

# THE BLACK TIMES OF '76

In the teeth of near defeat, Gen. George Washington pulled out miraculous mid-winter victories

By David Hackett Fischer

ON DECEMBER 18, 1776, the American Revolution was near collapse. The commander in chief of its forces, George Washington, warned his brothers in Virginia that "I think the game is pretty near up," unless a new army were instantly recruited, which was not happening. In six months of shattering defeats, he had nearly lost the army he'd been given. Of more than 30,000 soldiers who had fought in the summer, less than 3,000 remained. Washington had lost 90 percent of his command. His troops had suffered a catastrophic failure of leadership on every level: strategy, tactics, discipline, intelligence, supply, recruitment. British and German troops occupied large parts of New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. In the fall of 1776 thousands of Americans renounced the revolution and renewed their allegiance to George III.

Many in Congress and the army thought that Washington was not up to his job. He himself was tormented by a crushing sense of personal failure, confessing to his brothers, "No man I believe ever had a greater choice of difficulties, and less means of extricating himself."

But in those days that Thomas Paine later called "the black times of '76," Washington also told his brothers that one thing kept him going: "a full persuasion of the Justice of our Cause." With that conviction in mind, he made some of the most extraordinary command decisions in military history. In a moment

of apparently utter defeat, he joined the values of the Revolution to the conduct of the War of Independence. With that effort, he started another revolution in leadership.

He had tried by top-down methods to command an army of cantankerous Yankees, Philadelphia's egalitarian Associates, honor-obsessed Virginians, and ungovernable frontiersmen and thereby learned the hard way that "a people unused to restraint must be led; they will not be drove." He began to work with his army in that new spirit. While still firmly in command, he opened his councils to free discussion. He learned to listen and discovered how to

enlist the creativity of free people. With much help from Robert Morris, he built a more flexible supply system. With the advice of Joseph Reed, he organized a new intelligence network in New Jersey. With the assistance of Henry Knox, he massed artillery to support infantry assaults.

Washington's open councils urged him to seize the initiative, concentrate forces, strike hard, and withdraw quickly. They also identified opportune targets in New Jersey. With that knowledge

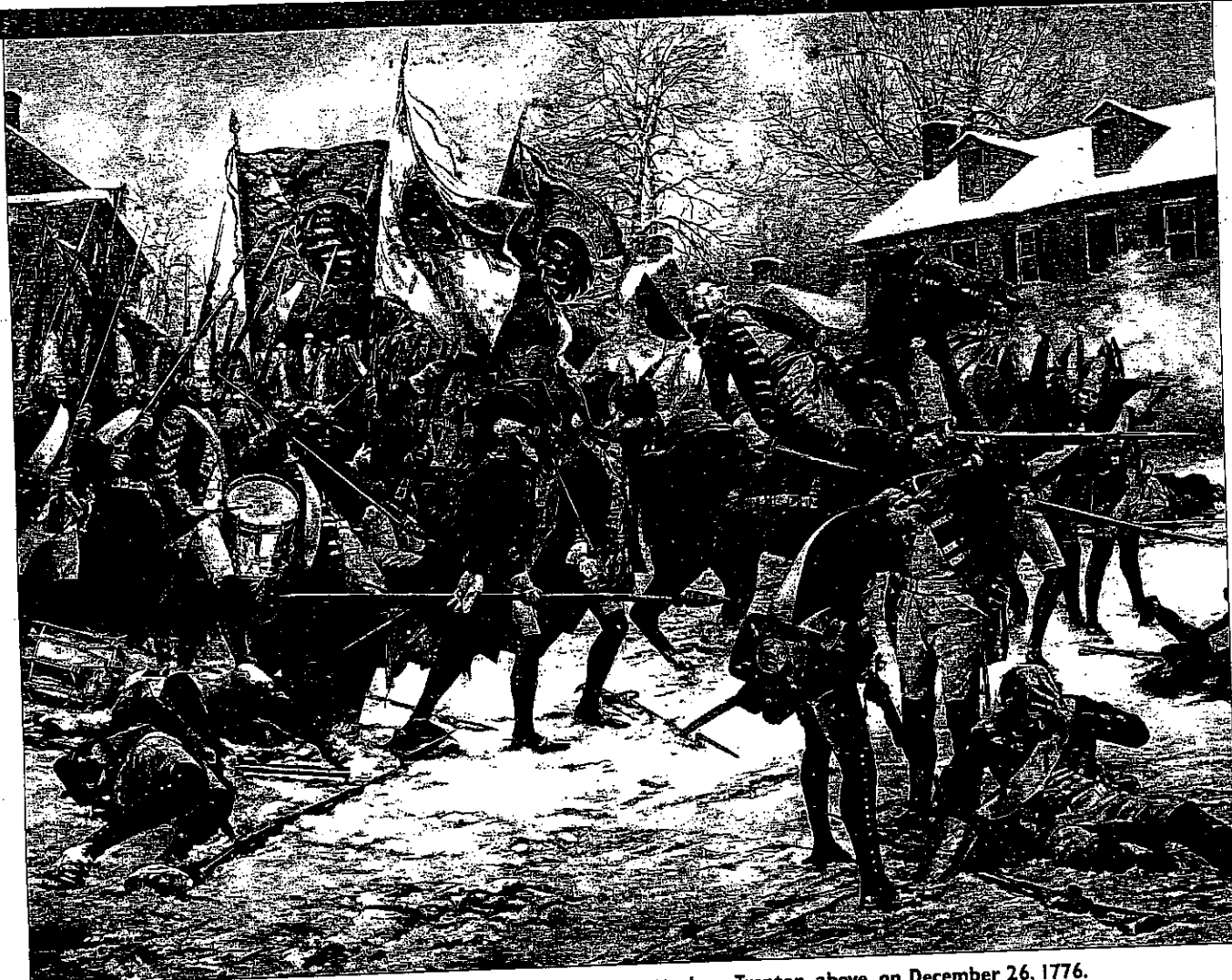
Washington decided to cross the Delaware River to attack a Hessian garrison at Trenton on Christmas night. It was a bold but carefully planned decision. Washington concentrated all his resources in three simultaneous river crossings.

