



cised remarkable leadership to rally and reform his infantry line before William could organize a second attack. The Norman cavalry pounded the seemingly immovable mass of Saxon foot soldiers, who hour after bloody hour, held their ground.

DUSK DIMMED THE DAY, and William decided on a new approach. He suddenly feigned a general withdrawal of his cavalry. It was a daring gambit. Harold did not fall for it, but, despite his attempt to stop them, his frustrated Saxon soldiers took the bait. Breaking their ordered ranks, which had successfully resisted the Norman cavalry, they charged in mad pursuit. Halfway down the hill, William's knights, acting as one, wheeled 180 degrees to face the scattered onrush of infantrymen, whom they cut down in the field like so many sheaves of wheat.

With the battle now turned against Harold, his personal bodyguards closed round to protect their king. But their numbers were not thick enough to stop an errant arrow from piercing Harold through the eye. He fell and died. With that, the bodyguards panicked and melted away, and the rest of his soldiers gave up the fight. Having begun near dawn, the battle ended before sunset. William the Conqueror's way was clear to London, where, on Christmas Day, he was crowned king of England.

Washington and the Delaware Crossing (1776)

THE DECISION TO WIN

As far as anyone could tell, as Christmas 1776 approached, the American Revolution was lost. There had been some surprising Patriot successes at the beginning of the war, in Boston and upstate New York, but then General George Washington lost Long Island and Manhattan and was sent into retreat clear across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania. In New York, he had had about 20,000 men and, on paper,

still commanded some 16,400, but most of these troops were scattered and many were underequipped, underfed, barely clothed, and barely sheltered. In the depths of a frigid winter, they were hardly in any condition to fight. The fact was that, in and around his New Jersey headquarters, Washington's army consisted of just four thousand shivering soldiers. He had hoped for reinforcements from General Charles Lee, but Lee was days distant. On November 13, Lee sat in the tavern of the Widow White at Basking Ridge, New Jersey, writing a letter to General Horatio Gates complaining that "a certain great man"—that is, George Washington—"is most damnably deficient." Just as he finished his disparaging missive—"In short unless something which I do not expect turns up we are lost"—a detachment of British dragons burst into the tavern and took General Charles Lee and four other American officers prisoner.

For their part, the British, under the overall command of General William Howe, were widely and thinly scattered in garrisons across New Jersey. Ordinarily, an attempt to cover so much territory with a relatively small army would be a very risky business, but Howe, with good reason, believed the American army had been defeated and no longer presented much of a threat. His principal commander in New Jersey, Major General James Grant, agreed, writing on December 17, "I can hardly believe that Washington would venture at this season of the year to pass the Delaware." Indeed, Grant had nothing but contempt for the army of Washington, and he felt particularly comfortable because Howe had dispatched three excellent Hessian regiments under Colonel Johann Rall to garrison the most vulnerable British position at Trenton, New Jersey. The Hessians, German mercenary troops in the employ of the British crown, were, in effect, instruments of terror, renowned for their discipline and infamous for their brutality toward enemy soldiers and civilians alike. Rall had a reputation as a particularly hard-bitten fighting commander. He, too, had nothing but contempt for the American army. As Hessian lieutenant Jakob Piel recalled, "It never struck him that the rebels might attack us, and therefore he made no preparations against an attack.

I must concede that on the whole we had a poor opinion of the rebels, who previously had never successfully opposed us." When several of Rall's officers urged him to erect some fortifications around their garrison at Trenton, he spat out a curse: "*Scheiszer bey Scheiszl* [Shit upon shit!] Let them come. . . . We will go at them with the bayonet."

But if Howe, Grant, and Rall thought little of Washington and his Continental Army, Rall did have his hands full with New Jersey locals and ad hoc militia troops. Whatever Washington did or did not do, the people of New Jersey deeply resented occupation by the British redcoats and, even more, by the Hessians. They were tired of being robbed and abused. While Howe's forces may have defeated Washington's army, New Jersey was in a chronic state of guerrilla warfare, which was taking its toll, especially on Rall's Hessians. Popular legend pictures these troops as fat, happy, and drunk in their Trenton garrison, but, in fact, they were cold, hungry, and tired—tired of continual skirmishes and the anxious necessity of ceaseless vigilance. This was not warfare as it was practiced in Europe, and their vaunted discipline had begun to fail.

