't have very much actual experience fighting battles. His only military experience came years before, in the French and Indian War. However, the passage also points to what is so compelling about Washington's style of leadership: he's never headstrong. Instead, he listens closely to his generals and heeds their council, in keeping with the American democratic process that was later established in the United States as a consequence of Washington's military victory.

❝ Washington was a man of exceptional, almost excessive self-command, rarely permitting himself any show of discouragement or despair, but in the privacy of his correspondence with Joseph Reed, he began now to reveal how very low and bitter he felt, if the truth were known.

Related Characters: Joseph Reed, George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

George Washington is almost universally respected among his American troops. He's an intimidating but charismatic leader, and many soldiers think of him as having nearly superhuman qualities. And yet, for all his impressiveness, Washington has moments of insecurity. He knows that he has only the most limited military experience, and that some of his military decisions aren't sound. While he doesn't advertise his weaknesses to his men, he confides in his close friend and personal secretary, Joseph Reed. Reed sees a side of Washington that few people ever do: the vulnerable, anxious, self-questioning side. It's a mark of Washington's respect for Reed that he's willing to confide in Reed so candidly.

Chapter 3 Quotes

But for all his raw courage in the heat and tumult of war, Billy Howe could be, in the intervals between actions, slow-moving, procrastinating, negligent in preparing for action, interested more in his own creature comforts and pleasures.

Related Characters: General William Howe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Three, McCullough moves from describing the American generals during the Revolutionary War to describing the main figures on the British side of the conflict. Chief among these is General William Howe, the commander of the British war effort in America. William Howe is a talented general, with much more experience in battle than George Washington. He's widely regarded as a talented and brave man. And yet, Howe has some clear weaknesses as a military commander. He can be hesitant and slow-paced, in part because of his own innate dislike for battle and carnage. And perhaps Howe is too indulgent, valuing his own comfort and safety over victory in war. In many ways, the passage suggests, Howe is a product of his social station. A wealthy aristocrat, Howe has always lived a luxurious life, and as a result he's arguably not the best fit for the challenging, rigorous job of commanding the British war effort.

If the desperate American need for leaders had thrust young men like Nathanael Greene into positions beyond their experience, the British military system, wherein commissions were bought and aristocrats given preference, denied many men of ability roles they should have played.

Related Characters: Nathanael Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McCullough contrasts the American and British sides of the Revolutionary War, arguing that their vastly different leadership styles reflect even greater differences in the structure of British and American society in the 18th century. In the British army, the best jobs are almost always given to aristocrats or people with high social standing. The problem with this is that the most well-connected people are not always the most qualified for the job. The American army, by contrast, is more meritocratic. High-ranking officials seem more willing to take chances on ambitious young soldiers like Nathanael Greene, no matter their economic background. Perhaps one of the reasons that the American army defeats its British opponents at the end of the Revolutionary War is that it does a better job of enlisting and motivating the soldiers based on merit, whereas the British army is commanded by wealthy but ultimately mediocre figures like General William Howe.

"My God, these fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months."

Related Characters: General William Howe (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In the winter of 1775-1776, George Washington and his troops hatch a daring plan to take Boston. By night, they move out to Dorchester Heights, an area overlooking the city of Boston, where British troops are currently stationed.

In only one night, Washington's troops build strong, stable fortifications that make their position in Dorchester Heights nearly impregnable. As a result, the American army has a strong position from which to attack the British forces in Boston. This is such an impressive feat that even General William Howe, the head of the British military forces in America, is amazed by it on sight. George Washington seems to use his skills as a surveyor and a lover of architecture to ensure that the fortifications are completed in record time.

Washington's performance had been truly exceptional. He had indeed bested Howe and his regulars, and despite insufficient arms and ammunition, insufficient shelter, sickness, inexperienced officers, lack of discipline, clothing, and money. His patience with Congress had been exemplary, and while he had been saved repeatedly by his council of war from his headlong determination to attack, and thus from almost certain catastrophe, he had accepted the judgment of the council with no ill temper self-serving histrionics.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Three ends on a good note for Washington and the American side of the war effort. Washington has yet to face General William Howe's men in a head-to-head battle, but he's proven himself to be a talented, sharp-minded commander. He sidesteps battling the British in Boston by designing strong fortifications in Dorchester Heights, virtually forcing the British to pull out of the city.

The passage encapsulates what's most impressive about George Washington. While he's not the greatest general in the world, his inventive, improvisational style of warfare proves more than a match for the British, who at the time had the most powerful military force on the planet. Furthermore, the passage emphasizes that Washington simultaneously fulfills his duties as a politician and a negotiator with the Continental Congress, convincing them to allocate special funds for his army.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Furthermore, as he knew, discipline was hardly improved, and too many of the new troops were raw recruits as unruly as those of the summer before. Some who were lauded as shining examples of patriotism looked hardly fit for battle, like the Connecticut unit comprised entirely of "aged gentlemen."

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

As Chapter Four begins, George Washington finds his army in a delicate position. It has just won a great victory against the British in Boston, but they have yet to fight an actual battle. When Washington and his troops arrive in New York, Washington is able to recruit new soldiers to fight, but he's also aware that these soldiers are untrained and not as well-prepared as those who've fought alongside him since 1775. The passage illustrates one of Washington's strengths as a commander: he's always realistic and pragmatic about his army's abilities. The thrill of recent victory doesn't seem to cloud his thinking.

Such courage and high ideals were of little consequence, of course, the Declaration itself being no more than a declaration without military success against the most formidable force on earth.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McCullough briefly describes the signing of the Declaration of Independence in early July, 1776. While the signing of the Declaration is rightly considered to be a milestone in American history and the history of the Revolution, it's not a central part of *1776*. As McCullough writes in this passage, the ideals represented in the Declaration of Independence were important, but only to the extent that they could be backed up by military force.

The passage is the most succinct version of a point that McCullough makes throughout *1776*: too often, people remember the Revolutionary War in terms of its lofty ideals of freedom and self-determination. But in fact, it's only

possible to celebrate these ideals today because of the sacrifices of thousands of American soldiers who endured starvation, disease, and life-threatening weather conditions in order to fight their British opponents.

[George Washington] felt compelled now to violate one of the oldest, most fundamental rules of battle, never to divide your strength when faced by a superior force. He split his army in roughly equal parts on the theory that he could move men one way or the other over the East River according to how events unfolded.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

George Washington's troops are now based out of New York, at the time a city of only 20,000 people. The British military is beginning to arrive by boat, anchoring in Staten Island, among other places. Washington knows that a military conflict is on the horizon, but he's unsure what to do next. He decides to divide his army into two groups, sending one group out to Brooklyn and keeping the other one stationed along the Hudson River. Washington's decision is symptomatic of his weaknesses as a commander: he has very little experience leading so many troops, and so he makes a major error when the time comes for decisive action. Furthermore, Washington's decision illustrates the strategic vulnerability of New York itself: the city is surrounded by water on almost all sides, meaning that it's difficult to defend without dividing up one's forces. In any event, Washington's decision to divide his troops leads directly to a major defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn Heights.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Remember officers and soldiers that you are free men, fighting for the blessings of liberty- that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men.

Related Characters: George Washington (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, George Washington speaks directly to his men. They're assembled in New York, preparing for battle with the British forces in Brooklyn. Washington inspires his men with a beautiful speech that emphasizes the values of freedom and liberty encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence. In this sense, the speech is a good example of the interplay between the ideals for which the war was being fought and the harsh, gritty realities of daily warfare. Washington's soldiers are at least somewhat inspired by these ideals, even if food, money, and survival are more powerful motivators.

The speech is somewhat tragic in light of the defeat Washington's men are about to suffer. Washington may be an impressive and charismatic speaker, but with the American troops outnumbered four to one, the numbers are just not on his side.

Washington never accounted for his part in what happened at the Battle of Long Island, and for many the brilliant success of the night escape would serve both as proof of his ability and a way to ease the humiliation and pain of defeat. The Americans could also rightly claim that they had been vastly outnumbered by a far-better-trained army, and that given the odds against them, they had, in several instances, shown exemplary courage and tenacity.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter ends on a mixed note. Washington is responsible for a failed attack on the British forces in Brooklyn. Because of his own indecisiveness, as well as some bad intelligence, Washington sends far too few men to Brooklyn, resulting in a crushing defeat for the American side. Soon after, Washington organizes a brilliant escape from Brooklyn back into Manhattan. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Washington's mistakes have led to a horrible setback for his soldiers. He has yet to prove, either to his men or to himself, that he's capable of leading the American army to victory in a battle with the British. So far, the British have won every battle they've fought against Washington's men.

Chapter 6 Quotes

There was no ringing call for valor in the cause of country or the blessings of liberty, as Washington had exhorted his troops at Brooklyn, only a final reminder of the effectiveness of bayonets.

Related Characters: George Washington, General William Howe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter Six, General William Howe organizes his men and prepares them for another battle with the American troops in New York. But Howe, as McCullough is aware, isn't a great leader. He's a dull speaker, and he doesn't seem to have the natural charisma that great leaders use to inspire other people. Although Howe lacks many of the leadership skills of George Washington, it's not a fatal deficiency, since his men outnumber the American troops by a long shot and they're likely to win any battle they fight against the Americans. In sum, George Washington seems like a great leader with a mediocre army, whereas Howe is a mediocre leader with a great army. In the end (at least in this battle) the better army wins.

Washington, in his report to Congress, called it an accident […] Beyond that he said no more.

Nor was Washington to say anything about Captain Nathan Hale, who was "apprehended" by the British the day after the fire and, it appears, as part of the roundup of suspected incendiaries.

Related Characters: George Washington (speaker), Nathan Hale

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

After Washington pulls his troops out of New York City, a sizeable chunk of the city burns down. This is a somewhat suspicious sequence of events, especially since Washington has written to the Continental Congress asking for permission to burn New York, and been denied. Some historians have suggested that Washington ordered the burning of New York, while others have attributed the fire to warm summer weather, or to the machinations of a spy named Nathan Hale, who may or may not have been working on Washington's orders. In general, while it's tempting to suppose that Washington orchestrated the burning of New York to ensure that it would be of no use to the British, there isn't enough evidence to draw that conclusion with any certainty. Nevertheless, even McCullough's suggestion that Washington *may* have been responsible for the burning of New York suggests a darker, more desperate side to Washington than is remembered in history classes.

Rather, in eighteenth-century military fashion, he hoped to maneuver Washington onto the open field, and then, with his superior, professional force, destroy the Yankee "rabel" in one grand, decisive victory.

Related Characters: General William Howe (speaker), George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

General William Howe pursues Washington and his troops through New York and into New Jersey. However, Howe doesn't always press his advantage against Washington. Time and time again, he allows Washington's forces to retreat, rather than finishing them off once and for all. In part, McCullough has already shown, Howe's behavior is a product of his cautious and conservative personality that makes him unwilling to push himself, or his troops, to finish the job. But at the same time, Howe's military strategies reflect the slower pace of 18th century warfare. Howe believes that his goal should be to maneuver Washington's army onto a wide, open battlefield, where he could wipe the Americans out completely. As readers have already seen, Washington is unwilling to engage in this kind of warfare. He prefers to attack Howe's forces by surprise, or to lead small, guerilla-style skirmishes against the British forces.

Washington is said to have as he watched the tragedy unfold from across the river, and though this seems unlikely, given his well-documented imperturbability, he surely wept within his soul.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Six, the American army has reached its nadir. The British forces have stormed Fort Washington, located along the Hudson River in Manhattan. Furthermore, they've soundly defeated the American forces in Brooklyn, and chased them back into New Jersey. The Americans seem to have no chance of defeating the British military, and Washington's own despair mirrors the perceived hopelessness of the entire revolution. The passage gains poignancy because, although Washington is described as weeping "within his soul," he doesn't betray any signs of despair to his men. Ever the politician, Washington knows that he has to pretend to be optimistic and strong in order to inspire his men to greatness.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Possibly, Washington was more hurt than angry. Later he would tell Reed, "I was hurt not because I thought my judgment wronged by the expressions contained in it [the letter], but because the same sentiments were not communicated immediately to myself." Possibly the charge of "fatal indecision of mind" also hurt deeply, because Washington knew it to be true.

