

Book Review

WASHINGTON'S CROSSING¹

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*There is an old American folk tale about George Washington and the Crossing of the Delaware. It tells us that the new American republics nearly failed in the winter of 1776, that George Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas night, and that his victory at Trenton revived the Revolution. All of this story is true, but it is not the whole truth.*³

Washington's Crossing is a superbly written narrative that provides a rich historical account of the Revolutionary War battles of Trenton and Princeton. David Hackett Fischer chronicles the events surrounding a defining moment in America's formative years and one of the country's first successful military campaigns.⁴ Despite its historical focus, *Washington's Crossing* provides more than a strict historical account of a military operation. Fischer does not simply regurgitate historical facts, but relates a story focused on the decisions of real people in the midst of actual events of consequence.

Choice is a dominant theme in the book. According to Fischer, "This book is mainly about contingency, in the sense of people making choices, and choices making a difference in the world."⁵ In *Washington's Crossing*, Fischer dissects the choices made by individuals on both sides of the conflict and examines their resulting impact on history and America today. What makes *Washington's Crossing* impressive is that Fischer presents his thesis in a way that is easily digestible. He artfully integrates historical accuracy with literary prose. Fischer does not dilute the complex history;⁶ rather, he cites to hundreds of primary and secondary sources, uses over 1100 footnotes, displays at least eighteen maps, and provides twenty-four appendices.⁷ The extensive research certifies the book's validity without encumbering the narrative. As one commentator aptly notes, "the book clips along like an adventure story It is a nonfiction book that reads like fiction."⁸

The turbulent events of late 1776 and early 1777 provide an exceptional set of circumstances for Fischer's premise. Fischer explains that America was quickly becoming another failed attempt at defeating colonial rule.⁹ In the winter of 1776, the new American republic was on the verge of destruction and resubmission to the British Empire.¹⁰ The Continental Army was weak and shriveled. The continental militia was undisciplined and marginally reliable.¹¹ In contrast, the British army and its hired Hessian allies were disciplined, well equipped, and strong.¹² In the fall of 1776, the British forces had quickly ripped control of New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island from the continental forces.¹³ In the winter, the British were

¹ DAVID HACKETT FISCHER, WASHINGTON'S CROSSING (2004).

² U.S. Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 53d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 142-43.

⁴ *Washington's Crossing* is part of a series of books designed to explore "Pivotal Moments in American History." *Id.* at ix. Not surprisingly, Fischer is the co-editor of the series. *Id.* at ii. He is a widely recognized historical scholar and well qualified to contribute to this area of historical writing. Fisher earned an A.B. from Princeton in 1958 and a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1962. See David Hackett Fischer, University Professor and Warren Professor of History, Brandeis University Department of History Faculty Website, <http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/history/faculty/fischer.html> (last visited May 24, 2005). Over the past fifteen years he has written several books focused on American history, and he currently serves as a Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University in Wayland, Massachusetts, where he teaches primarily American history. See *id.*

⁵ FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 364.

⁶ Professor Fischer notes in one interview: "It's a complicated tale and I didn't try to simplify it." Elise Soukup, *The First George W.*, NEWSWEEK, Mar. 15, 2004, at 12.

⁷ See FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 380 (listing the various appendices), 459-86 (providing the bibliography of sources), 545-46 (providing a comprehensive listing of maps).

⁸ Alexander Rose, *History in the Making: An Interview with David Hackett Fischer*, NAT'L REV. ONLINE (July 1, 2004), <http://www.nationalreview.com/rose/rose200407011011.asp>.

⁹ See FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 136-37 ("Many on both sides thought that the rebellion was broken and that the American war was over.").

¹⁰ See *id.*

¹¹ See *id.* at 19-30, 85-88.

¹² See *id.* at 31-65.