Cracking discipline was not the only problem the Hessians faced. There was a fissure in the very heart of command. Colonel Rall trusted and detested his superior, Colonel Carl von Donop, who had overall command of the Hessian forces along the Delaware River. The ill will was apparently reciprocated, and, as a result, Rall and Donop rarely communicated. For this reason, Donop had little idea of the situation among Rall's exhausted troops in unfortified Trenton. When Rall finally complained about increasing guerrilla attacks on the outskirts of Trenton, Donop offered no help but did advise him to build fortifications. Rall impatiently replied that these would do no good because "I have the enemy in all directions." He asked instead for reinforcements, a request Donop merely relayed to Major General Grant. That officer replied with a contempt for Rall that nearly equaled his contempt for Washington: "Tell the colonel he is safe. I will undertake to keep the peace in Jersey with a corporal's guard." To Rall directly, Grant wrote that he "may be assured that the rebel army in Pennsylvania . . . does not exceed eight

thousand men, who have neither shoes nor stockings, are in fact almost naked, starving for cold, without Blankets, and very ill-supplied with provisions." No reinforcements would be sent.

About mid-December, the mind of George Washington was occupied with three things: First, the disintegration of his dwindling army. Second, the certainty of an impending British-Hessian invasion of Pennsylvania across the Delaware River. Third, an apparent opportunity to make a "counterstroke"—an offensive move against the British and Hessians. With a small and starving army—smaller and hungrier than even Grant thought—the prospects for such a counterstroke did not glow brightly, but, Washington reasoned, if it failed, the mere fact of taking *some* action would be beneficial to the army, reinvigorating its flagging spirits and necessarily reviving discipline among its faltering ranks.

Washington began thinking of crossing the Delaware and attacking one of the main Hessian garrisons there. He had been chased across New Jersey; now he would bring the war back to the enemy. The idea, however, was not some grand conception born of strategic genius. It was, rather, the recognition of prevailing circumstances, all of which were quite independent of the condition of Washington's army or his plans for the war. The commander-in-chief was getting encouraging news about popular resistance throughout New Jersey. At this very moment, a Pennsylvania militia force, without any orders from Washington or anyone else, was conducting hit-and-run raids against British installations along the Delaware. He was also aware that Colonel von Donop had led a large contingent of Hessians *away* from the Trenton area and down to Mount Holly, New Jersey, in pursuit of Patriot militia forces there. What Washington may or may not have known is that the militia was not his only target in Mount Holly. Donop was strongly attracted to a beautiful young widow there, who made him forget all about both of his enemies, Colonel Rall and General Washington.

On December 22, 1776, Washington's adjutant, Colonel Joseph Reed, sent his commander a message advising him about the Patriot militia near Mount Holly: "We can either give [the militia] a strong

reinforcement—or make a separate attack—the latter bids fairest for producing the greatest and best effects. . . . We are all of the opinion my dear general that something must be attempted to revive our expiring credit, give our Cause some degree of reputation & prevent total depreciation of the Continental money which is coming very fast." Reed's thoughts anticipated and reinforced Washington's own, especially when Reed stated that "even a Failure cannot be more fatal than to remain in our present situation. In short some enterprize must be undertaken in our present Circumstances or we must give up the cause." Reed's recommendation, in view of the "scattered divided state of the enemy," was to stage an "offensive attack" on Trenton.

Doubtless, Reed was preaching to the converted. By this time, Washington had reached the same conclusion. Reed ended his message emphatically: "Delay is now equal to a total defeat," then excused himself for writing in such blunt language: "Pardon the Freedom I have used, the Love of my country, a Wife and four Children in the Enemies Hands, the Respect and Attachment I have to you—the Ruin and Poverty that must attend me & thousands of others will plead my Excuse for so much Freedom."

The very day he received Reed's dispatch, December 22, Washington called his commanders to a council of war. He presented Reed's proposal for crossing the Delaware and attacking one of the enemy's posts in New Jersey. With very little debate, the officers agreed on the operation. Washington now turned to Colonel John Glover, who led a regiment of rugged fishermen from Marblehead, Massachusetts. He was an expert in small boat handling. He looked Washington in the eye and told him not to "be troubled" about the crossing. His "boys could manage it." George Washington issued orders the next morning.

The same myth that portrays the Hessians as generally fat and happy depicts Colonel Rall and his men as reveling and drinking all Christmas day and night in Trenton, so that, when the attack came on the morning of December 26, they were too hungover to put up much of a fight. The truth is that Trenton was dismal and deserted, and Rall and his men had

no celebration. They expected an attack—perhaps from Washington, certainly from rebel guerrillas. For the past week, there had been little sleep in the Hessian garrison. Nerves were frayed. However, when a storm began on Christmas night, Rall felt a sudden relief. After all, no one would try to cross the Delaware in a winter storm, let alone launch an attack in one. Loyalist spies had reported that Washington was forming up his troops on the other side of the river. Looking at the wind-driven ice and snow, Rall replied: "These clodhoppers will not attack us, and should they do so, we will simply fall on them and rout them."

The Delaware had indeed frozen. Then, under warm rains, it had melted again, only to refreeze, though not solid. On the night of December 25, the river's waters rolled with great sheets of broken ice whirling in the swift current. On this night, in this weather, Washington loaded 2,400 veteran troops and 18 cannon into large Durham boats, which were normally used for ferrying freight across the broad river. Washington made his crossing at Mckonkey's Ferry (the modern Pennsylvania town of Washington Crossing), nine miles above Trenton. Simultaneously, about a thousand militiamen, commanded by General James Ewing, prepared to cross at Trenton Ferry, their mission to block any retreat of Hessians from Trenton. Also, as a diversion, Colonel John Cadwalader was to cross the Delaware at Bordentown.