Related Characters: George Washington (speaker), General Charles Lee, Joseph Reed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, George Washington opens a letter from General Charles Lee, to Joseph Reed, his secretary. Reed, Washington's close friend, has already told Lee that he's worried about Washington's indecision and poor performance as a general. In this letter, Lee responds by expressing the same sentiment. Washington is hurt by their comments for several reasons. In part, he's hurt because he trusted Reed with his insecurities and weaknesses, and counted on Reed not to break his confidence. But secondly, Washington is hurt that Lee and Reed doubt his abilities as a commander. In a way, however, Washington's humiliation proves useful. Learning that his friends thinks he's indecisive provides him with the "jolt" he needs to change his ways and organize a successful attack on the British forces.

Called on to explain later, Cornwallis would say his troops were exhausted, footsore, hungry, and in need of rest. More important, it had not seemed at the time that excessive haste was wise or necessary. There were dangers in too rapid a pursuit. He worried about General Lee, who was variously reported just ahead or coming up from behind. But had it looked like he could catch Washington, Cornwallis said, he would have kept going, whatever the risks, no matter the orders.
Some would see the pause as a horrendous blunder and blame William Howe.

Related Characters: General Charles Cornwallis, General William Howe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

William Howe appoints General Charles Cornwallis to be his new second-in-command. Cornwallis's first task is chasing George Washington's troops into New Jersey. Cornwallis chases the troops as far as Brunswick, but then, perplexingly, hangs back and waits for further instructions. In the end, Cornwallis waits six full days before he advances any further. Had Cornwallis simply gone ahead and attacked Washington's troops, it's likely that he would have defeated them and won the Revolutionary War for the British.

Historians still debate why Cornwallis stopped at Brunswick, and there are many theories. Some have argued that Cornwallis was waiting for additional orders from Howe, and didn't get them right away. If this is true it would confirm what McCullough alleges elsewhere in the book—namely, that Howe is a mediocre, slow-paced general. But it's also possible that Cornwallis stops because his men are tired, and wants to proceed with caution. As with so much of the Revolutionary War, it's likely that historians will never know the truth about exactly why things happened as they did.

Rall attended a small Christmas gathering at the home of a local merchant and was playing cards when, reportedly, a servant interrupted to deliver still another warning message that had been delivered to the door by an unknown Loyalist, and this Rall is said to have thrust into his pocket.

Related Characters: Johann Gottlieb Rall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

On Christmas Day, a Hessian officer named Johann Gottlieb Rall gets drunk. He's not alone, either—almost every Hessian drinks that day and retires to bed for a long night's sleep, assuming the American's won't attack. However, as the passage shows, Rall makes a huge mistake that indirectly brings about the American victory at the Battle of Trenton on December 26, 1776. Rall receives intelligence that the Americans are planning a surprise attack on the Hessians, but instead of reading the message, stuffs it into his pocket and goes back to drinking and playing cards. The passage is interesting and somewhat amusing because it shows that historical milestones are often the result of small, random-seeming events. Had Rall read the message, it's entirely possible that the Hessians would have been prepared for Washington assault and would have defeated the Americans in the battle at Trenton.

But as thrilling as the news of Princeton was for the country coming so quickly after the triumph at Trenton, it was Trenton that meant the most, Trenton and the night crossing of the Delaware that were rightly seen as a great turning point. With the victory at Trenton came the realization that Americans had bested the enemy, bested the fearsome Hessians, the King's detested hirelings, outsmarted them and outfought them, and so might well again.

Related Characters: King George III

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

1776 (the year as well as the book) ends with two back-to-back victories for George Washington and his American troops. First, the troops make a surprise attack against the Hessians in Trenton, taking a thousand prisoners. Then, the troops attack the British forces near Princeton, and again win a great victory and take many prisoners. These two victories are exactly what the American war effort needs: cold, hard proof that Washington is a great general, and that the Americans have what it takes to defeat the most powerful military force on the planet. McCullough concludes his book by cutting ahead to Washington's final victory against the British army in 1783, implying that the victory at Trenton sets Washington on a path that leads directly to victory for the American side in the Revolutionary War. By the same logic, 1776—remembered as the year of America's birth—was actually the low point of the Revolutionary War for Americans in many respects. As readers have learned, American soldiers' experiences during that harsh year were so miserable that, if they weren't going to lose, they had nowhere to go but up.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: SOVEREIGN DUTY

It's October 26, 1775, and King George III of England rides to the Houses of Parliament to address the war in America, a British colony which is fighting for independence. Thousands watch him as he rides in his gold chariot, followed by soldiers. George embodies the splendor of the British Empire itself, an empire that includes much of North America.

In the late 18th century, British society subscribes to the idea that the king is the infallible, semi-divine embodiment of Britain's supreme might. The Revolutionary War will challenge this idea.

George III ascended to the throne of England at the age of twenty-two. He's a man of plain taste, at least for a king, and many people secretly find him dull. However, he's also handsome, and sincerely loves music and architecture.

History remembers George III as a "mad king," but in 1775 he—like the British Empire itself—seems impressive and even invincible.

In the Houses of Parliament, George III discusses the war with the American colonies, and points out that the colonists outnumber the British. Many of the MPs (members of Parliament), such as Lord Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, assure George that the Americans don't pose a serious threat because they lack discipline. Other MPs, such as the intellectual Edmund Burke, have previously voiced support for the American cause. King George has sent military reinforcements to America, led by three generals: William Howe, John Burgoyne, and Henry Clinton.

Many of the powerful British politicians of this era did not support military action in America. In fact, much of the intellectual support for the American revolution against Britain was itself a product of British political philosophy.

The war with America began earlier in 1775, in April, with bloodshed at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. George Washington of Virginia is the commander of the American troops. However, it takes a month before England learns of the war, since it takes about that long to travel across the Atlantic Ocean. In July, George III holds an emergency meeting of Parliament and sends 2,000 troops to Boston. In the earliest battles of the war, the British forces take victory, but also suffer heavy losses. The battles wreak havoc on American cities. The king's supporters flee, while other Americans lose all their property in the chaos.

The British victories in Lexington and Concord establish a pattern that will persist for the rest of the Revolutionary War: the British army is larger and more powerful than the American army, meaning that the British can declare victory even if they have technically suffered greater losses.

George III remains popular in England despite the war. And yet many of the English newspapers characterize his military action in the war as being "unnecessary" and "unjust." George sends William Howe to command the British troops in America. Around the same time, Lord North, a prominent MP, arranges for German princes to hire mercenary troops to be sent to America. George's handling of the war is controversial, but as he rides to Parliament in October 1775, he's never seemed more popular.

In 1775, there are signs of the instability of George III's position, such as the criticism he receives in certain newspapers. However, George III and the British military still seem invincible. Few people would have predicted that, only a few years later, George III's military action in America would fail.

In Parliament, George III delivers an address that will go down as one of the most important in English history. He denounces the Americans as traitors, and suggests that Washington and his peers are trying to establish their own empire. To put a "speedy end" to their plotting, George III announces that he'll send additional forces. In short, he declares America to be fighting for its independence—something that American leaders themselves haven't publicly declared yet. George III falls silent after twenty minutes of speaking, and leaves Parliament.

George III's speech is rash and disorganized. By accusing America of trying to break away from the British Empire, George arguably empowers the most radical American revolutionaries and silences the Americans who simply want to return to the status quo and be a loyal, autonomous colony of Britain.

After George III's departure, the House of Lords (which consists of the aristocratic MPs) debates his speech. Some argue that his measures are reckless. Many are opposed to the idea of fighting the American colonists, whom they still consider to be British. Others wonder why George III thinks the rebels are fighting for independence. The Duke of Grafton, a former Prime Minister, surprises everyone by vehemently declaring his opposition to the king's plan. He supports a milder program: repealing the Stamp Act of 1765, the legislation that arguably first prompted a rebellion.

Many of the MPs find George III's measures to be foolish and counter-productive. There's no reason to pursue an all-out war with America, Grafton suggests, when milder measures could bring about a resolution. The Stamp Act of 1766, which placed heavy taxes on paper products, is often regarded as one of the first pieces of legislation to have provoked the American revolutionaries. This passage raises the possibility that, if it were not for George III's aggression, there may never have been a Revolutionary War, and America might have remained a British colony.

In Parliament's House of Commons (a lower House than the House of Lords, consisting of publicly-elected MPs, some denounce George III's speech, but some come to the king's defense. One MP, John Dyke Acland, who'll go on to fight in America on the British side, declares that Britain's army is the most powerful in the world. John Wiles, Lord Mayor of London, declares that if Britain fails to win its war with the colonies, "the grandeur of the British empire" will pass away. Another member, George Johnstone, praises the colonists for their bravery in fighting British troops.

One reason why many MPs agree to support military action against the Americans is that they fear that the might of the British Empire itself is at stake. Unless Britain immediately and decisively quells the uprising, it's argued, its status as a powerful empire will come into question.

The MPs continue to debate George III's resolution well after midnight. Two powerful speakers, Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke, oppose military action in America. At the time, Fox is a young man, but already a great thinker and orator. Fox denounces Lord North's military efforts in America, and North calmly agrees to step down from his military post. However, North also announces that British forces will sail to America and offer the Americans "mercy upon a proper submission," though he doesn't explain the terms. In the end, both houses of Parliament vote in favor of George's measures.

British military action is opposed by thinkers on the right (such as Edmund Burke, one of the founders of modern Conservatism) as well as the left (such as Charles Fox, who also supported the French Revolution, and was expelled from Parliament for doing so). Nevertheless, the MPs vote for military action partly because of George III's influence and partly because they fear a threat to the British Empire's credibility as a military force.

One MP who remains silent during the debate is Edward Gibbon, a friend of Lord North. At the time, Gibbon is finishing his monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He's confident that Britain's "conquest" of America will be successful. In November, George III appoints to the war effort Lord George Germain, an experienced soldier and politician, who's previously claimed that American colonists need to be dealt a "decisive blow" from Britain.

In his book, Gibbon posits that the Roman Empire collapsed as a result of overextending itself—an interpretation that makes his confidence all the more puzzling, since the same interpretation could also be applied to Britain's military action in America. Nevertheless, almost nobody in Parliament, even the people who oppose military action, thinks that the Americans have a chance of defeating *the British military.*

CHAPTER 2: RABBLE IN ARMS

In October 1775, an American general from Rhode Island named Nathanael Greene writes that he wishes the American troops had more gunpowder. Greene is an officer in the American army, though he's only been a soldier for six months. Although he is a Quaker, and inexperienced with fighting, he is clever and hardworking. Like many important Americans in the Revolutionary War, Greene is very young.

The chapter immediately establishes the crisis of resources in the American military. In contrast to the British military, the American army is poor and desperately in need of supplies. Nevertheless, it has attracted plenty of ambitious, intelligent young men, such as Nathanael Greene.

Greene grew up in Rhode Island. His parents didn't give him much in the way of an education, but they raised him to be deeply religious. On his own, he read the works of the English political philosopher John Locke. In 1770, Greene began running a foundry in the nearby village, and he married his wife, Katherine Littlefield, in 1774. In his free time, he studied military strategy, and took part in organizing the local militia. By 1775, he had been placed in charge of the entire Rhode Island regiment, and left for Boston to help with the war effort.

Greene is representative of the American ethos *of hard work, meritocracy, and personal ambition. He succeeds because of his own talents, rather than his family's wealth or social status. Notice, also, that Greene is an admirer of John Locke, the English philosopher whose theories were an important inspiration for Thomas Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers.*

Greene knows that the American troops are untrained. British soldiers consider them "a rabble in arms," and even George Washington privately says that they're "raw materials" for an army. Yet the American troops outnumber the British troops two to one.

Even though the American army is disorganized, Americans officers have good reason to be optimistic for the war with Britain, since they have more men on their side for the time being.

In 1775, the American forces are mostly based outside of Boston, on Prospect Hill. The British army has taken Bunker Hill and Charlestown, not far away, and George III has sent new troops to Boston. Both sides recognize that they needed to get "the lay of the land," and hire cartographers to map the area. George Washington has spent little time in Massachusetts, but he knows the British are planning another attack. He also knows that the American army needs more gunpowder. Meanwhile, the troops spend much of their time drinking and "carousing." They don't have many supplies, but there's plenty of food and drink in the camp. There's also a deadly "camp fever" going around—probably dysentery, typhus, or typhoid.

George Washington faces many challenges in the coming months. His men are disorganized and lazy, and they're in desperate need of military supplies such as gunpowder. This passage establishes a pattern for the rest of the book: for long stretches of time, Washington's men remain in one place, waiting for an inevitable conflict with the British army.