¹³ See *id.* at 84-98 (detailing the fall of New York), 121-28 (detailing the fall of New Jersey), 137 (discussing the fall of Rhode Island).

poised to continue their march inland, take control of Philadelphia, and arrest the members of the Continental Congress.¹⁴ The British expected to end the rebel insurrection promptly and definitively.¹⁵

However, to read *Washington's Crossing* solely as history undervalues the writing. Fischer provides historical detail to support his broader premise “that particular individuals at particular times have an indelible effect on events.”¹⁶ He discusses the myriad factors that influenced personal choices, shifted momentum in favor of the Americans, and resulted in the ultimate defeat of the British forces.¹⁷ In just under 400 pages, Fischer instills a genuine appreciation of the monumental importance of the events and people he discusses.¹⁸ He provides a true and accurate account of American history, as well as lessons in military and civic leadership, honor, and humanity. Fischer also provides insight into the formation of the unique American spirit that remains as important today as it was in the winter of 1776. In that respect, *Washington's Crossing* is not only a valuable history lesson, it is an inspiration.

The Painting

Fischer introduces his book with a discussion of Emanuel Leutze's painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.¹⁹ This is an appropriate introduction because, as Fischer acknowledges, most modern Americans think of the famous painting when they imagine General George Washington crossing the Delaware River on Christmas 1776.²⁰ Fischer spends six pages discussing the painting and utilizes Leutze's work to express some of the book's major themes.

Fischer notes that Leutze “invites us to see each of these soldiers [in the painting] as an individual, but he also reminds us that they are all in the same boat, working desperately together against the wind and current.”²¹ Fischer repeatedly presents this theme of Americans placing differences aside and uniting in times of crisis to pursue a common cause.²² He contends, however, that this is not an unguided pursuit. Just as Washington is at the center of Leutze's painting, Fischer highlights the central role of Washington as the man who provides the unifying and determined leadership for the American cause. Caspar Weinberger, a former U.S. Secretary of Defense, suggest that “this book makes clear that it was the military genius and leadership of Washington that turned almost certain defeat into victory.”²³ Indeed, the book is titled *Washington's Crossing*, and throughout the book Fischer reveals why George Washington deserves this recognition.

Moreover, Fischer notes that most Americans are surprised by the enormous size of Leutze's painting when they see it in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁴ Similarly, *Washington's Crossing* surprises readers with the extent of the history behind the actual event; Fischer reveals that there is far more to the story than Leutze's painting depicts. His writing enhances the reader's knowledge through well-integrated historical anecdotes about the countless choices that occurred at many levels.²⁵ The book consistently elicits moments of genuine discovery.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 136-37.

¹⁵ See *id.* at 73-75, 160-61.

¹⁶ Woody West, *Washington Command: Leading America's Spirited Response to a Military Nightmare*, WASH. TIMES, Feb. 15, 2004, at B8.

¹⁷ Fischer provides so many examples that a comprehensive listing of these factors is impractical. See, e.g., FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 7-18 (discussing General Washington's background and education), 19-30 (discussing the different colonial regions and their varying ideas of liberty), 138-43 (discussing the influence of Thomas Paine's writings), 143-45 (discussing the Continental Congress's changing approach to military and economic affairs), 151-54 (discussing the formation of new military units and the appointment of new military leaders), 153 (discussing the “new breed of combat leader in the American army” represented by the appointment of Colonel Charles Scott to lead the Fifth Virginia Regiment), 180 (highlighting the American belief that even men without military uniforms have “a natural right to take up arms in defense of their laws and liberties”), 193-201 (discussing spontaneous uprisings in response to the British occupation and pillaging of New Jersey), 208 (discussing the philosophy of American officers leading from the front), 296 (discussing Colonel Edward Hand's leadership in the midst of sudden crisis), 301 (highlighting the effect of General Washington's leadership), 305 (discussing the leadership of Colonel Charles Scott).

¹⁸ The book's editor, James M. McPherson, posits that “[n]o single day in history was more decisive for the creation of the United States than Christmas 1776.” *Id.* at ix.

¹⁹ See *id.* at 1.

²⁰ See *id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 2.

²² For instance, Fischer notes that General Washington's leadership “unit[ed] cantankerous Yankees, stubborn Pennsylvanians, autonomous Jersey men, honor-bound Virginians, and independent backcountrymen in a common cause.” *Id.* at 266.

²³ Caspar Weinberger, *Books of Summer XII*, FORBES, Oct. 4, 2004, at 43.

²⁴ See FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 2 (noting that the painting is over twelve feet high and over twenty-one feet long).

²⁵ Although Fischer details numerous individual and collective decisions throughout the book, his *Reprise: A Web of Contingency in History* provides a superb summary of these choices, their interrelation, and their impact on history. See *id.* at 364-67.

