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First in War -

## **A review of *Washington's Crossing* by David Hackett Fischer; and *Valley Forge Winter: Civilians and Soldiers in War* by Wayne Bodle**

The academic history profession is in a heap of trouble. Many historians have lost the ability to write clearly about important topics. Instead, they write for their peers on ever more obscure issues--"more and more about less and less," as James McPherson has put it. Additionally, impelled by a 1960s' mindset, many academic historians see their job as "debunking myths." In some cases, such debunking is necessary, but all too often, the goal seems to be to expose all that has gone before, especially if it involves the United States, as "a record of crime and folly."

Fortunately, there are many historians who resist this approach. They are capable of challenging the conventional wisdom when necessary, but they keep their eyes on what is important and expand our knowledge rather than constrict it. Two such excellent new books are examples of what historians can accomplish: *Washington's Crossing* by the eminent David Hackett Fischer, and *Valley Forge Winter* by Wayne Bodle. Both works are examples of what has been called the "new military history," an approach that places war and warfare into its social and political context.

*Washington's Crossing* begins by confronting an example of the sort of historical iconoclasm that characterizes so much of current historical writing. The iconography being "deconstructed" in this case is Emmanuel Leutze's splendid painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. On a National Public Radio broadcast in 2002, a commentator claimed that *Washington Crossing the Delaware* bore little resemblance to "historical reality" and cited many examples of the painting's "historical flaws" to support her argument. Fischer takes such an approach to task, writing that while the commentator might have been right about some of the details (though wrong about others) she had missed the "accuracy of its major themes." Had she and others like her done so, he observes, they might have discovered "that the larger ideas in Emmanuel Leutze's art are true to the history that inspired it."

Every schoolchild used to know the story of Washington's crossing. In July 1776, the Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence. But the British, having evacuated Boston the previous winter, now executed "the largest projection of seaborne power ever attempted by a European state" up to that time, as 100 ships carrying 23,000 British regulars and 10,000 Germans descended on New York Harbor. During the summer, this force under General William Howe repeatedly defeated the Continental army under George Washington, driving the Americans first from Brooklyn, then from the rest of Long Island, and finally from Manhattan. But the "cataract of disaster" did not end there. The British also seized most of New Jersey and Rhode Island. By December, the "Glorious Cause" of American independence was in jeopardy as Howe drove Washington south toward the Delaware River. There was panic in Philadelphia.

But Howe, whose major shortcoming during the summer and fall had been overcautiousness, now made an error that undid all he had accomplished. Giving in to his more aggressive

subordinates, he authorized an advance to the Delaware River, thereby overextending his forces. Washington launched a brilliant but risky counterstroke, crossing the Delaware on Christmas night to attack a Hessian garrison at Trenton. Surprise was complete and the American victories at Trenton, along with a subsequent one at Princeton, saved the Revolution. In less than two weeks, an army on the verge of disintegration won two unexpected victories and revived a cause teetering on the verge of extinction. The barely flickering flame of liberty burst forth anew. Although it took another seven years of hard fighting to vindicate by arms, the cause of American Independence, Trenton represented a decisive turning point of the war.

But as Fischer points out, this is only the tip of the iceberg (no pun intended). The "larger idea" that informed Leutze's painting--and the real measurement of Washington's greatness--was Washington's ability to forge unity from diversity. This wasn't as easy as it may seem to us today; we are used to thinking of America during the late-18th century as essentially homogeneous, comprising people almost exclusively from the British Isles. According to the conventional wisdom, ethnic "diversity" came about later when large-scale immigration from non-English areas of the world took off after the Civil War. This is misleading.

As Fischer demonstrated in his earlier masterpiece, *Albion's Seed*, the country that became the United States was settled by four distinct groups from the British Isles. The first wave of immigration comprised small freeholders who came from East Anglia to Massachusetts Bay. For the most part, these settlers embraced the Reformation and tended to challenge established power, whether royal or ecclesiastical. The second wave was composed primarily of fugitives from the Civil War: Cavaliers and the prosperous gentry of the south of England who moved to the Tidewater of Virginia. The next was the migration of Quakers and other pietists from the midlands to Delaware Bay and Pennsylvania. The last saw Scottish and Scots-Irish "border-men" relocate in the highlands of America.

As Fischer makes clear, these groups brought their often conflicting folkways from England to America and were not necessarily predisposed to working together, even during a time of emergency. The New Englanders distrusted the Virginians. The Virginians distrusted the New Englanders. Both distrusted the Quakers. And the highlanders distrusted everyone.

To Fischer's way of thinking, Washington's great accomplishment was to forge an army out of such disparate groups. To do so, Washington had to overcome his own prejudices. In the beginning, he had little good to say about the "levelling spirit" of New England, where "the principles of democracy so universally prevail." He disdained the New England soldiery for their laxity and ill-discipline. "They are an exceeding dirty and nasty people," he concluded. But he adapted to circumstances, coming to trust such New Englanders as Henry Knox and Nathaniel Green, and adapting his aristocratic virtues to the realities of an emerging democratic regime.

For Fischer, the historical truth that Leutze's painting reveals is that Washington forged unity out of diversity. Thus the painting can be said to represent a microcosm of the Revolution as a whole. "Washington's small boat," writes Fischer, "is crowded with thirteen men. Their dress tells us that they are soldiers from many parts of America, and each of them has a story that is revealed by a few strokes of the artist's brush." In the boat with Washington and Lieutenant James Monroe "holding a big American flag upright against the storm" we find a New England seaman of African descent, a recent Scottish immigrant, "hard-faced western

riflemen," farmers from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and merchants from Baltimore. Fischer writes that "the artist invites us to see each of these soldiers as an individual but he also reminds us that they are all in the same boat, working desperately together against the wind and current. He has given them a common sense of mission, and in the stormy sky above he has painted a bright prophetic star, shining through a veil of cloud." Thus Leutze captured the "larger ideas" of the Revolution that the NPR commentator missed.