Within his first month of command, George Washington realizes that he needs to introduce more discipline. Soldiers are whipped for laziness. But even with Washington's new disciplinary measures, the American troops come across as disorderly, untrained, and filthy. They spend their days digging trenches and piling up mounds of earth to defend against the impending British attack.

Even though the American forces aren't actively fighting the British at this time, they keep busy by building up fortifications. Even still, the Americans' come across as amateurs at war, contrasting with the highly experienced, regimented British army in Boston.

The American soldiers must provide their own guns and "uniforms" (although some uniforms are just ordinary clothes). Many of the guns are old and heavy, but the best "musket men" can fire a gun three or four times a minute, and many have had guns since they were children. Most of the soldiers are farmers, artisans, or fishermen, so they're used to hard manual labor. Some soldiers are only teenagers, others are drifters without any profession. Some soldiers are in their fifties, while others aren't yet teenagers. John Greenwood is a sixteen-year-old soldier. He grew up in Boston, where he learned how to play the fife (a small flute)—a skill that allows him to stay with the army for free, earning eight dollars a month to play for the soldiers.

In part, the American soldiers are so disorderly because they've only recently become soldiers, unlike the highly trained British troops. Notice that McCullough doesn't say anything about the soldiers' ideals or belief in democracy or liberty. As much as anything, the passage suggests, the American soldiers are fighting with Washington because they're in need of a good, steady job.

A sizeable portion of the American army is black. George Washington, a Southern slave owner, didn't want blacks serving in the army, but out of necessity he's forced to accept black soldiers. Other commanders write that black soldiers are "equally serviceable with other men," and often very brave. Some other soldiers desert the army out of cowardice or racism, or because they're needed back at home.

Although the American army is somewhat more meritocratic than the British army, this meritocracy for the most part doesn't extend to its black soldiers, who face plenty of racism from their peers. The fact that many soldiers desert the army early on reinforces the point that many of them aren't particularly committed to independence or other lofty ideals.

By midsummer, American troops from Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania have joined Washington's army. Many of these men are "backwoodsmen of Scotch-Irish descent." They're skilled gunmen, but largely indifferent to training or discipline. Washington orders all troops to build defenses against the British. By early August, the English and American troops are organizing night-raids on each other's camps. The British use their greater supply of gunpowder to bombard the Americans. But there are also many British deserters, many of whom are "half-starved."

Both the American and British armies experience problems with defectors and with general morale, suggesting that few of the soldiers on either side is particularly strongly-committed to his government's cause. Furthermore, both sides of the Revolutionary War are having problems allocating enough resources to keep soldiers well-armed and -fed.

By the end of the summer, Washington's troops are in a state of decline. Their morale is low, and they continue to behave lazily. There's also a dearth of blankets and warm clothes, and the coming winter promises to be brutal. Washington, a Virginian, is personally biased against soldiers from New England, but he recognizes how dire the situation is and knows that he, and the army in general, needs to put aside regional differences.

One of Washington's greatest assets as a leader, as McCullough says at several points, is his realism: he can assess the situation soberly and accurately and prepare for the worst. Notice, also, that the American army is divided along regional lines, so that even Washington himself is biased against soldiers from certain colonies.

George Washington resides in a mansion near Harvard University. There, he speaks with his officers and corresponds with the other colonies. He also takes meetings with visiting politicians and dignitaries, hoping to curry favor and win additional funds for his army. Washington is widely regarded as modest and "amiable," yet also as an impressive gentleman. He's famous for inspiring his troops and employees to greatness. His secretary, Joseph Reed, often says that he feels "bound by every tie of duty and honor" to obey Washington's command.

Washington isn't just a general. He's also a talented politician, who raises large amounts of money and political support for his troops. Washington is widely regarded as a charismatic leader, as evidenced by the remarks of his secretary and close friend, Joseph Reed.

George Washington was born in Virginia in 1732, the great-grandson of John Washington, an English emigrant, and the son of Augustine Washington, a tobacco planter who died when Washington was a boy. Washington taught himself to read and write, and at a young age he began a career as a surveyor's apprentice. In 1753, he traveled to Pennsylvania to protect the colony's claim to the Allegheny River valley from French troops. After a series of fights with the French, he won a reputation as a talented, resourceful commander.

Washington was born into a wealthy family; indeed, he was one of the wealthiest people in America at the time. However, he was also a hard worker and an ambitious commander who distinguished himself in battle. Washington fought in the French and Indian War, a decade-long conflict in which Americans living in the British colonies fought against French forces trying to seize British lands in North America.

In 1759, Washington "retired" from military life and took over his father's plantation in Virginia. He married Martha Dandridge Custis, and thereafter lived like an English aristocrat. He loved art and music, and arranged for plays to be performed on his property. He was one of the richest men in America, though not the richest, as he was sometimes said to be. Like most English lords of the era, he enjoyed hunting, and perfected his riding skills while hunting foxes. He was rumored to be very strong.

One of the paradoxes of Washington's life is that, even though he's a symbol of American independence and democracy, he was also a very aristocratic, British figure in many ways.


Washington was a charismatic leader, but he also knew his limitations. At the time when he began commanding the American troops, he hadn't been involved in military life for fifteen years—and even when he'd been a commander, he'd only been involved in backwoods warfare. Yet when he appeared before the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, he was able to convince his peers that he was the ideal candidate to command the army.

The Continental Congress was a Philadelphia-based group that included most of the American Founding Fathers, including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. McCullough doesn't discuss the Congress at great length in this book, but the Congress was an important resource for Washington, since it allocated most of the funds for his army.


In September 1775, Washington begins making plans for a surprise attack on British forces in Quebec. He also wants to strike the British in Boston. However, by the middle of September, a mutiny breaks out among Washington's men. The mutiny is easily suppressed, but Washington is "shaken" by the uprising.

Despite Washington's charisma as a leader, he's unable tocontrol his own men—a fact that frustrates and worries him.

The next morning, George Washington meets with his head generals, including General Charles Lee, who fought alongside Washington in the backwoods. In addition to Washington's head generals, Nathanael Greene is present. Washington argues that the Americans should attack Boston by water. However, the generals argue that it's too risky to attack the British, pointing out that the troops don't have enough gunpowder, and if the tide is even slightly too high, the troops won't be able to enter Boston. Washington accepts his men's recommendation. However, he pens a long letter to his friend John Hancock, requesting that the Continental Congress send him more money. At the end of September, it does.

Washington seems to value his generals' opinions, and allows them to talk him out of invading Boston. Washington continues to balance his two roles: as military commander, and as a financial negotiator with the Continental Congress. Without funds, Washington has no way of paying his men, and therefore has no way of waging war with the British.

If asked why they'd chosen to fight, most of Washington's men would probably say that they wanted to defend their country. They saw the British as invaders, challenging their liberty and autonomy. Few of Washington's men would have given national independence as a reason. But as the year goes on, there's more and more talk of independence from Britain. In a letter, Nathanael Greene says that many men want "a declaration of independence."

To the extent that Washington's men are fighting for idealistic reasons, they see themselves as fighting to restore the status quo *in their own country, rather than fighting for radical change. With the exception of Greene, few American soldiers feel a strong desire to break away from British rule altogether—contrary to what George III claimed in October 1775.*

At the end of September, it's discovered that Dr. Benjamin Church, head surgeon for the American army, is a British spy. This is shocking news—he'd been an outspoken proponent of American values, and he was widely respected for his integrity. Church's treachery is discovered when soldiers apprehend a woman carrying a letter Church has written to the British. He's tried, found guilty, and exiled to the West Indies.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, both sides wage espionage campaigns against their opponents. For instance, Washington is now known to have had many powerful informants in the British army.

On October 18, delegates from the Continental Congress, including Benjamin Franklin, confer with Washington and decide not to approve an attack on British troops in Boston, since this would risk the destruction of Boston itself. A week later, British forces attack and burn the city of Falmouth. Washington receives another blow when his secretary, Joseph Reed, announces that he needs to leave Washington and tend to his family.

The Continental Congress still sees itself as fighting to restore the status quo *in America—which means protecting American cities and American property—rather than fighting for independence at any cost.*

The weather is getting colder, and rations are getting scarcer for Washington's men. Washington finds it difficult to get over his bias against New Englanders—every day, they disrespect his authority in some way. However, he begins working closely with two talented New Englanders: Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox, a colonel from Boston who is well-versed in military tactics.

Washington begins to get over his bias against people from certain American colonies when he gets to know Greene and Knox. This suggests that the American army is a strong meritocracy, where anyone talented can succeed, regardless of their background (although, as McCullough has already noted, this doesn't apply to African American soldiers).

Washington first meets Henry Knox in July 1775, and he's impressed with Knox's intelligence. In the fall, Knox suggests that the American forces try to recover the British cannons in Fort Ticonderoga. American forces had captured Fort Ticonderoga from the British earlier in the year, but the British cannons in the fort are still there. Washington sends Knox on a mission to claim the cannons.

In contrast to the rigid, methodical organization of the British military, the American military as run by George Washington encourages its commanders to pursue risky, flexible ventures, such as the recovery of the cannons.

As Knox is leading his men out to Fort Ticonderoga, the weather gets colder. Washington realizes that his men need to conserve their gunpowder. Snow falls in November, suggesting that the winter will be long and miserable. Scurvy and smallpox are rampant in the camp, and many American soldiers desert their stations. At the end of November, the British send a boatload of homeless Bostonians to Washington's encampment. These people are sick and starving, and Washington orders for them to be cared for even though he recognizes that the British are trying to spread disease to his troops.

The deployment of homeless Bostonians to Washington's camp represents both a shift and an intensification in British military strategy, in two ways: Washington's resources are already strained without having to shelter civilians, but this development also increases his troops' exposure to illness. Washington's decision to care for these displaced Bostonians despite this exemplifies his courage and compassion as a leader.

As the year comes to an end, many American soldiers have the opportunity to leave the army. Washington, knowing that many will choose to leave rather than reenlist, sends a letter asking the Continental Congress to give him more money to pay the men to stay. The situation is dire: Washington's army is on the verge of collapse. Then, unexpectedly, Washington gets good news. An American privateer has captured a British vessel stocked with guns, cannons, and mortars. It's a huge victory for the American side.

It's a sign of the low morale of the American military that so many soldiers want to leave. However, Washington attempts to boost his men's morale by offering them more money upfront. The prospect of recovering the Ticonderoga cannons provides another boost to morale, since it means the Americans can finally match the British technologically.

In the weeks leading up to reenlistment, Washington and his generals try to incentivize his troops to reenlist, but they continue to show little motivation. Meanwhile, there's no news from the expedition to Quebec, nor from Knox's expedition. In December, the Continental Congress changes its mind and gives the go-ahead for Washington to attack British troops in Boston, even if it means destroying the city itself.

The Continental Congress is clearly becoming more desperate, as suggested by its sudden reversal regarding the destruction of Boston. The Congress knows it needs a quick, decisive victory against the British forces, no matter the costs.

On December 24, a snowstorm blows through Massachusetts, causing some soldiers to freeze to death. On the final day of the year, soldiers leave by the thousands rather than reenlist. However, "substantial numbers" of soldiers stay behind—possibly as many as 9,000—and new soldiers arrive, many of them from distant colonies. Washington declares that his army is now a "Continental Army," uniting people of many colonies under one cause. He displays a new **flag** to honor the army, with thirteen red and white stripes. When the British see it, they think it's a flag of surrender.

The soldiers who choose to stay in the army are motivated by a mixture of idealism and practicality. They know they stand to make more money fighting for another year, even if they're risking their lives. They may also respect Washington and believe in the American political cause. Nevertheless, the British continue to regard the Americans as a weak opposition, as suggested by the British forces' confusion about the new American flag. The new flag symbolizes the growing cultural unity of the American military, and of the Revolutionary cause in general.

CHAPTER 3: DORCHESTER HEIGHTS

In mid-1775, the British troops seize Bunker Hill, and soon after they invade Boston. However, they don't try to seize Dorchester Heights, just outside of Boston, even though many point out that it's the most important point from which to defend the city. Many British generals propose that the troops leave Boston and relocate to New York, a better tactical location. But by the time General William Howe receives orders from England to leave Boston, it's too cold, and the troops are forced to stay.

The decision not to take Dorchester Heights is one of many tactical blunders by General William Howe, the leader of the British military effort in America. Howe receives his orders from England in delay because of the time it takes to travel across the Atlantic Ocean.