That was the plan. But Ewing could not get across the treacherous river, and Cadwalader was so delayed that he was of no real help. Worse, Washington planned to disembark in New Jersey at midnight, under cover of darkness. The element of surprise was all important. The weather, however, had caused so many delays that his crossing was not completed until about 3:00 A.M. on the 26th. It was at least 4:00 A.M. by the time Washington's men were on the march. The attack, when it came, would not occur before daybreak.

Delay, Washington wrote, "made me despair of surprising the Town, as I well knew we could not reach it before the day was fairly broke." He began to think seriously of aborting the attack, but he decided, even as his boat tossed about in the middle of the half-frozen river, that he had

passed the point of no return: "As I was certain there was no making a Retreat without being discovered, and harassed on repassing the River, I determined to push on at all Events."

Washington's decision to win was motivated not by the high spirits of a victor, but by the nothing-more-to-lose resignation of one who had suffered a series of devastating defeats. He could sit tight, do nothing, and surely lose. Or he could seize the opportunity current circumstances presented—a rebellious Jersey population, an exhausted and thinly distributed enemy—and quite probably be defeated, but possibly, just possibly, win. In the middle of the turbulent Delaware, he had determined that there was no return, only the slim opportunity offered by continuing to advance. But, really, he had already decided this very thing when he resolved to lead a "counterstroke" with a cold and hungry army almost everyone had written off as finished.

The night before the crossing, the physician and revolutionary patriot Benjamin Rush visited Washington as he was making final preparations for the crossing. The commander had wisely decided to protect the security of the operation by allowing no one to pass in or out of his army's encampment. When Rush saw him, he was busy writing a secret password on slips of paper to be distributed to all of his officers. As Rush spoke with the general, one of the slips "by accident fell upon the floor near my feet. I was struck with the inscription upon it. It was 'Victory or Death.'"

WE CAN ONLY IMAGINE what it was like to march to battle nine miles along the Jersey side of the river through the frigid, stormy gloom of 4:00 A.M. that morning after Christmas. To preserve surprise as long as possible, Washington had ordered absolute silence, so there was none of the customary soldier's talk to ease the fatigue and the fear. Washington had also ordered that no lights be struck, so there was not even the comfort of a pipe. When it became clear that snow and freezing rain had rendered the muskets useless, Washington—affirming to his subordinate com-

mander John Sullivan that "I am resolved to take Trenton"—directed him to order the men to fix bayonets. If they could not fire, they would thrust.

It was 7:30 A.M. by the time they reached the Hessian encampment and heard the German sentry's cry: "*Der Feind! Herans! Herans!*" ("The enemy! Get up! Get up!").

Rall did his best to rally his men, but was soon mortally wounded, and the Battle of Trenton, between a "defeated" army and some of the best troops of Europe, was over, according to some, in just under two hours. Others say it lasted little more than half an hour. Of the 1,200 Hessians engaged, 106 were killed or wounded and the rest captured, along with sorely needed equipment and stores. Washington's forces had suffered no more than four wounded, and some historians believe that no American was killed, while others report two killed in action and two frozen to death. With this victory, Trenton was redeemed and, with it, the revolution saved.

Woodrow Wilson and World War I (1917)

THE DECISION TO BECOME A WORLD POWER

There's an old saying," John F. Kennedy remarked on April 21, 1961, when he accepted responsibility for the collapse of the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, "that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." Woodrow Wilson knew he was taking a great risk in joining the catastrophe of the Great War in April 1917, and, like JFK some forty-four years later, he was willing to assume responsibility for the decision. Of course, unlike Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs fiasco, America's entry into World War I is generally counted a triumph. The nation entered the war at a low point for the Allies, who, exhausted and all but blinded white by three years of stalemated slaughter, were reeling under the blows of a series of desperate German offensives. The arrival of some two million fresh troops—with millions more available after them—turned

<p>1. On paper how many men did Washington have in his army? How many did he actually have? What was their condition?</p>	
<p>2. Why was Howe's (British) soldiers spread so thinly across New Jersey?</p>	
<p>3. Where were the German Hessians stationed? What were they known for?</p>	
<p>4. What kind of constant state of warfare was New Jersey in? Was it effective?</p>	
<p>5. What three things was Washington occupied with in the middle of December?</p>	
<p>6. What were Reed's recommendations to Washington?</p>	
<p>7. How did Washington make his decision to try to win?</p>	
<p>8. What was the password that Washington's doctor discovered the night before the attack?</p>	
<p>9. How many German's were killed and captured? How many Americans?</p>	