Fischer cautions that “size is not a measure of significance.”²⁶ The Delaware crossing was a single event; however, its historical significance is far larger. In this respect, the painting provides a good analogy of perspective. Leutze portrays a small group of Americans in a small boat on a giant canvas. Likewise, Fischer repeatedly expresses that seemingly insignificant individual choices produced major impacts when magnified upon the giant canvas of history.²⁷

Fischer is keenly aware that history is not only a matter of facts, but of perspective. Indeed, he dedicates an appendix and a historiography to the subject of historical perspective and accuracy.²⁸ Like a good painting, “[g]ood history . . . depends on combining delicate detail with broad strokes, and balancing color with depth.”²⁹ Fischer understands that history can be told by many sources and that each deserves appropriate consideration. He evaluates the relative value of various sources and synthesizes them into coherent accounts of the same events.

The Book

Fischer establishes the quintessential importance of individual choice through the organization of his book. First, he contrasts the relative quality of the opposing armies. In these chapters, Fischer indicates that the British and Hessian troops are far superior to the American army. In the next few chapters, Fischer relays the plight of the American army and its desperate and failed attempts to thwart the determined British and Hessian assaults. However, in the final chapters, which constitute the bulk of the book, Fischer’s analysis focuses on how individual choices at many levels changed the course of the war and transformed a losing American army into victors. As one commentator observed, “[c]ontemporary observers assumed that the little American rebellion must inevitably be crushed by the greatest empire on earth, yet, somehow, individual Americans made a series of better decisions than did their British and Hessian foes.”³⁰

The Armies

Fischer dedicates three chapters to an in-depth review of the principal armies involved in the engagements. These chapters orient the reader by providing significant details and background concerning the history, composition, organization, leadership, and cultural nuances of each army. Here, the value of Fischer’s reliance on a plethora of primary sources is obvious. Eighteen of the book’s twenty-four appendices relay extensive information about the armies.³¹ Such exhaustive analysis helps explain the striking peculiarities and cultural differences of the armies that surface throughout the book.³² Fischer weaves these characteristics into his narrative to help explain how the choices on each side contributed to the final outcome.

Fischer begins with a discussion of the American army, referring to the Continental Army as “An Army of Liberty.”³³ He shows the reader an American army that was a piecemeal configuration of diverse groups from various parts of the country. Despite sharing a common mission, the men did not hold a common definition of liberty. Fisher elaborates on some of the difficulties these differing views created when integrating the units into the army.³⁴ Additionally, forging a new army required the instillation and enforcement of discipline. This also proved problematic, however, since liberty and military

²⁶ *Id.* at 5.

²⁷ One example is Hessian General Rall’s choice to “fight the Americans by attacking directly against their main strength [inside] the town of Trenton.” *Id.* at 243. Fischer characterizes this decision as a “mistake of historic consequence.” *Id.* Another example is American Sergeant Joseph White’s leadership of a heroic charge to capture Hessian cannons during the battle of Trenton which helped achieve American victory. *See id.* at 247-48. A further example is Colonel Edward Hand’s decision to take charge of the Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment when its original leader, French General Matthias de Roche-Fermoy, abandoned his command in the face of British and German troops. *See id.* at 296. Colonel Hand’s choice proved critical to American success at Trenton. *See id.* at 296-301.

²⁸ *See id.* at 421-57.

²⁹ Rose, *supra* note 8.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ Only appendices I through K and W and X provide no information about the armies.

³² *See FISCHER, supra* note 1, at 7-30 (discussing the characteristics of the American army), 31-50 (discussing the characteristics of the British army), 51-64 (discussing the characteristics of the German army).

³³ *Id.* at 7.

³⁴ *See id.* at 25.

discipline were conflicting concepts for free Americans.³⁵ According to Fischer, successful integration resulted primarily from the choice of action of their leader, General George Washington.