Winter in America is a challenge for the British soldiers. Soldiers freeze to death standing outside on watch, and keeping warm seems impossible. The soldiers cut down trees in the surrounding area for firewood, and food remains scarce. Nevertheless, some of the more high-ranking British soldiers manage to enjoy their time. They attend plays commissioned by General Howe, many of them satirizing the American soldiers.

The British military's experience in Boston emphasizes the strong class divisions in British society: upper-class British officers thrive while their inferiors starve and freeze. For an army that is already suffering from low morale, such stark class differences would only serve to further demoralize low-ranking British troops.

British commander General William Howe is well known for being an indulgent, fun-loving man. He's rumored to be in an adulterous relationship with a woman named Elizabeth Loring, the wife of a Boston Loyalist (i.e., a supporter of King George III). William Howe, along with his brother Richard Howe (George III's Lord Admiral of the Navy), belong to a wealthy English family. William Howe is respected for his bravery, though he's also rumored to be too "soft" for war. Howe is particularly shaken by the carnage at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Howe is also rumored to dislike his second-in-command, Henry Clinton.

General Howe is a powerful, well-connected man, and he's clearly no coward. Nevertheless, the passage gives the impression that Howe and his brother have been chosen for their posts because of their aristocratic heritage, not their talents in warcraft. In many ways, General Howe seems too inexperienced to be running the British military in America. For instance, a commander who's shocked by the carnage of battle is not the best candidate for running a war effort.

The British army takes a different approach to appointing generals than the American army. America gives leadership opportunities to lower-class men like Greene, while Britain's army reflects the structure of British society, with aristocrats taking the top jobs.

The British and American militaries reflect the differences in British and American society at the time. American society is more meritocratic, offering working-class people like Nathanael Green opportunities for advancement.

Meanwhile, the British have little intelligence on the Americans, and don't know that the Americans are running low on supplies. On January 14, George Washington writes a letter to Joseph Reed, explaining that his army is near collapse. He lists various problems: no gunpowder or money, and too many deserters and undisciplined troops. He suggests that he should never have agreed to lead the American army.

Despite his reputation for level-headed and unflinching leadership, George Washington frequently expresses fear and regret to his close confidant, Joseph Reed. However, Washington is a strong leader who understands the importance of appearances, and he keeps his fears private.

In the week before writing his letter to Reed, Washington takes an important step. With the approval of the Continental Congress, Washington sends General Charles Lee to New York, recognizing that the city needs to be protected from a possible British invasion. On January 17, Washington receives the worst news so far: the expedition that he sent to attack British troops in Quebec was defeated, and many Americans were killed or wounded.

As 1776 begins, Washington continues to experience setback after setback. Though 1776 is often remembered as a glorious year in American history, the passage suggests that it's also full of defeat and disappointment.

On January 18, Knox returns from Fort Ticonderoga, bringing good news: he's brought back the cannons. Knox pulled the cannons across frozen Lake George using enormous sleds. During the dangerous journey, one of the cannons broke through the ice and sank—but Knox manages to recover it and returns with all the cannons, and thousands more guns. This event strengthens Washington's trust in Knox and gives the American troops momentary hope that the stalemate in Boston might soon change.

Knox earns Washington's trust by succeeding in his mission. This reinforces McCullough's point about the meritocracy and upward mobility of the American army at the time: Knox succeeds and wins respect because of his talent, not his family name.

George Washington is encouraged by the retrieval of the cannons, but he knows that his army is still weak. As January presses on, the temperature drops further. In February, Washington confers with his generals and proposes attacking Boston. The generals determine, again, that the attack is a bad idea. However, they propose luring the British army out to Dorchester, and then attacking Boston while some of the troops are away.

As before, Washington proves himself to be a sober, realistic military strategist. He genuinely values his generals' opinions, allowing them to modify his plan to invade Boston.

The American troops plan to occupy Dorchester late at night. Using their new cannons, they'll defend their position and build fortifications. To distract the British from the noise of building, Washington suggests artillery fire from Cobble Hill. He allocates 3,000 men to fortify Dorchester and another 4,000 to attack Boston once the British have gone out to Dorchester. To keep the operation secret, Washington forbids any messages from being sent to Boston.

In part because his army is weaker and undersupplied, Washington has to rely on secrecy and strategy to defeat the British. As his generals have just told him, he can't possibly defeat the British in a head-on conflict. Therefore, Washington's best option is to take the British by surprise and divide their attention by seizing Dorchester.

The operation begins with Washington's troops firing on Boston. The British fire back, though neither side does much damage. For two nights leading up to March 4, the firing continues. Meanwhile, American troops march out to Dorchester Heights and begin setting up fortifications. They work hard, and by the dawn the fortifications are finished—a "phenomenal achievement." When General William Howe sees what the Americans have done, he says, "These fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months."

Even though Washington has yet to win an actual battle against the British, he distinguishes himself as an excellent general in other ways. By this time, his soldiers act very efficiently, suggesting that Washington has managed to introduce some organization and discipline in his ranks after all.

The British forces are intimidated by the Americans' move into Dorchester. General Howe orders 2,000 of his men to march to Dorchester, and they leave by noon on March 5. However, there's a horrible storm that evening, and Howe calls off the attack before the troops have arrived. It's unclear exactly when Howe decides to cancel the attack. He may have recognized that it was a mistake to send British troops to Dorchester, and then used the storm as an "easy out," rather than admitting his mistake.

It's instructive to compare Howe's decision-making process with Washington's. Washington allows his generals to talk him out of bad decisions. Howe, it's suggested, doesn't accept as much input from his inferiors, and as a result has to back out of a bad decision to save face.

In less than a day, the Americans have leveled a significant attack on Britain's control over Boston. Now that the Americans control Dorchester, it's unclear how much longer the British will be able to last in Boston. Rather abruptly, General Howe commands Britain's troops to leave Boston at once, rather than wait for the Americans to attack. Howe organizes ships to carry away the troops, along with any Loyalists who want to come. On the night of March 9, Howe orders the British to bombard the American troops, but the bombardment kills only four people.

It's a sign of Washington's tactical genius that he manages to force the British out of Boston without facing them in head-on conflict. Even if his army is too weak to defeat the British directly, it's efficient and organized enough to outmaneuver the British, humiliating General Howe and his forces.

On March 10, General Howe announces that he has arranged for Loyalist townspeople to be sailed away from Boston. For Boston Loyalists, this is a daunting offer. Most of them have never lived anywhere but Boston, and they're frightened about leaving, especially since Howe is secretive about where the ships are bound (some say Nova Scotia). More than one thousand Loyalists board the British ships, including many Harvard graduates and other elites.

The decision of so many Loyalists to flee Boston is an indication of the war's shifting tides. The Loyalists who leave are likely very afraid of what might become of them when the Revolutionaries retake Boston.

Also March 10, General Howe orders all Bostonians to surrender any supplies that might be useful to the American troops. He claims that Bostonians will be compensated with certificates from England for doing so, but most people in the city understand that these certificates are worthless. Howe instructs Crean Brush, a prominent Loyalist, to buy up any valuables using these certificates. Brush takes advantage of the authority he has been given, and uses force to steal precious resources from locals. This prompts a series of riots as soldiers plunder the town. A week later, the British leave Boston.

In the British forces' final days in Boston, chaos breaks out. While William Howe appears to be sincere in his desire to compensate Bostonians fairly for their possessions, the effect of his plan is to rob Bostonians of their property and give them worthless certificates in return. (It's worth noting, however, that Washington's forces engage in somewhat similar behavior later on in New York.)

On the morning of March 17, the American troops realize that the English are leaving Boston. That afternoon, they march into Boston. The next day, Washington begins a survey of the city to assess the damage. He finds that the British have robbed Boston of much of its wealth, though the town itself isn't in bad shape. Buildings are still standing, and there are still bushels of wheat and hay, along with many horses. Washington puts Nathanael Greene in charge of Boston while he plans his next move.

It's a mark of Washington's respect for Nathanael Greene (and, implicitly, a mark of the meritocratic structure of the American army) that he gives Greene so much responsibility.

Aboard the British ships, many of the soldiers wonder what William Howe is planning. Loyalist civilians in particular are terrified that they'll never return to Boston. By March 27, it's announced that the ships will be sailing to Halifax. Meanwhile, Washington sends the good news to the Continental Congress, which designs a gold medal in Washington's honor. The news of Howe's defeat in Boston arrives in England in early May, prompting a wave of outrage in Parliament.

Washington is widely regarded as a hero for his military strategies in Dorchester, even though he only ordered the occupation of Dorchester after his generals talked him out of invading Boston itself. In this way, it's suggested that Washington is an effective general because he knows how to take advice, not simply because of his own talents.

The assault on Dorchester has been a resounding success for the American army. Washington has defeated William Howe, a far more experienced general. Furthermore, he's waged a military campaign while also negotiating with the Continental Congress for money, showing that he's a good politican as well as a great tactician. He has also cultivated relationships with exemplary leaders from New England (such as Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox) and no longer speaks ill of New Englanders as a result. Meanwhile, many prominent thinkers in America, including Thomas Paine in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, begin lobbying for a declaration of independence from Britain.

After the Siege of Boston, as it's often called, the entire American army becomes more strongly united as soldiers from different colonies learn to trust and respect one another. The victory in Boston also emboldens the Founding Fathers to push for more radical changes in America. Rather than trying to restore the status quo, *they now begin lobbying for total separation from the British Empire.*

Emboldened by his success, George Washington begins sending troops to New York in anticipation of another British invasion. Many of the American troops welcome the opportunity to leave cold Massachusetts. By April 4, Washington and his troops have begun the march to New York.

Spirits are high among American troops as the spring begins, even as the possibility of another invasion looms on the horizon.

CHAPTER 4: THE LINES ARE DRAWN

Washington's troops march through Massachusetts toward New York. By early April, they have reached Rhode Island, where Washington is greeted as a hero. The troops sense that they're heading toward danger, though nobody is sure where the British forces have gone. Even so, the troops remain in high spirits after their victory in Boston.

Chapter Four picks up where Chapter Three left off: Washington is rapidly becoming a hero, and the American troops in general are optimistic about their chances against the British.

George Washington knows that he'll face challenges in New York unlike any he faced in Boston. In New York, the British will be able to attack by sea from almost any direction, and many New Yorkers are loyal to England, raising the possibility that locals will betray his troops. However, Washington understands the strategic and political importance of defending New York: if the British capture the city, it'll be a huge blow to American morale.

Privately, Washington continues to worry about the likelihood of his army's success against the British. One of his greatest assets as a general is his ability to be calm and realistic in his assessments, rather than overestimating his abilities simply because others regard him as a hero.

At the time, New York is a divided city: the Loyalists and American factions are both prominent. When he arrives in New York, Washington recruits five divisions of soldiers. However, he worries about the population in Long Island, which is overwhelmingly loyal to George III. There are also British warships in the Upper Bay near New York City, a constant reminder of the impending threat of invasion.

New York is a dangerous city for Washington and his troops, not simply because it's vulnerable to attack from the British navy but because the American army will be vulnerable to sabotage from Loyalist New Yorkers.

Washington also recognizes that his soldiers from Boston are tired and worn-out from marching and fighting. He's recruited new troops during the march to New York, but these troops are just as disorganized as his original soldiers. Many of the soldiers from New York also dislike that Washington has recruited black soldiers.

The passage reminds readers of the strong racial prejudice in Washington's army, undercutting the promise of meritocracy and equality implicit in the American revolutionary cause. Although black soldiers fought bravely against the British, they weren't given the same respect or opportunities as white soldiers.

Washington and his army arrive in New York on April 13 and immediately take residence at the Kennedy Mansion, a famous New York building of the era, named after a Scottish land speculator named Archibald Kennedy. In the coming weeks, Washington inspects the city's fortifications, which were designed by Charles Lee and built under the guidance of General William Alexander, better known as Lord Stirling. Stirling is a wealthy, powerful man, supposedly descended from a Scottish lord.

For all its commitment to self-determination and meritocracy, the American army is thoroughly aristocratic at the same time. Many of its officers, such as Lord Stirling, have aristocratic backgrounds, and Washington lives like a king during his time in New York.

New York City only has a population of 20,000, but it's one of the wealthiest American cities at the time. Many of the troops, including Henry Knox, are impressed with the residents' luxurious lives. Other soldiers praise the beautiful buildings and statues but disdain the brothels.