But Washington's Crossing is not a book about art history. It is an outstanding account of a critical campaign in the war that established the American Republic. After all, the principles of the Revolution had to be vindicated on the field of battle. And the army that Washington forged from such diverse groups had to defeat the most powerful military and naval power of the time.

In the course of doing so, Washington also created a uniquely American "way of war" including an approach to combat, decision-making, and civil-military relations that still guides us today. For instance, Fischer nicely contrasts the approaches to planning that characterized Cornwallis and Washington. Though the former was an able, intelligent, and competent commander "of high principle and serious purpose," he was less likely than Washington to solicit the opinions of his subordinates when drafting his plans.

Thus before the battle of Princeton, "Cornwallis imposed his plan from the top down, against the judgment of able inferiors" while "Washington, in his council of war, welcomed the judgments of others and presided over an open process of discovery that yielded yet another opportunity." Washington adapted to the realities of war in North America while his otherwise able opponents failed to do so. "He was quick to modify his plans with changing circumstances and adapted more easily than his opponents. Washington was a man of steadfast principle but also a military opportunist." Although Fischer vindicates a more traditional rendering of Washington and the Revolution, he still debunks a number of misconceptions about the campaign. The Americans were not poorly armed. Indeed, they possessed more artillery than their adversaries in both battles of Trenton and the fight at Princeton. On the other hand, Washington's victory at Trenton did not come about because he caught the Hessians recovering from drunken Christmas revelry, or because their commander, Colonel Rall, was incompetent. In fact, the Hessians had been exhausted by constant guerrilla attacks and Rall was an excellent soldier. This of course enhances rather than diminishes the American victory.

Wayne Bodle's Valley Forge Winter nicely complements Washington's Crossing. While iconoclastic in one sense, Valley Forge Winter actually makes Washington and the American army look better than does the conventional story of Valley Forge. Bodle aims to demonstrate that what "everyone knows" about the travails of Washington's army during the winter of 1777-78 is not altogether correct. The conventional wisdom holds that the winter encampment at Valley Forge was the turning point of the war, providing the crucible for the transformation of a ragged, ill-equipped, and starving rabble into an effective military instrument of national policy, capable of holding its own in the open field against disciplined British regulars.

Most examinations of Valley Forge have looked at the encampment in isolation. Most of the iconography of Valley Forge has arisen explicitly from this lack of social, political, and military context. Thus we have Washington praying alone in the snow for the deliverance of

the army; his hungry, freezing Continental soldiers huddling around their camp fires deep in the isolated Pennsylvania wilderness, while Howe and his redcoats made merry in the rebel capital of Philadelphia; and Baron von Steuben whipping an ill-disciplined rabble into a real army.

In contrast, Bodle places Valley Forge within its proper context: the nine-month campaign in the Middle States that began when Howe invaded Pennsylvania in the fall of 1777. Philadelphia fell after Washington failed to turn Howe back at Brandywine and Germantown. What then should the Americans do during the winter? Some counseled retreat to the interior, others a more aggressive posture that would keep the pressure on Howe.

Washington decided to take up winter quarters at Valley Forge, a defensible position where the army could be provisioned but close enough to Philadelphia to enable Washington to act with "celerity" in response to Howe's movements. Valley Forge was anything but isolated. Indeed, the choice of Valley Forge placed Washington and his army in a diverse and divided region, affected by the conflicts Fischer illuminated in *Albion's Seed*.

While the army faced shortages, it was not in its death throes. As Bodle puts it, the army's situation was less desperate than "desperate as usual." He claims that Washington overstated the adversity that the army faced primarily to galvanize Congress and impel that body to action.

Finally, Bodle contends that Steuben's contributions have been exaggerated. In fact, he claims, the army had already evolved into a more effective fighting force before the encampment at Valley Forge, having fought quite well at Brandywine and Germantown. Steuben merely honed its skills.

For Bodle, the two most important contributions of the Valley Forge experience were 1) that it set a precedent for future civil-military relations, both between Washington and Congress and between the army and civilians; and 2) that it adumbrated the strategic posture Washington would adopt for the remainder of the war in the north. When Howe abandoned Philadelphia and fell back on New York, Washington positioned his army where it could respond no matter what Howe did.

Washington always sought a position that was easily defended, easily re-supplied, and most importantly, astride Howe's communications. No matter where Howe moved, Washington could counter his thrust by taking advantage of interior lines of operation. Thus the experience of the winter of 1777-78 "forged a temporal--and especially a spatial--template for the rest of the war in the north." There is a tendency to treat the outcome of events as inevitable. Since we know how things turned out, we conclude that they could not have turned out any other way. But history is not predetermined. Indeed, there would seem to be an infinite number of possible outcomes, all dependent on prior events.

The War for American Independence is a case in point. Its outcome was far from inevitable. Washington was not infallible. He made mistakes, especially early in the war. Many of these, especially during the Long Island campaign of 1776, could have been disastrous to the cause of American independence. Additionally, one can point to any number of small events that could have changed the results of the war.

**But although one can argue that, even with Washington, America might have failed to win its independence, could America have won it without Washington? I would argue that the answer is no.**

**Many factors contributed to America's success in gaining its independence. But Washington's often-denigrated abilities as a strategist were certainly one of the most important. He kept the political object foremost in his considerations. He examined his alternatives in terms of the whole strategic picture. Learning from his early mistakes, he constantly adapted his strategy to the circumstances. Recognizing the defects of his tactical instrument, he never asked too much of it. These are the marks of a great strategist and help explain why Washington was indeed "first in war." Victory was necessary for all that followed.**