A timely reminder of America's Enlightenment origins

Charles Bogle
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Washington's Crossing, by David Hackett Fischer, 543 pages, Oxford University Press, 2004, $17.95

In *Washington's Crossing*, published by Oxford University Press as part of its Pivotal Moments in American History series (series editors, David Hackett Fischer and James M. McPherson), Fischer describes how Enlightenment thinking informed the character and decision-making of George Washington at a critical point in the American Revolution. Fisher argues that although this same Enlightenment thinking molded the outlook of the British commanding officers and their charges, the exigencies of an imperialist policy resulted in brutal treatment of the colonists and spoliation of their property.

The author concludes by calling on his American readers to remember and embrace their Enlightenment origins at the present critical point in their history.

The painting entitled "Washington Crossing the Delaware," which hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, provides the inspiration for the title of Fischer's book. The masterpiece is itself evocative of the Enlightenment and the revolutions it engendered. In the introduction to his book, Fischer writes that the artist, a German-American named Emanuel Leutze, undertook the painting to encourage the Europeans, who were engaged in the revolutions of 1848, to follow the example of the American Revolution.

Fischer responds to the postmodernist writer Ron Robin, the author of *Scandals and Scoundrels*, and Wesley Frank Craven, the author of *The Legend of the Founding Fathers,* who attack the painting for historical inaccuracies. While Fischer concedes that the painting contains errors—e.g., the Stars and Stripes it depicts was not adopted as the American flag until 1777, a year after Washington's crossing of the Delaware—he argues that Leutze accurately captured the tension inherent in the event and the desperation felt by the soldiers in the boat.

Fischer also contends that the painting's physical dimensions bespeak an artist who was fully conscious of the depicted event's significance. The author notes that at Trenton, New Jersey, "2,400 Americans fought 1,500 Hessians in a battle that lasted about two hours" (p. 5). These numbers pale when compared to the great battles of the American Civil War and the world wars of the twentieth century, but Fischer argues that Trenton and the other "little battles" (p. 5) of the American war for independence were "conflicts between large historical processes," and that the artist's understanding of the significance of the battle (as well as the revolution as a whole) as "a world event" informed his decision to paint the scene on a 12-foot-by-20-foot canvas.

The author posits that Leutz, from the standpoint of his place and time, was able to realize that the battles of the Revolutionary War represented a "collision between two discoveries about the human condition that were made in the early modern era" but had previously been thought to be incompatible: first, that people could employ the concepts of freedom and liberty to make a society work; and, second, that human beings possessed an innate capacity for "order and discipline."

According to Fischer, the first discovery was not new to the American Revolution, but the idea that liberty and freedom could serve as the foundation for social and political systems was. The second discovery also predated the Revolution; but heretofore, this capacity for order and discipline had been manifested in subordination to the powers-that-be, while with the American Revolution it became a force for liberation and freedom. The Revolutionary battles witnessed "an invention of new methods by which people could be trained to engage their will and creativity in the service of another," not as slaves or automatons, but in "an active and willing way" (pp. 5-6).

Fischer rightly claims that these discoveries were products of the Enlightenment, which insisted that man possessed powers of reason capable not only of breaking the shackles of servitude and superstition, but also of bringing into existence a society based on freedom and liberty. These qualities are evident in the American colonialists' manner of fighting the war, which was to develop "the strengths of an open system in a more disciplined way" (p. 6). This, then, is the major theme of Fischer's *Washington's Crossing*.

A member of the Virginia planter class, George Washington believed in and accepted social and racial inequalities, but with important qualifications. While he kept slaves (whom he freed after the Revolution), he shared the belief, common to his time and place, that one should treat one's subordinates "with civility and condescension" (p. 14). The latter word connoted, in eighteenth century America, the treatment of subordinates "with decency and respect while maintaining a system of inequalities" (p. 14).

Washington brought his belief in inequality to his command in Massachusetts. Fischer writes that he was, at first, "appalled by New England soldiers" and complained of the "leveling spirit" of New England, where "the principles of democracy so universally prevail" (p. 19). However, in the course of the Revolution, Washington came to understand that these same principles had produced what Fischer declares to have been perhaps "the most literate army in the world," which had, as a consequence, learned to define liberty as independence (p.21). As members of an open society, the Americans could not abide by the European means of punishment, such as flogging and capital punishment. Instead, Washington learned to appeal to his soldiers' "honor, reason, pride, and conscience," with considerable success (p. 30).