New York is an important strategic location for both sides of the Revolutionary War: it's the source of enormous wealth and also an important naval base.

On April 22, not long after the troops arrive, the dead bodies of two American soldiers are discovered in a brothel. Furious over the deaths, a group of soldiers tears down the brothel and starts a riot. Washington condemns his soldiers' behavior and enforces a strict evening curfew. Later on, a smallpox epidemic breaks out, killing many. Washington proceeds with training his new troops and building new fortifications for the city.

The passage emphasizes the chaos and disorganization within Washington's army. While Washington himself seems to want his soldiers to behave peacefully and respectfully, many of the soldiers themselves lash out against the Loyalist population of New York.

General Charles Lee has told Washington that the troops will need to be ready to defend New York from a naval invasion. He recommends that cannons be installed overlooking the East River, much as Washington installed cannons in Dorchester Heights. Washington complies, and also begins fortifying Long Island.

As in Dorchester, Washington concentrates on building fortifications. Washington was trained as a surveyor, and designing strong, stable fortifications was his specialty.

The troops set to work fortifying New York. They install guns and cannons on Governor's Island, and overlooking the Hudson River. Toward the northern end of Manhattan, at the highest point on the island, the Americans build Fort Washington. On a small island on the Hudson, they build a second fort, Fort Constitution. As the months drag on, Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox become good friends, and both men's wives join them in New York. On May 16, Knox sends a letter encouraging the Continental Congress to declare independence from Britain.

While the process of building fortifications fosters rebelliousness among certain of Washington's troops, it also brings some of the troops together, including Knox and Greene. The fact that Knox sends a letter to the Congress, encouraging them to declare independence, is a sign of the growing optimism and ambition of the American army.

On May 18, Washington receives word that British ships are preparing to invade New York. The message turns out to be a false alarm, but even so the American troops feel it confirms their sense that the British will arrive soon. Washington feels ready for the fight. He has thousands of men ready for battle, and enough artillery to fire on British ships.

Washington and his men are feeling optimistic: their fortifications are strong, and they seem to believe that they have a good chance of defeating the British in the event of a battle in New York. This moment of optimism before battle is a testament to Washington's great leadership abilities.

Suddenly, it's discovered that a group of Loyalists in New York are conspiring to assassinate George Washington. American troops take to the streets to attack everyone suspected of being a Loyalist, and Washington moves to a new residence. The Loyalist plotters are found and brought to trial, but only one of them is sentenced to death. This man, Thomas Hickey, is publicly hanged on June 28, to thunderous applause. Later that day, Washington learns that the British are sailing to New York from Halifax. On June 29, American troops spot British ships on the horizon, and by July 2, the ships have docked near Staten Island.

Washington experiences a blow to his confidence when he's nearly assassinated. However, the applause that greets Hickey's hanging suggests that Washington remains very popular in New York.

On the same day that the ships land on Staten Island, the Continental Congress votes in favor of declaring independence from Britain. The news reaches New York on July 6, to much celebration. The soldiers sense that the war has "entered an entirely new stage." Washington and the members of the Continental Congress are now officially treasonous, meaning that they'll be sentenced to death if the British capture them. The Declaration of Independence is a high-minded, rhetorically masterful document, but it's "of little consequence, of course … without a military success against the most formidable force on earth." Yet the Declaration has an impact on the soldiers: they're now fighting an all-out war for independence.

Notice that McCullough portrays the signing of the Declaration of Independence as an important but still peripheral event in the book. His focus isn't on the politicians and thinkers who engineer the American Revolution, but rather the soldiers and tacticians who fight it. Political ideals were important to the American troops, and provided them with an added motivation to defeat the British, but arguably even more important was the American troops' desire for money and social advancement under Washington.

Even with the British nearby, spirits are high among the American troops. But on July 12, the Americans get a reminder of their weakness. Two British ships sail up the Hudson, past New York, and Washington orders his troops to fire their cannons. The British ships fire back, causing mass panic. The American cannons don't seem to be doing any damage to the British ships. By the end of the day, the British have sailed all the way up the Hudson. Washington is furious. The British have proven that they can send ships north at any time, meaning that they could halt Washington's retreat from New York.

This passage reveals that Washington's carefully designed fortifications aren't as effective as they'd appeared, since the American troops can't even stop a British ship from sailing up the Hudson. This makes Washington and his men look foolish: they've been working for months on fortifications that now seem to serve no real purpose.

On the British side, morale has never been higher. The British troops are well-fed and confident that they can defeat Washington's forces. The British want revenge for the defeat in Boston, and they ridicule the Declaration of Independence. British generals' strategy is quick, decisive military action in New York. Their greatest fear is that the Americans will continue to use a defensive strategy rather than fighting the British army head-on.

The British correctly recognize that they'd have a major advantage in a head-to-head battle with the American army. Therefore, they hope that they'll be able to corner Washington's troops rather than having to chase Washington across the Northeast.

On July 14, General William Howe sends a British soldier, waving a truce flag, to deliver a letter to George Washington. At first, Washington's troops won't accept the letter, since Howe has addressed it to "Mr. Washington" (an insult). It's only when a higher-ranking British officer, Captain James Paterson, re-addresses the letter to "George Washington, Esq., etc., etc." that Washington agrees to a meeting.

It's another sign of Washington's sense of pride and honor—a hallmark of his aristocratic background—that he refuses to be addressed by any inferior title.

Washington meets with Captain James Paterson, who offers Washington the letter—though Washington again refuses to read it, since he finds the "etc., etc." in the address insulting. Paterson explains that George III is offering pardons to Washington and his peers. Washington replies, "Those who have committed no fault want no pardon." It's likely that Washington knew that Paterson was going to make peace offerings. The reason he agreed to see Paterson was to prove, both to the British and to his own men, that he could "go through the motions quite as well as any officer and gentleman, but more importantly to send a message to the British command absent any ambiguity."

It's likely that Washington never has any intention of negotiating with the British representatives. He just wants to put on a show to prove that he's a tough negotiator who won't give into the British under any circumstances. Furthermore, his encounter with Paterson makes for good propaganda for his own troops, since Washington shows his social superiority to Paterson and, by extension, the entire British army.

British ships continue to arrive in New York all throughout the summer of 1776. By August, over a hundred vessels have landed on Staten Island. Thousands of British troops, along with German Hessians, are prepared for a fight.

The British ships landing near New York provide a constant, visible reminder of the weakness of the American fortifications. Staten Island is very close to Manhattan, meaning that the British could attack Washington's troops at almost any time.

The Americans are fairly optimistic about the upcoming fight, and new American troops arrive in New York every day. However, many soldiers also attempt to desert the army, since 1776 is a bumper year for crops, meaning that it's more lucrative for many working-class people to continue laboring on farms than to fight in the army. Other soldiers desert in order to avoid the "camp fever" in New York.

Desertion is a constant and unwelcome reminder to Washington that his men are more interested in money and opportunity than in lofty ideals. When better opportunities arise or the threat of disease becomes real, soldiers desert the Revolution.

Washington tries to predict how the British will most likely attack his troops in New York. He's worried that the British will attempt to invade Long Island. Breaking a basic rule of military strategy, he divides his army into two halves, and sends one half out to Long Island to protect it. Washington's forces are becoming restless and impatient. In the past four months they've done a spectacular job of fortifying New York, but now they're eager for battle.

Washington makes a very basic tactical error by dividing his army, which suggests that, for all his charisma and experience in battle, he still has a lot to learn about warfare. Washington also has yet to face Howe's troops in head-to-head battle, and his poor decision-making in the weeks leading up to battle suggests a weak, nervous commander.

Nathanael Greene becomes dangerously ill, and Washington is forced to relieve his favorite general of his duty as a commander. In Greene's place, Washington appoints John Sullivan, who is seen as a vastly inferior commander. It's now late August. An American commander in New Jersey sends word to Washington that the British are preparing to attack from Long Island and the Hudson. Washington receives the letter but replies simply, "We have made no discovery of any movement here of any consequence."

Washington is in a weak position as he prepares for the inevitable British invasion. He loses a talented officer, and he has difficulty separating useful intelligence from misinformation. As a result, Washington has little to no idea where the British will invade New York. All he can do is wait.

CHAPTER 5: FIELD OF BATTLE

On the night of August 21, 1776, a storm breaks out in New York, killing ten soldiers. The next morning, the British invasion begins. By 8:00 AM, 4,000 British troops have come ashore at Gravesend Bay in Long Island. By noon, 15,000 have landed, and Loyalist New Yorkers are welcoming them ashore. The British are wowed by the abundance of crops—indeed, Americans in the 1770s enjoy an unusually high quality of life compared to people in most other parts of the world.

The British forces occupy Long Island, far from the Hudson River where Washington has already built many defenses. This is a smart move, since the Loyalists in Long Island give the soldiers added support. Had the British landed on the west side of Manhattan, by contrast, they would not have been able to march inland without resistance.

Later in the morning, Washington receives word of the British arrival. However, he's told (incorrectly) that their troops number in the eight- or nine-thousands, so he assumes that the British have another attack planned. He sends a mere 6,000 men out to Long Island, expecting there to be a bigger strike along the Hudson. Washington urges his troops to fight for liberty, telling them, "you are free men, fighting for the blessings of liberty."

Washington receives a bad piece of information and makes a huge tactical error as a result. But this passage also highlights what makes Washington such an extraordinary leader: he delivers a stirring speech in which he emphasizes the ideals for which America is fighting, and ties those ideals directly to the lives of his own men.

On August 24, the American troops march out to meet the British. British forces still haven't invaded along the Hudson, but Washington guesses that this is only because of the storm on the night of the 21st. Washington keeps relieving his generals of command and replacing them with others. The contrast between his indecisive leadership and the perfectly executed British invasion of Long Island is striking. By the end of the day, 5,000 Hessians arrive in Long Island, bringing the total size of British forces to 20,000 men.

The British humiliate Washington and his army by invading Long Island without so much as a false step. Washington, it's worth remembering has never fought a major battle aside from his backwoods assaults on the French. The last-minute changes he makes to the line of command seem indicative of his nervousness or fear.

When Washington arrives in Brooklyn to join his troops, he's appalled by their disorderliness. He also receives word that British forces in Long Island outnumber him, contrary to what he'd been told. However, he continues to prepare for battle. In Brooklyn Heights, he order his soldiers to build fortifications, and places Lord Stirling in charge of troops near the Gowanus Road. Meanwhile, John Sullivan is placed in charge of troops near Flatbush Road, nearby. Washington believes that the British are going to "make a push" into Brooklyn from Long Island.

Washington receives two major blows at once: his troops are clearly not ready to fight, and they're badly outnumbered. (Furthermore, as the passage reminds us, Washington is missing Nathanael Greene, who's still dangerously ill.) But Washington has no choice but to fight while he can, so he makes the best of a bad situation.

It's been five days since the British landed in Long Island, and still there has not been battle. At night, Washington writes a letter to his wife, Martha Washington. What he writes to her is anybody's guess—Martha later destroys all but a few of her husband's letters.

It's curious that McCullough doesn't even try to guess what Washington writes his wife. This gives the passage a tense, suspenseful tone, since readers can't tell how Washington is feeling about the impending fight with the British.

General Henry Clinton of the British army hasn't distinguished himself in the war with America, having failed in the missions General William Howe has given him, and he's eager to prove himself. Clinton forms a plan of attack and, instead of giving it to General Howe for approval, sends it directly to the troops and their officers. Clinton's plan is to send an advance guard into Brooklyn that night, while General Howe will follow the next morning with the remaining 10,000 troops. These troops are experienced, accustomed to adverse conditions, and extremely loyal to George III. They despise their American foes and are eager for battle.

From Washington's perspective, the British army seems strong and perfectly organized, but the truth is that British officers are quarreling with one another. The passage suggests a hidden weakness in the structure of the British military in America. However, the British have a big size advantage that seems to make up for some disorganization at the top.

At 9PM, Clinton gives the order for the British troops to march out to Brooklyn. While neither Clinton nor General William Howe realizes it, Clinton's plan is extremely risky. He's leading a huge force into unknown territory at night: a surprise attack by the Americans could decimate the British forces. Early in the march, the British forces capture five American scouts; however, the scouts refuse to give up information about Washington's troops. By dawn, the British troops have made it to Bedford Road. Amazingly, they've marched nine miles in darkness and avoided attack. Howe leads the remaining British troops out of Long Island.