Throughout, Fischer explains Washington's role as the military leader charged with the daunting task of unifying the army into a cohesive and effective fighting force. Washington faced difficult choices concerning "how he could lead an amateur American army against highly skilled Regular troops."³⁶ Washington was a strong advocate of strict discipline;³⁷ yet, Washington "learned that the discipline of a European regular army became the enemy of order in an open society."³⁸ Fischer portrays Washington as a sensitive leader who chose to strike a delicate balance between enforcing discipline and respecting liberty. As a result of Washington's individual efforts, the "army of free men [learned] to work together."³⁹ Fischer elaborated on Washington's importance in an interview discussing the book:

Gradually, Washington found a way to work with these men. He was always listening, always consulting. His greatest success was to tap the skills, knowledge and experience of these men. This kind of leadership was one of Washington's great feats, and it became the very model for an open society and for the kind of leadership Americans now expect.⁴⁰

Fischer next contrasts the American army with the British and Hessian armies. He suggests that the revolution was not just a contest between armies on the battlefield, but that the events also reflected a larger battle over ideology.⁴¹ In 1776, the Americans faced a British army that was a professional and highly skilled veteran force that enjoyed "an experience of victory without equal in the world."⁴² Unlike the American army, British military training was "a search for order and regularity through discipline."⁴³ British soldiers held the "ideals of loyalty, fidelity, honor, duty, discipline, and service . . . as sacred."⁴⁴ Likewise, the hired Hessian force "was a highly disciplined professional force, with strong values of obedience and service."⁴⁵ Even when officers had differing backgrounds, they nonetheless "all believed deeply in hierarchy, order, and discipline."⁴⁶ The Hessian leadership "despised the American language of liberty and freedom as the cant of cowards, traitors, and poltroons."⁴⁷

Fischer's contrast of the relative quality of the armies heightens the reader's sensitivity to the importance of individual choice. The American army was not equal to its more experienced, better disciplined, and larger foes. Fischer argues that this disparity influenced important decisions within each army.⁴⁸

Desperation

After presenting a static comparison of the armies, Fischer examines the armies under dynamic circumstances. Fischer places the reader directly into a gripping story told from both sides of the battle lines. Readers will likely agree that

³⁵ See *id.* at 30.

³⁶ *Id.* at 11.

³⁷ See *id.* at 15. Fischer notes that General Washington maintained "a deep concern for order and discipline." *Id.* Fischer states that Washington "raged against the undisciplined militia [and] demanded more rigorous military laws . . ." *Id.* Fischer also quotes a letter that Washington wrote to his captains stating, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all." *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 30.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Andrew Richard Albanese, *Crossings Then and Now*, PUBLISHERS WKLY., Apr. 5, 2004, at 33.

⁴¹ See FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 50 ("For men on both sides who actually did the fighting, the war was not primarily a conflict of power or interest. It was a clash of principles in which they deeply believed.").

⁴² *Id.* at 33.

⁴³ *Id.* at 40.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 50.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 65.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 58-59.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 59.

⁴⁸ See *id.* at 364 ("Many of them, from generals to privates, made choices that had an impact on events. But what they chose differed very much from one army to another, and so also did their ways of choosing.").

“Professor Fischer conveys in a remarkably realistic way what combat and the fog of war are actually like.”⁴⁹ Fischer elaborates upon the miserable failures and dire circumstances faced by the Continental Army and the new American Republic. He further details the confidence, professionalism, and successes of the British and Hessian forces sent to quash the rebellion. Fischer expertly builds suspense through the precarious predicament facing the Americans.

First, Fischer explains the British and American campaign plans. The British leaders, Admiral Lord Richard Howe and General William Howe, contemplated at least six different strategies.⁵⁰ They ultimately chose a strategy designed to take control of New York and the Hudson Valley and then seize New Jersey and Rhode Island.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Americans contemplated at least five strategies to meet the British offensive.⁵² The American leadership chose to defend strategically important New York.⁵³

Fischer then spends the next fifty-six pages discussing the result of these choices: a tragic American loss in New York. He succinctly states, “[t]he American army had been routed. Its commanders had made many grievous errors, and even its best infantry could not win a pitched battle against a seasoned regular army. In an ordeal by combat on Long Island, the forces of order made short work of an army of liberty.”⁵⁴

Fischer heightens the desperation of the American condition by detailing the subsequent American losses of New Jersey and Rhode Island.⁵⁵ The British strategy succeeded as planned. The chosen American strategy had failed, and the Americans retreated across the Delaware to Pennsylvania. Here, Fischer purposely injects a dark note, “[m]any on both sides thought that the rebellion was broken and that the American war was over.”⁵⁶