Fischer writes that British forces were also imbued with the Enlightenment, but with an important difference. They were taught "improvement and humanitarian reform," and—contrary to postmodernist writer Michael Foucault's contention in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* that the British were expected to be "robots" or "human machines"—they were expected to behave "as men who actively engaged their minds and wills in the performance of their duty" (p. 40). But unlike the Colonial army, whose goal was liberty, British soldiers were taught "order and regularity through discipline" (p. 40). As a consequence, British troops, when leaderless, were sometimes unable to adjust their

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battle plans and, under conditions of privation, were capable of plunder and acts of torture.

Fischer does not mean to imply that British forces were alone in plundering. He notes that American generals faced the same problem. For the most part, however, plundering by American troops was limited to "petty theft and careless destruction" (p. 175).

The two brothers who commanded the British and Hessian forces, Admiral Lord Richard Howe and General William Howe, shared Washington's enlightened attitude towards their subordinates and war policies in general. William was known for treating his soldiers "with kindness and sympathy" (p. 73). On one occasion, Fischer writes, Howe went out of his way to encourage and "express his satisfaction" in a young German officer who had been disciplined by his superiors for "a tactical mistake" (p. 73).

Charged with "end[ing] the rebellion and restor[ing] the American colonies to their [British] allegiance" (p. 73), the Howe brothers listened to and considered a number of plans to meet this goal, one of which was the use of terror to break the American will to resist. But when this policy was implemented by several British officers, the result was an "explosion of American anger" toward the British. The Howes rejected this approach on the grounds that it was "unlawful and inhumane" (p. 75).

Ultimately, the brothers decided to ask for a great number of reinforcements and use "rapid movements" to vanquish the colonists without heavy losses. As Fischer notes, this amounted to an intelligent, "humane plan" (p. 79).

The Continental Congress and Washington decided on "a point-by-point defense" of New York, which they rightly perceived to be the site of Britain's first major attack. But faulty intelligence and Washington's initial rigidity in dealing with his forces resulted in battlefield indecision and errors and the loss of a large portion of his cavalry. These factors, according to Fischer, were largely responsible for the fall of New York in 1776.

Fischer writes, "as late as August 12 [1776], Washington wrote to Hancock that the army had no intelligence about the enemy's movements" (88). Later in the same month, Washington's intelligence again failed him, this time concerning the landing point of Howe's army.

Washington's rigidity is evident in his treatment of the Connecticut Light Horsemen, his largest contingent of cavalry, who offered to pay for their own upkeep as well as their horses. Deeming these propertied countrymen unfit for cavalry duty, Washington ordered them to "serve as infantry, a mortal insult to a cavalryman" (p. 86).

When more infantry arrived and Washington still insisted that the Light Horsemen remain dismounted, they demanded to be dismissed, to which Washington readily acceded on the grounds that their "refusal to do fatigue duty would spread through the army" (p. 86). Fischer notes that while a few of the cavalry decided to remain with the army, most never returned.

Following the loss of Long Island, Washington reassessed his strategy. Unlike the British troops, Colonial soldiers were unwilling to die merely for honor and duty, which meant they were also unwilling to engage a larger enemy in fruitless battles. It was for this reason that their general decided to fight a defensive war, while watching "for an opportunity when a brilliant stroke could be made with any probability of success" (p. 102).

Although the remainder of 1776 saw British General Cornwallis chase the Colonial army across New Jersey, the success of Washington's new strategy was evident even in retreat. Fischer reports that the Colonists "did not behave like a beaten army." They skirmished instead of taking on the British forces directly, resulting in large numbers of enemy killed and wounded (126). Still, by December 1776, many on both sides thought the war essentially over.

At this crucial junction, Fischer notes, two events occurred that were to change the course and outcome of the war: the publication of Thomas Paine's *The American Crisis* and Washington's successful crossing of the Delaware and defeat of Hessian mercenary forces in Trenton.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense,* published in February 1776, provided the Colonists with the vocabulary of democracy for expanding and unifying their thinking concerning British rule. With *The American Crisis*, written in November as he retreated with the Continental army across New Jersey, Paine focused on presenting a plan for action, including a "broad agenda for Congress and the states," and, most importantly, he focused on urging the immediate rebuilding of a depleted army.