Although Clinton succeeds in marching his troops into Brooklyn that night, it's a sign of his inexperience as a general that he chooses to do something so risky. Clinton is no genius; he just has the benefit of commanding a large, technologically superior, well- trained group of soldiers. Washington may be the better general, but Clinton commands the better army.

In Brooklyn, the American generals realize that the British are approaching the Gowanus Road. Lord Stirling orders his forces—a mere 1,600 soldiers—to hold their fire until the British are within fifty yards. The American troops fight bravely, but they're badly outnumbered. They're confused that the British seem to be holding back, and wrongly assume that it's because the British are frightened. In reality, the British are waiting for the rest of their army to arrive.

Even the best group of 1,600 soldiers can't defeat a force many times its size. Notice that, not for the last time, the British hesitate rather than pressing their advantage—the British military is very cautious and slow-paced in its maneuvering.

By mid-morning, the British and American forces are still fighting. Suddenly, the second half of the British army arrives and surrounds Sullivan's troops. Sullivan orders his men to retreat, but is captured in battle. The Hessians slaughter thousands of Americans, and the American defenses collapse.

The American army is dealt setback after setback. Sullivan is a mediocre commander, and his capture signals his troop's resounding defeat.

Washington arrives in Brooklyn around 9AM, just before the second half of the British army arrives. He's horrified by what he sees: his army has been outmanned and outmaneuvered. By 11AM, the Hessians have surrounded Lord Stirling's troops. Stirling shouts for his men to run away. Terrified, the Americans try to retreat, but many of them die at the hands of British soldiers, while others are taken prisoner. Stirling decides to surrender to the Hessian regiment. By noon, there can be no doubt that the Americans have lost the fight—the first great battle of the Revolutionary War, and the largest battle fought on American soil to date. The Americans have lost a thousand men, while the British have lost only hundreds.

Washington's army suffers a crushing defeat in this chapter, due to the smaller size and poor training of Washington's army, as well as the mediocrity of certain of Washington's generals and the unreliability of Washington's message system.

By the morning of August 28, Washington and his troops have retreated into Brooklyn, near the East River. Washington has called additional American troops to Brooklyn from Manhattan. By the end of the day, American reinforcements have arrived in Brooklyn, but a wild storm has begun that prevents the ships from landing. The storm is still blowing the next morning, and Washington's men are tired. However, the storm protects them from additional British ships landing in Brooklyn.

Thus far, McCullough has praised George Washington for his realism and pragmatism, even suggesting that these are his best qualities as a commander. By this standard, Washington makes an unusual strategic error when he calls for more troops from Manhattan: he fails to recognize that the possibility of attack in Manhattan still looms large.

By noon on August 29, Washington gives an order for all available boats to be rounded up, announcing that there are "many battalions from New Jersey which are coming over to relieve others here," and that some soliders will be sent away. In the afternoon, Washington holds a meeting with his generals to decide what to do. Many of the generals recommend that Washington retreat, and in the end, there is a unanimous vote to flee. Washington is about to surprise General Howe once again.

In the end, Washington acts pragmatically and trusts his generals' opinions. He's ready to do the dishonorable, "cowardly" thing (running away from the British army) if it means the survival of the American military.

By 7PM, the troops have their orders to pack up and prepare for a "night attack" on the British. By 9PM, the least experienced troops head for the Brooklyn ferry, thinking that they'll be relieved by new soldiers. Washington tells only his top officers about the real plan for the night—stealing away into New York—because he doesn't want word to get out, for fear that the troops will give some sign that they're about to leave, leading the British to charge again. By 11PM that night, the winds have died down, making it possible for the American troops near the East River to sail back to New York. Meanwhile, the troops nearest the British have the tough job of making it appear that the entire American army is still present.

While Washington has yet to prove himself as a great general in battle, his retreat from Brooklyn is itself an impressive tactical maneuver that many generals wouldn't be able to pull off.

By four in the morning, Major Alexander Scammell of the American army rides to the frontlines, looking for his commander, General Thomas Mifflin. Scammell tells Mifflin that Washington is waiting for the arrival of "the last remaining troops." Mifflin is confused, but Scammell insists that these are the words Washington told him to pass on. Mifflin decides to assemble his regiment and retreat from the British army. Scammell has made a huge mistake: he misinterpreted Washington's order, and as a result the frontline American troops are leaving sooner than planned.

The plan of retreat is almost ruined when the soldiers on the frontlines pull back too early. For the second time in New York, Washington's troops make a big mistake because of poor communication.

By the time the frontline troops arrive at the river, Washington is still loading troops into the boats. Washington is appalled that the frontline troops have abandoned their posts and orders them to go back at once. The troops return to the frontlines. Seemingly, the British haven't even noticed their retreat.

Had the British been paying closer attention, or if they'd been contemplating marching further into Brooklyn, McCullough suggests, they would have chased the Americans back to the river.

By dawn, most of the American troops still haven't left. Some of the boats become mired in mud, and some of the heavy artillery proves difficult to move. By daybreak, however, a heavy fog covers Brooklyn, concealing the Americans' actions from the British. Thanks to the fog, the American troops in Brooklyn are able to escape across the river without being seen. By mid-morning, the British have discovered the Americans' retreat. They're astonished, but also pleased, since they can now claim all of Brooklyn for themselves.

Once again, the Americans benefit from the weather. Just as the wild storms made it impossible for British ships to dock in Brooklyn for a night, the fog conceals the American retreat to Manhattan.

George Washington deserves credit for engineering a brilliant escape from Brooklyn. But of course, he also bears some of the blame for the American troops' failure in Long Island, where they were outnumbered thanks to Washington's decision to divide the army. Historians still debate General Howe's decision not to continue attacking the Americans in the afternoon. Had he done so, he might have defeated Washington once and for all. In any event, the news of the Americans' defeat causes much celebration in London, when it finally reaches Britain. Meanwhile, the Continental Congress is devastated by the defeat, though it doesn't panic.

In many ways, the battle between the Americans and British in Brooklyn is representative of both sides' strengths and weaknesses. Washington is a savvy, quick-thinking commander, but his maneuvers sometimes fall short because of poor intelligence and communication, or because his army isn't strong enough. Howe commands a huge, well-trained army, but he's not a compelling leader, and he's so slow-paced that he throws away multiple chances to win the war early.

When the American troops arrive back in New York from the East River, many of them haven't slept for days. Washington is so tired that he can't even muster the energy to write a letter to the Continental Congress. However, he soon begins arranging "new dispositions of our forces."

Washington has a tough job: he has to command his men, haggle for funds with the Continental Congress, all while seeming to be a calm, stately leader.

CHAPTER 6: FORTUNE FROWNS

Back in Manhattan, Washington's troops begin to despair. Riots break out throughout the city, with gangs of soldiers looting and stealing. There are rumors that Washington lacks the skills to lead effectively. However, Henry Knox's loyalty to Washington never falters. Washington himself begins to question whether New York has become a lost cause.

Washington's resounding defeat in Brooklyn causes the troops to question his authority more than ever. Even a powerful, charismatic general needs some victories on the battlefield in order to inspire his men—otherwise, he offers only empty words and gestures.

Washington sends a letter to the Continental Congress in which he raises the possibility of leaving New York. The Congress writes back, instructing Washington to ensure that no damage will be done to the city if he pulls out. Privately, Nathanael Greene urges Washington to leave New York as soon as possible, since there's no telling when the British will strike. Greene also recommends that Washington burn New York, so that it won't be of any use to the British. Congress refuses to permit this. Washington can't make up his mind whether to stay in New York or leave. Meanwhile, hundreds of soldiers desert, and many others suffer from disease.

The Continental Congress was at least willing to entertain the idea of burning Boston to the ground if it meant keeping the city from strengthening the British military, but they are unwilling to entertain a similar possibility with New York. The passage doesn't explain exactly why this is, but perhaps the Congress, emboldened by the Declaration of Independence, isn't desperate enough to authorize such drastic measures.

The Continental Congress decides to send a delegation of three people (Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Edward Rutledge) to meet with Admiral Lord Richard Howe. The meeting is unproductive: Howe demands that the Americans "tread back" on their claims of independence. The three delegates respond that this is impossible, and Howe refuses to negotiate further.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, American leaders hadn't made specific reference to independence. But now, independence is a crucial, non-negotiable part of the American cause, suggesting that the Revolution has become more idealistic than it was in its beginnings.

On September 13, two British ships sail up the East River and anchor in Bushwick Creek. The Americans fire on the ships, but do no damage. By the afternoon of September 14, the British army has moved north, to Harlem Heights, and Washington is forced to prepare for another battle.

Another battle between the British and the Americans is approaching. The British seem eager to exploit the weak position of the Americans, who suffered a horrible defeat just a few weeks before.

On the British side, General Clinton argues with General William Howe about the best way to proceed with the invasion. Howe supports an invasion through Kips Bay, whereas Clinton thinks it would be better to proceed via the Harlem River. Howe overrules Clinton. He then gives the troops a lackluster speech, telling them of a plan to invade on September 15 and urging them to depend on their bayonets. Notably absent from the speech is any trace of the inspirational rhetoric that Washington uses for his troops.

Once again, the passage stresses that General Howe is a weak commander placed in charge of a first-rate army. He's not a compelling speaker or leader in the way that Washington is, but in a way, he doesn't need to be, since his soldiers are experienced and trained to a far greater extent than their American foes.

Around ten o'clock on September 15, British boats make landfall in Kips Bay, located on the east side of Manhattan. The early hours of the battle are humiliating for the Americans—they run from the British attack, confirming British soldiers' beliefs that the Americans are cowards. By the late afternoon, well over 10,000 British troops have landed. The Americans continue to flee, infuriating Washington.

The passage conveys the humiliation of the American troops, but also suggests that they had no other choice but to run away: they were so badly outnumbered that they could never have won, even if they were the best, most disciplined troops on the planet. Again, Washington seems to be a good general in charge of a small, amateurish army, while Howe is a weak general in charge of a big, well-trained army.

The British forces don't pursue the Americans. Had they done so, they could have trapped the Americans in Manhattan, and perhaps ended the war. As an explanation for the sheepishness of the British army, a rumor is circulated among American soliders that a woman named Mrs. Robert Murray invited General Howe to tea in her home, where she delayed him from sending orders for two hours, allowing the Americans to escape. The truth, however, is simpler: Clinton's orders were simply to drive back the Americans and then wait for his arrival in the afternoon. The British believe they've won another great victory—even though, as a result of Howe's decision, it'll be "the Americans' turn to claim success" the very next day.

For the second time in one chapter, General Howe fails to capitalize on his advantage and wipe out the Americans once and for all. It's noteworthy that Americans invented a legendary woman to delay Howe from giving further commands, since the truth is actually much more embarrassing for Howe: he was in a position to give whatever orders he wanted, and he simply didn't see the clear path to victory.

George Washington rides to Harlem Heights. There, he and Nathanael Greene witness the British chasing the American troops. Washington orders a counterattack of three companies of Virginian soldiers, headed by Colonel Thomas Knowlton, who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Knowlton botches the counterattack by firing on the British before his soldiers cut off their path of retreat. Frustrated, Washington calls off the attack. Before he can do so, however, Knowlton is killed. The American troops have killed hundreds of British soldiers—heavier losses than the Americans have sustained—but they've also lost Knowlton, a talented commander.

Even though Washington's counterattack is a failure, it's an important moment in Washington's career as a general. In the middle of a humiliating retreat, Washington takes the initiative and organizes his troops for a counterstrike when the British are least expecting it. In short, the passage foreshadows Washington's more ambitious, successful counterstrikes in New Jersey, the subject of Chapter Seven.

Washington and his troops are now based out of Harlem Heights, the rocky area overlooking the Harlem River. This is an excellent strategic position. However, the British army now occupies most of Manhattan. While his troops enjoy the beauty of the island, General William Howe plans a new assault on the American troops.

For the time being, Washington's army still seems to have a chance of preserving its position in New York. In Harlem Heights, they've occupied high ground—a strategically advantageous position that's similar to the position of Dorchester Heights relative to Boston.

On the night of September 20, a fire breaks out in New York. (This is quite common in American cities at the time, especially in the summer.) The fire burns down a sizeable chunk of the city. One reason the fire is so deadly is that there are no warning bells left in New York—Washington had them melted down to make cannons. By the next morning, the fire has burned itself out, but hundreds of homes have been destroyed. Many British soldiers believe the fire was the "work of the enemy."