In great secrecy his forces mustered late on Christmas afternoon. Just as the Americans were crossing, a howling nor'easter struck the region with great violence. Two crossings failed. The third barely succeeded, with much disorder and long delay. In the midst of chaos, Washington sat pensively on an old beehive, wrapped in his cloak, and wondered if he should call it off. But retreat was more dangerous. He let it go forward.



Washington, depicted above by Thomas Sully in 1842, took a desperate gamble, launching an attack on Trenton across the icy Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776.

**Washington was tormented by a crushing sense of personal failure**



Col. Johann Rall and his Hessian garrison fell to the bold American attack on Trenton, above, on December 26, 1776.

The men marched inland through rain, sleet, and driving snow and did not reach Trenton until after daybreak. Washington feared that surprise was lost, but as they approached the town, another thick band of snow and sleet struck, affording the Americans tactical surprise. The Hessians, highly professional troops, mustered quickly and counterattacked with determination, but Washington's assault guns struck them with terrific force. More than 900 Hessians were killed, wounded, or captured. With difficulty Washington moved his command and its prisoners quickly back across the river.

It became a famous victory, but Washington knew that it was not enough to revive the sinking Cause. His new intelligence service told him of other opportunities in New Jersey, and after careful discussion in his open councils, Washington resolved to recross the now-frozen Delaware in the bitter cold of December

29, 1776. The hardest decisions were made by hundreds of sick and weary Continental infantry asked to outstay their enlistments for a few weeks. Many agreed—barely enough for the operation.

At this second battle at Trenton, Washington established a strong defensive position from which he flung back several British attacks. As British reinforcements converged on Trenton, he slipped away under darkness, moved behind British lines, defeated an approaching British force in a meeting engagement near Princeton, mounted a quick assault on the British base there, and overran part of another British brigade. Washington continued the campaign for another two months. Jersey militia and Continental troops fought more than 60 small engage-

ments. British commanders gradually lost control of New Jersey and were driven into a few garrisons on the Atlantic coast. The winter campaign did substantial damage to General Howe's army, which shrank from 32,000 troops in August to 14,000 effectives by late winter. Washington also seized the moral advantage in his

orders to "treat [prisoners] with humanity, and let them have no reason to Complain of our Copying the brutal example of the British army."

The tide of opinion began to turn—in America, France, and even Britain. The conduct of this small campaign delivered the Revolution from defeat. It did not win the war. That struggle would long continue. But through it all, Washington's revolutionary leadership had set an example that endures to our time. ★



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