Before crossing the Delaware, Washington distributed copies of Paine's new pamphlet to his forces. Many of the American civilians read it as well. Fischer argues that while Washington's crossing of the Delaware is traditionally given the lion's share of credit for reviving the Colonists' faith in their army and its cause, the revival arose mostly "from the acts and choices of ordinary people in the valley of the Delaware, as Thomas Paine's *American Crisis* began to circulate among them" (p. 143).

These ordinary people read Paine's tract in the context of their experiences with the British occupying forces. Following the British victories in New York and New Jersey, the British pacification policy rapidly turned into what can most accurately be described as terrorism. Due to a lack of supplies, especially food, General Howe ordered his troops to forage the countryside. In the process, most of the farmers were given promissory notes instead of coin, and as a result many of them abandoned their property and took with them as many of their possessions as they could carry.

Fischer records the anarchy that resulted from plundering engaged in by "stragglers from both armies" (p.180). Indeed, just prior to Washington's crossing, "the Revolution was a civil war.... This was life without liberty or law in occupied New Jersey" (pp. 180-181).

But plundering and anarchy also resulted in the formation of New Jersey militias, which diverted British and Hessian mercenary attention from the Continental army. These diversions allowed Washington to attack on Christmas night, 1776.

As for the crossing itself, Fischer argues that the Continental army had in its favor superior technology (in the form of lighter, swifter artillery) and Washington's ability to inspire his men by riding into the thick of battle and talking with his troops, while the Hessian troops were undermined by poor intelligence and Hessian Colonel Rall's contemptuous attitude toward the American troops. Rall "often remarked that a ragtag force of rebels could never stand against German Regulars" (p. 245).

Fischer's interpretation is supported by the statement of a member of the Hessian Lossberg regiment, who observed, "Our whole disaster was entirely due to Colonel Rall" (249).

Fischer finds the same tendencies at work in the battles that followed: the Second Battle of Trenton on January 2, 1777; the Battle of Princeton, which took place the next day; and The Forage War (January 4-March 24, 1777). The British commanders, especially Lord Cornwallis, remained "sensitive to rank and privilege" (p. 315) and therefore would not listen to advice from inferiors. On the other hand, due to the "less stratified society, and especially expanding ideas of liberty and freedom" (p. 316), Washington continued to work closely with and listen to his associates, engaging in what Fischer terms "consultative leadership" (p. 265).

Fischer concludes that Cornwallis's approach produced an army that was often unable to respond to the guerrilla-style tactics practiced by the Continental army, while Washington's troops were far more flexible and capable of making decisions on the battlefield. Fischer cites these differences as a primary reason for the colonists' victories in these battles, and ultimately in the Revolutionary War as a whole.

Fischer concludes by bringing the lessons of *Washington's Crossing* to the present. "We have much to learn from [our Revolutionary predecessors]," he writes. He asserts that they were able to discover a

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different, successful way of fighting a war, while maintaining the Enlightenment values that spawned the Revolution. By maintaining these values, revolutionary Americans, according to the author, were “capable of acting in a higher spirit” (p. 379). As inheritors of these values, argues Fischer, Americans today are likewise capable of acting in such a spirit.

Fischer’s insistence that Enlightenment thinking informed both General Washington’s treatment of his troops and the war in general is a welcome addition to our understanding of the American Revolutionary War. We are reminded not only of a noble heritage of ideas and ideals, but of the material conditions that tested and proved their value. The author’s insistent reminder of our inheritance of these ideals is also welcome and timely.

The Bush administration’s brutal occupation of Iraq, with its attendant plundering and slaughter, as well as the very real possibility of a widening war in the Middle East, represents a return to the oppression and backward thinking against which the Enlightenment struggled.

This, however, is not simply the product of the reactionary character traits of one individual, or even one political party. It is an expression of the historical contradiction between American and world capitalism and the revolutionary ideals that in an earlier period guided the rising bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudalism, absolutism and the Church. The American ruling class has long since turned away from the revolutionary and Enlightenment traditions that provided the political, ideological and moral foundations for the birth of the American republic. All that is lasting and positive in the legacy of the Enlightenment can be defended and extended today only through a new revolutionary struggle—that of the international working class for an end to all forms of exploitation and social inequality—that is, for socialism.

Washington’s Crossing includes a number of useful maps as well as illustrations contemporaneous with the revolutionary period. The book also contains a number of valuable appendices devoted to such topics as troop estimates, weather conditions at the time of the Delaware crossing, and casualties. It concludes with a historiography of the Revolutionary War.

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