It might seem a little too convenient that New York burned down a couple days after Washington's army left for Harlem Heights, especially considering Washington's correspondence with the Continental Congress about preventing the city's resources from strengthening the British army in any way.

In his letters to the Congress, Washington claims that the fire was a "lucky accident." However, as part of the investigation in the fire, the British troops arrest a man named Nathan Hale. Hale is found to be in possession of firebrands, and he's promptly hanged for starting the fire. Before his execution, Hale admits to being an American spy, and historians now know that he that he served under General Thomas Knowlton. Hale's duties as a spy for Washington still aren't entirely clear.

Ultimately, McCullough doesn't take sides in the historical debate over whether or not Washington ordered the destruction of New York. While there's some evidence that spies working on his payroll burned the city, the evidence isn't conclusive, and it's likely that we'll never know exactly what happened.

In Harlem Heights, American soldiers are deserting every day. Washington seems calm, even though he's secretly frightened that his army is about to be defeated for good. By the middle of September, however, the Continental Congress has issued payments for every soldier in Washington's army. The Congress also institutes new, harsh punishments for deserters.

Even in a crisis, Washington affects an image of calm, wise leadership. But he doesn't simply depend on his charisma: he knows that he needs to offer his men concrete reasons to stay in the army. Thus, he increases punishments and pays wages upfront.

As October begins, more British ships sail into New York. On the morning of October 9, the Americans open fire on three British warships moving up the Hudson River. The warships fire back, and though the ships sustain considerable damage, the British prove "that the Hudson was undeniably theirs to employ as they wished."

Once again, the British demonstrate that they can surround the Americans whenever they wish, thanks to their naval superiority.

The British are planning to outflank the American army by water. On October 12, they send an armada up the East River. Washington quickly realizes that his army is doomed unless he acts fast. Using Lord Stirling and John Sullivan, both of whom have recently been returned to the army through prisoner exchanges, Washington orders his forces to withdraw from Harlem Heights and march north.

To his credit, Washington realizes early on that the British navy is too strong and, as a result, he has no chance of defending his position in Manhattan. This is another instance when Washington's pragmatism and level-headedness outweigh his sense of pride.

On October 16, Washington holds another military council: John Sullivan, Lord Stirling, Mifflin, and Henry Knox are all present. Also present is Charles Lee, whom Washington has reappointed his second-in-command. (Washington has also changed the name of Fort Constitution to "Fort Lee" in Lee's honor.) The commanders agree that they should try to defend Fort Washington, located north on the Hudson. Lee later claims he opposed defending Fort Washington, though this is false, based on the minutes of the meeting.

Charles Lee was stationed in New York while Washington and his troops were still in Boston. Washington clearly respects Lee, and he's familiar with Lee's leadership style, since they fought in the backwoods together years ago. However, as the passage foreshadows, Lee is sometimes more concerned with his own reputation than with being loyal and honorable.

On October 18, while Washington's forces march toward Westchester, the British land at Pell's Point. The British forces immediately encounter a small but well-prepared American force. The Americans, who number 750, kill many British soldiers before retreating. The British losses at Pell's Point inspire General Howe to proceed cautiously in case of another American assault. Howe is planning to maneuver the Americans onto an open field and defeat Washington "in one grand, decisive victory."

General Howe's slow pace isn't always a weakness. Here, he makes a sound decision by choosing to proceed slowly: he knows that small American squads can do a lot of damage to his army. However, the passage shows that Howe is still strongly committed to idealistic notions of warfare: he thinks that he needs to defeat the Americans in one momentous battle. In reality (and as Chapter Seven will show), the American Revolution is more often comprised of quick skirmishes and surprise attacks of the kind that are Washington's expertise.

On October 28, a full ten days after landing at Pell's Point, the British forces (along with the Hessian mercenaries) march to White Plains, where they fight Washington's troops, who are based at the top of Chatterton's Hill. As a result, the British and German troops have to fight an uphill battle. In the end, the British side emerges victorious, but also sustains heavier losses.

Echoing their original "victory" at Bunker Hill, the British defeat the Americans in battle even though they lose far more men, confirming that they can afford a greater number of casualties than the Americans can.

Washington's forces retreat to the Bronx River after the Battle of Pell's Point. To their surprise, the British forces don't pursue them. On November 5, the British army swerves off in a different direction, toward the Hudson River. Some of Washington's generals believe the British are headed for Fort Washington, while others suggest that the British are sidestepping Washington's forces altogether and preparing to move into Philadelphia. Washington, however, is confident that General Howe will attack again. He's not sure if he should pull troops out of Fort Washington or leave them where they are stationed.

This passage gives readers a window into Washington's decision-making process. While Washington makes an effort to appear composed, he's often an indecisive leader. Here, for instance, he doesn't seem to know whether to retreat altogether or leave some men behind.

Washington decides to divide his troops into four groups. He allocates 7,000 troops to remain under the command of General Charles Lee, who will be stationed east of the Hudson. 3,000 troops will guard the Hudson Highlands, north of Manhattan. 2,000 troops will go with Washington into New Jersey. Finally, Nathanael Green will command the troops in Fort Washington. Greene is confident that he'll be able to hold out against British forces, while Washington is more inclined to leave New York altogether. Fort Washington isn't as strong as Greene believes—in part because it has no water supply.

Washington makes yet another major tactical error by dividing his army in four, considering how badly he's outnumbered by the British forces. Washington made a similar mistake in the charge against the British invasion of Long Island, and it seems clumsy of him to make the same mistake again in less than a month, but it suggests a general atmosphere of panic and confusion.

In November, the British receive two critical pieces of information. First, the plans for Fort Washington are delivered by Captain William Demont, who has defected from the American army. Second, a series of Washington's letters to the Continental Congress are stolen from a careless messenger. The letters reveal Washington's decision to divide his forces into four groups, and suggest his frustration with his men. General William Howe begins to formulate a new plan: he decides to attack Fort Washington while Washington is away in New Jersey. On November 15, Howe sends Captain James Paterson, waving a white flag, to deliver a message to Fort Washington: surrender or "face annihilation." The Americans refuse.

The British have multiple advantages over the Americans. First, they know how to take Fort Washington, since they've intercepted the plans. Second, they outnumber Washington's men. Finally, Washington's men are divided, and weaker as a result. Howe seems confident that he can wipe out Washington's troops once and for all, hence his offer of peace.

On November 16, Washington crosses the Hudson with his generals on a scouting mission. They hear the noise of cannons assaulting Fort Washington. Nathanael Greene suggests that Washington keep himself safe by staying away from the fort while other generals go back and fight, but Washington insists that they everyone stay away from Fort Washington. The British forces attacking Fort Washington number 8,000. By the early afternoon, the British have driven all 2,000 Americans back into the fort, where they can barely fit, and by 4pm, the American forces have surrendered.

Once again, the British defeat the American troops not so much because of their greater tactical ingenuity but because their army is four times the size of the American army. Clearly, Greene has made a big mistake in thinking that Fort Washington is impervious to assault.

The defeat at Fort Washington is perhaps the most crushing blow the Americans are dealt during their time in New York. 2,000 Americans are captured. George Washington is said to have wept at the sight of his empty fort. Nathanael Greene's confidence that Fort Washington could be defended has proven false. But of course, it's ultimately George Washington's fault that the fort was captured. Washington doesn't dismiss Greene altogether, but he begins to think less of him as a result of the defeat.

Chapter Six is full of defeats for the Americans, and the taking of Fort Washington is perhaps the most humiliating of them all, since the British are able to occupy it relatively easily. Washington has suffered some huge challenges to his confidence in himself and his commanders, such as Greene. Still, it's a sign of Washington's self-control that he doesn't fire Greene out of spite.

Soon after capturing Fort Washington, General William Howe sends troops to Fort Constitution, now named Fort Lee. Washington gets word of the impending attack, probably through a British deserter, and orders the American troops to abandon the fort at once. When the British arrive, they find the fort deserted. Meanwhile, George Washington leads his remaining troops into New Jersey.

For the last time in Chapter Six, Washington and his troops flee from the British army, suggesting that they now know that they're incapable of defeating their opponents in battle.

CHAPTER 7: DARKEST HOUR

On the morning of November 21, George Washington and his troops move into New Jersey. His men are "broke and dispirited." He sends a letter to General Charles Lee, suggesting that Lee cross the Hudson and join forces with him to protect New Jersey from British attack.

Washington doesn't command Lee to join him in New Jersey—he only suggests that Lee do so if he's able. This suggests that he isn't yet entirely certain that protecting New Jersey is a top priority.

Unbeknownst to Washington, Joseph Reed sends a secret letter to Charles Lee. In this letter, Reed implores Lee to join Washington, adding that he has often worried about Washington's "indecisive mind" during the New York campaign. He also suggests that Lee go to the Continental Congress "and form the plan of the new army."

In this surprising passage, Reed betrays Washington by seeming to voice his disapproval for Washington's indecision. Reed sees a side of Washington that nobody else sees: his fear and self-doubt. But instead of continuing to defer to Washington's judgement, Reed confers with Lee. The passage suggests that, in the eyes of some, Lee may be the better commander.

Another challenge arises for Washington: his enlistments will soon be free to return home, having served in the army for a year. The men's morale is even lower than it was in Boston, suggesting that huge numbers will leave rather than reenlist. The army has lost four huge battles in the last three months. Washington wonders if he should retreat to Pennsylvania and take time to regroup.

Washington is a charismatic, impressive leader, but he has failed to lead his men to a single victory in battle. As a result, he anticipates losing thousands of men when their enlistment period is up.

One of the problems Washington and his army face is that the colonies are reluctant to donate troops to a continental army. There are plenty of opponents of Britain in the colonies, but the colonies' leaders prefer to keep their armies at home, rather than sending them out to Washington. Washington sends Reed to New Jersey to entreat the governor to provide Washington with reinforcements. Washington also sends General Thomas Mifflin on a similar mission to Pennsylvania. Mifflin soon reports back that the people of Pennsylvania are "divided and lethargic." Washington hears nothing from Reed.

It's important to remember that, even though the British forces badly outnumbered Washington's men in New York, America has a much larger army than Britain at the time. However, the American colonies refuse to work together and protect one another with a nationalized, continental army. Britain has a comparatively easier time rounding up troops and sending them away from home.

On November 22, the continental army reaches New Jersey. Thomas Paine, author of the pamphlet *Common Sense*, has been serving as a civilian aide on Nathanael Greene's staff, and he is inspired by the troops' commitment. "These are the times that try men's souls," he writes in *The Crisis*, referring to this moment of determination in the face of fear and doubt at the end of 1776.

Paine's words are still taught in classrooms across America. They are a testament to the extreme difficulty and uncertainty of the war. Washington and his men have suffered so many defeats by now that it often seems they have no chance of defeating the British.

On the British side, the taking of Fort Washington catalyzed a major shift in strategy. General Clinton is reassigned to invade Rhode Island. Clinton dislikes the campaign he has been given. He thinks that it would be better to pursue Washington into New Jersey. Nevertheless, he leads 6,000 soldiers to Newport, Rhode Island, and claims the city without a fight.

On the British side, the highest-ranking generals continue to argue with one another, illustrating the hidden divisions of the British military that are among its greatest weaknesses.

General Clinton and General William Howe have been quarrelling for months. At White Plains, Clinton says he can't stand Howe. Howe promptly replaces Clinton with General Charles Cornwallis, a commander with a distinguished military career. Howe orders Cornwallis to pursue the American troops to Brunswick (later known as New Brunswick), but not to go any farther. Washington leads his troops past Brunswick without trouble. He reunites with Lord Stirling's troops, many of whom are tired and without shoes.

Instead of inspiring his commanding officers to work well together, as Washington does, Howe argues with Clinton and dismisses him abruptly. Then, he continues at his slow, methodical pace, refusing to permit Cornwallis to pursue Washington past Brunswick, even though it's likely that Cornwallis's troops would be able to defeat Washington's troops.

On November 24, a messenger arrives with a letter for Joseph Reed from General Charles Lee. Thinking the letter might have important information, Washington opens it. In the letter, Lee expresses that he shares Reed's concern over Washington's "fatal indecision of mind," and that he intends not to march to New Jersey, as Washington has requested. Clearly, Washington thinks, Reed and Lee have "lost faith in him." He sends the opened letter along to Reed with "a note of explanation." Washington undoubtedly feels hurt that his closest friend and followers are distancing themselves from him.