Defiance and the American Spirit

Fischer deliberately portrays the American army as an inferior force and recounts the details of the miserable losses and rout of the American army. Why? Fisher hopes to prepare the reader for the epic transformation that takes place in the remaining chapters: “The Americans began to develop fresh confidence in Gen[eral] Washington and to believe that they could match and defeat the British army, and the British were losing confidence that they could win this war against upstart rebels”⁵⁷

After building upon the near hopelessness of the American predicament, Fischer masterfully expresses the defiance of the American forces and their unwillingness to capitulate despite the overwhelming odds of defeat. Fischer demonstrates how the Americans and their leaders made decisions that profoundly impacted history forever. He notes that “[t]his great revival grew from defeat, not from victory. The awakening was a response to a disaster.”⁵⁸ Moreover, Fischer seems to agree with Doctor Benjamin Rush, a leading actor in the events at Trenton and Princeton,⁵⁹ that Americans choose not to act decisively during crisis until circumstances are dire:

⁴⁹ Weinberger, *supra* note 23, at 43.

⁵⁰ The British strategies included: (1) a blockade, (2) “the deliberate use of extreme violence and terror to break the American will to resist,” also called “*Shrecklichkeit*,” (3) a relentless search and destroy approach, (4) a “spreading ink-stain strategy,” (5) a “divide and conquer” approach through seizure of key territory, and (6) the use of “Loyalist Americans against the rebels.” FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 75-77.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 77-78.

⁵² Although Fischer enumerates five formal strategies, he actually discusses six. The American strategies included: (1) the use of privateers, (2) attrition through retreat and delay tactics, (3) resistance through an “irregular war” and guerilla tactics, (4) the use of defensive tactics to invite the enemy to attack only strong positions (called a “war of posts” by General Washington), (5) an “offensive-defensive” approach where American forces attacked “whenever an opportunity presented itself, while offering no opening to an enemy,” and (6) a full “perimeter defense” of all American colonies and towns. *Id.* at 79-80.

⁵³ *See id.* at 80.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 98.

⁵⁵ *See id.* at 121-37.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 137.

⁵⁷ West, *supra* note 16, at B8.

⁵⁸ FISCHER, *supra* note 1, at 143.

⁵⁹ *See id.*

[Rush] thought it was a national habit of the American people (maybe all free people) not to deal with a difficult problem until it was nearly impossible. “Our republics cannot exist long in prosperity,” Rush wrote[,] “We require adversity and appear to possess most of the republican spirit when most depressed.”⁶⁰

Nothing in *Washington’s Crossing* more appropriately captures Fisher’s fundamental thesis than the book’s emphasis on the critical role of writer and soldier Thomas Paine and his *American Crisis*. Fischer credits Paine with reenergizing Americans to pursue their fight for liberty. He contends that *American Crisis* was a catalyst for this American revival,⁶¹ and highlights its profound effect, suggesting that the revival “rose 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.”⁶² Reflecting on Paine’s writing and the tragedy of December 1776, Fischer provides meaningful insight into his themes of individual choice and the American spirit that remain relevant today:

Everyone agreed that it was a perilous moment when things had gone deeply wrong for the American War of Independence. It was also a pivotal moment when great issues of the Revolution were hanging in the balance. Most of all it was a moment of decision, when hard choices had to be made. Thanks in part to Thomas Paine, it became a time when many Americans resolved to act, in ways that made a difference in the world.⁶³

Ultimately, Fisher proves his fundamental thesis—that people’s choices have lasting import. Fischer’s chronicle of the recapture of Trenton and conquest of Princeton spans nine days. In those nine days Americans made innumerable individual choices at every level. They made these decisions under harsh conditions and in circumstances of uncertainty and fear. Yet, these choices were inspired by a common goal: the undaunted pursuit of liberty. In *Washington’s Crossing* Fisher succeeds at providing a vibrant history, but he provides a history that is an inspiration today. The truth of Fisher’s superb work is that our choices matter.

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *See id.* at 138-43. *The American Crisis* remains an inspirational writing, particularly when read in light of the events of 11 September 2001.

⁶² *Id.* at 143.

⁶³ *Id.* at 142.