Washington opens Lee's letter to Reed and learns that his friend and confidante has begun to doubt his authority and talent as a general. This is arguably one of the biggest blows to Washington's self-esteem. Throughout the book he's depended upon Reed for advice and encouragement, and now he finds that Reed has been criticizing him behind his back.

In Philadelphia, the members of the Continental Congress are all either "ill or exhausted or absent." There are rumors that the British intend to march to Philadelphia. The three main signers of the Declaration of Independence—Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams—are absent on diplomatic missions.

The British are only a few hundred miles away from Philadelphia, meaning that the Continental Congress is in grave danger.

On December 1, 2,000 of Washington's troops leave the army rather than reenlist. Washington sends another letter to General Charles Lee, commanding him to come to New Jersey at once. Meanwhile, British and Hessian troops are rapidly approaching New Jersey. By late afternoon, the British have opened fire on Washington's remaining troops. Washington orders his troops to retreat to Trenton. The British troops, headed by General Charles Cornwallis, are only sixty miles from Philadelphia.

Even though Washington knows, or at least suspects, that Lee has been criticizing him privately, he continues to depend upon Lee's talents as a general. The situation has become so dangerous for Washington's troops that he has no choice but to command Lee to come at once.

Admiral Lord Richard Howe and his brother William Howe send a peace treaty to the people of New Jersey. The treaty requires them to take an oath of allegiance to George III and in return receive a pardon for any actions against the crown. Many people in New Jersey take the oath. General Charles Cornwallis arrives in Brunswick but, due to a lack of clear orders from General Howe, doesn't advance for six days, giving Washington and his troops the time they need to flee. This six-day pause is a huge blunder on the part of the British. Had Cornwallis been allowed to advance, he could have defeated Washington's forces for good.

Once again, Howe squanders an opportunity to defeat Washington for good. Instead of doing so, he allows Washington's troops to rest and regroup, ensuring that they'll fight the British again on their own terms.

Everything seems to be going according to plan for the British army. However, many of the British and Hessian soldiers are pillaging local households. Many British officers find their troops' behavior disgraceful.

The British officers can't control their own men, much as Washington couldn't prevent his own men from rioting in New York.

On December 7, British and Hessian forces finally leave Brunswick and march to Trenton, New Jersey. Aware that the British are on their way, Washington orders another retreat across the Delaware River. For hours, his men try to lift heavy artillery into boats. Thomas Paine describes the crossing of the Delaware as an "orderly retreat," in which no sign of fear can be detected. And yet Washington's men are dispirited. Hundreds desert, and others are sick and tired.

It's difficult to tell if Paine is being honest in his description of Washington's retreat, or if he's trying to make the retreat seem more orderly and honorable than it really was. In any event, there can be no doubt that morale is dangerously low in the American army.

It's likely that the British soldiers will cross the Delaware and seize Philadelphia. Washington expects General Charles Lee to march toward him, providing much-needed troops. However, unbeknownst to Washington at the time, Lee has been arrested. On December 12, Lee stopped in a tavern. British cavalry arrived and burned the building, threatening to kill everyone inside unless Lee surrendered. Lee was captured, and his arrest was celebrated throughout the British army.

In recent months, Washington has had mixed feelings about Lee. Nevertheless, Lee's capture by the British army is an undeniable setback for the American side of the war. For all his faults, Lee is a talented general.

Washington is furious when he learns of Charles Lee's arrest. He's also dismayed when the Continental Congress relocates to Baltimore for fear that Philadelphia will be invaded. However, General William Howe suspends all further military operations for the winter, and orders his troops to retire in New York and New Jersey until the spring. Howe sees no reason why he should press his advantage now: the winter is cold and miserable, and he's confident that he'll be able to defeat Washington's forces for good in 1777.

Howe is cautious and slow-paced not just because of his own personality (and perhaps his own reluctance to fight), but because the pace of classical, 18th century warfare is slow—at least by today's standards.

Washington doesn't realize that General William Howe is suspending military operations. He sends spies to infiltrate the British army, and offers money for information on the British troops. He hears from sources in Trenton that Howe is going back to New York, but he's skeptical that this is true. Meanwhile, Washington is concerned as he looks ahead to 1777: on New Year's Day, all remaining enlistments will expire, meaning that he could soon find himself with no troops at all. Even if the remaining soldiers choose to stay, he'll be left with an army of less than 7,000 troops, most of whom are shoeless, hungry, and exhausted. For all intents and purposes, it seemed, "the war was over and the Americans had lost."

This is the single lowest point in the book for the American troops. They haven't had any good news for months, they've lost four major battles with the British, and they're exhausted and hungry. Washington has inspired his men with rhetoric and charisma, but he's failed to provide them with food, money, shoes, or even a victory in battle.

Despite clear evidence to the contrary, George Washington refuses to accept that the war is over. He knows he needs to make decisive action—especially since he has little left to lose at this point. On December 22, he receives an unsolicited letter from Joseph Reed, who advises him to strike at the British as soon as possible. Washington begins to plan an attack on the British, and schedules it for Christmas Day.

Even though Washington knows Reed has been criticizing him in private, he accepts Reed's advice, showing that he's a calm, pragmatic thinker who trusts Reed and who doesn't let his emotions cloud his decision-making process. (And as it turns out, Reed's advice is sound: Washington is right to act quickly and decisively.)

On Christmas Eve, Washington confers with his generals to go over the final details of the attack. The army is scheduled to cross the Delaware in three groups: two groups will be fairly small and one, led by Washington, will contain the majority of the troops. Late on the night of December 25th, the troops cross the Delaware, aiming to arrive in Trenton by 5AM am. The weather is harsh, and the Delaware is partly frozen.

Washington organizes the momentous crossing of the Delaware, a moment that will go down in American history as a turning point in the Revolutionary war. The event is the subject of a famous 1851 painting by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze.

Crossing the Delaware is an unforgettable experience for many of the troops. John Greenwood, the fifer, later describes the intense cold weather, explaining that he was genuinely frightened that he would freeze to death. By 3AM, the cannons have been transported safely across the Delaware, thanks to the careful planning of Henry Knox. By this point, the army is way behind schedule. The plan was to have made it across the river by midnight. But instead of pulling back, Washington decides to continue with the attack.

The passage gives a vivid sense of Washington's men's fear and anxiety. After months of crushing defeat, they seem to be acting on an understanding that desperate times call for desperate measures. However, the crossing of the Delaware is a success thanks to Washington's commanders' leadership. Knox has had experience moving heavy cannons back from Ticonderoga, and here he relies on that experience.

Washington leads 2,400 of his troops toward Trenton. He learns that some of his men's guns have become so wet they no longer work. He says, "use the bayonet." By 8AM on December 26, Washington's troops have arrived in Trenton. The sun is up, and the troops no longer have the element of surprise. A Hessian officer named Johann Gottlieb Rall has already received intelligence that American troops might be planning an attack. On Christmas, an American patrol fired on Hessian officers. But that evening, Rall—confident that Americans would never attack on such a cold day—drank and played cards. He received a letter warning of an attack, but instead of reading it he thrust it into his pocket.

In the past, Washington has made huge tactical blunders as a result of faulty intelligence. Here, it's the Hessians' turn to make a tactical error because of a miscommunication. Rall doesn't take the threat of attack seriously enough to read the letter warning of the impending invasion—a sign that the war is by many seen as over.

The Americans begin their attack on Trenton at 8AM. Washington's troops have been cold and wet all night. They're exhausted and some of their weapons don't work. Meanwhile, the Hessians in Trenton march out of their barracks. The American forces overpower them: those whose guns work fire on the Germans and kill many of them, including Johann Gottlieb Rall. In less than one hour, the Americans have captured Trenton and taken a thousand prisoners. Not one American dies.

Washington uses the element of surprise to stage a successful attack upon the Hessians. Washington excels at small, improvisational maneuvers of this kind. (It was these kinds of maneuvers, McCullough suggests, that Washington exceled at during the French and Indian War, too.) And yet, Washington's victory is also the result of some luck, since it was made possible by Rall's drunken negligence the previous day.

Washington has just won a huge victory. The defeat of the Hessians in Trenton inspires his men, and soon the newspapers are full of glorious accounts of Washington's daring maneuvers. Meanwhile, General William Howe hears the news and decides to march to New Jersey with an army of 8,000 troops.

Washington has won an impressive victory, although he's also acted deviously, attacking the Hessians the morning after their Christmas festivities. Presumably, the American newspapers don't emphasize this aspect of his victory.

Washington learns that the British troops are marching out to New Jersey. He decides to "go after the enemy once again." But this decision poses a problem: Washington doesn't have enough troops to match the British in battle. With authorization from the Continental Congress, Washington takes every measure to ensure that his troops reenlist and stay in the army.

Out of desperation to defeat the British, Washington effectively becomes a dictator over his own troops, refusing to allow them to leave the army even though they've signed contracts permitting them to do so. McCullough doesn't dwell or pass judgment on this aspect of Washington's leadership, though it clashes markedly with Washington's reputation as a fair and democratic leader.

On January 1, 1777, General Charles Cornwallis and his army arrive in Princeton, New Jersey. From there, he leads a force of 5,500 men out to Trenton. Left with no choice, Washington and the American troops leave Trenton. But instead of retreating, Washington leads his army to attack Cornwallis's rear guard in Princeton.

Washington's maneuver here is similar to the one he attempted to execute in Manhattan earlier in the year: he leads his troops to attack the enemy from the rear.

On January 3, George Washington and his troops attack British forces two miles outside Princeton. This time, the attack is a genuine surprise for the British, and many British soldiers die in the ensuing gunfight. The Americans take three hundred British prisoners in an "unexpected victory." Afterwards, Washington marches his troops to Somerset Courthouse, where they retire to the village of Morristown for the winter.

The American army begins 1777 with a successful surprise attack on the British, suggesting that Washington has improved as a commander over the course of the last half-year.

1776 ends with two astonishing victories for Washington's troops. The attack on Trenton is rightly seen as a turning point in the war—the moment when Americans soundly bested their opponents in battle, outfighting and outsmarting them. Many British commanders see Trenton as a minor defeat for their side, but others admit that Washington is a greater general than they'd supposed.

The American army's victories in Trenton and Princeton aren't as damaging to the British army as the defeat in Brooklyn had been for the American army. Even so, Trenton and Princeton are important victories for the Americans symbolically—proving that they can match the most powerful military force on the planet, and that George Washington is the great general that he's said to be.

As 1777 begins, George III once again rides to Parliament to speak about the war. Some members of Parliament continue to denounce the war, as they did in 1775. However, Parliament once again votes to send reinforcements to America to ensure a British victory. In 1783—six years later—the war finally comes to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. At this time, only two of the general officers who had been involved in the Siege of Boston (Washington and Nathanael Greene) are still serving. Henry Knox also continues to fight for the American side until the end of the war.

In the final pages of the book, McCullough jumps ahead from 1777 to 1783, suggesting that Washington's back-to-back victories put him on a path that would end in his defeat of the British. Over the course of the war, Washington cultivates friendships with many of his commanders, including Greene and Knox, showing that Washington has overcome his prejudices against New Englanders.

The Americans go on to defeat the British largely because of military and financial support from France and the Netherlands. At the same time, it is Washington and his army who win the war—not the French or the Dutch. Washington isn't a brilliant strategist, and he has made many mistakes by the time the war ends, but he "never forgot what was at stake and he never gave up."

McCullough seems to suggest that Washington deserves the bulk of the credit for defeating the British in the Revolutionary War, a point that not all historians would agree with. Many would argue that Washington was a mediocre, devious commander who only won because the French gave him massive amounts of troops and money. But there is much to suggest that Washington was the wise and pragmatic thinker McCullough portrays. His victories in Trenton and Princeton are confirmation of his talents as a commander.

1776 is remembered as America's birth year. But for most American soldiers, it was a year of disease, hunger, and desertion—with "all-too-few victories." Especially for those who served alongside Washington from 1776 until the end of the war, the American victory against the British "seemed little short of a miracle."

Too often, history classes treat the American revolution as a glorious, idealistic fight for freedom. But, as McCullough has shown in his book, the Revolutionary War was a miserable, painful struggle for the thousands of Americans who actually fought in battle against the British. The Americans succeeded against the British not simply because of their ideals but because of the hard work and dedication of American soldiers.

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