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THE DARK DAYS OF DECEMBER

By Nathan W. Dickerson

David Hackett Fischer's book *Washington's Crossing*, published in 2004, focuses on the days leading up to and following the Battle of Trenton and reveals the battle's importance in the creation of the United States. Fischer's goal in writing *Washington's Crossing* is to shine a new light on the revival of the American cause in the days leading up to the battle and to highlight the overall importance this relatively small engagement had on the larger picture of American independence.

Fischer's theory revolves around a belief that the choices and events that had occurred previous to the battle set the stage for it to be a major turning point in the war. In the opening portion of *Washington's Crossing*, Fischer uses the book to show his readers where both armies were, physically and mentally, leading up to the battle in December of 1776. Fischer particularly emphasizes the low morale of Washington's army after the many defeats in the New York campaign. At this stage of the war, it appeared as if Washington's army would not be destroyed by the British, but rather by the New Year and the end of his men's enlistments.¹

Fischer highlights key points that would come into effect as the Battle of Trenton drew nearer. He alludes to the confusion and lack of organization in the Colonial army in the months leading up to the Battle of Trenton during the New York campaign. He shows how faulty intelligence played a major role in Washington's tactical mistakes in battle. On the other side of the battlefield, Fischer relates General Howe's conservative strategy to the underwhelming success of Washington's army by pointing out that Howe's strategy was preventing Washington from maximizing on the strengths of his army in a manner that would give him the upper hand.²

A stirring began amongst the American people in December 1776, as Washington's army sat opposite the British Army on the banks of the Delaware River. This stirring was triggered by the words of a man named Thomas Paine. Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, the pamphlet

¹ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 202.

² Fischer, 77.

that brought the Continental Congress to the doorstep of declaring independence triggered this stirring by writing another pamphlet. This pamphlet, *American Crisis*, pushed Congress one step closer to freedom.³ Paine's message in *American Crisis* called for the spirit present at the battles of Lexington and Concord to rise up again and take arms against the British tyrants. This call to arms created a spark that would ignite an impassioned fervor throughout the American movement.

It is here that Fischer reveals the missing piece of American folklore from the winter of 1776. Fischer relates that while the battle on Christmas day become the turning point of the war, it was the revival of the revolutionary spirit in days prior that would allow Washington to seize momentum and charge forward.⁴ The Continental Congress saw a need to change of direction of the war. Until this point, Congress intervened in the everyday operations of the war, and by doing so, greatly hindered Washington's ability to control his army. Congress created the concept of civilian oversight with military command to correct this problem.⁵ This gave Washington the ability to run the Army in a way that better fit the method in which he was going to command it. It was because of these changes that a new national army was formed.⁶ A few months prior to Trenton, Congress gave Washington permission to raise new forces. Now, with the changes made to the structure of the army by Congress and with Americans across the Colonies feeling the urgency presented by Paine, the ranks grew and morale shifted.⁷ Washington restructured his army then reformed it in a manner which that provided better organization and stronger leadership than had been present in the New York campaign. Out of the defeat and chaos of the New York campaign rose a desperation that revived the Revolution. Now Washington needed an opportunity to capitalize on this new fervor and solidify the American cause.

In mid-December, Washington began forming a plan. Drawing on the enemy intelligence his spies provided him, Washington chose to attack the Hessian troops at Trenton, the weakest enemy outpost along the Delaware River. On Christmas morning of 1776, Washington's men crossed the Delaware River. Washington's men faced great difficulties. But due to the

³ Fischer, 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

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better organization and stronger leadership instituted after the New York campaign, Washington's soldiers remained steadfast and pushed through to Trenton where they forced the Hessian troops to retreat and then surrender.

Washington took this victory at Trenton and capitalized on it, turning it into a twelve-week campaign culminating in a victory at Princeton. From these victories rose the new national army as ranks swelled and morale soared. The revival of the revolutionary spirit leading up to Trenton did not open the door for victory it simply gave Washington the opportunity that General Howe had been alluding him, and he capitalized on it.

In this book, David Hackett Fischer takes an old story from the American history books and redefines it. He provides a reason for what has long been seen as simply a miracle, and paints an even greater picture of its importance. Fischer defends his thesis well and backs up his points with solid background information, especially in regard to why the Battle of Trenton played such an important role in the outcome of the war. Fischer goes into detail on the mindset of Washington's army and how the revival of the revolutionary spirit changed the course of the war. By showing the impact that the revival of the revolutionary spirit had on the morale of the colonies, as well as the impact it had on the physical structure of the army, Fischer accomplishes his goal of shining a light on the days leading up to the Battle of Trenton. Fischer effectively answers questions of how a defeated and tired army could dismantle well-trained mercenaries, without making faulty statements about the Hessians' potential drunkenness as others have done. Fischer takes a unique approach to historical writing by adding in a number of paintings based on moments from the Battle of Trenton and Princeton as well as maps. He even provides a lengthy appendix to help his readers better understand his research and theory. This book would be a fascinating read for anyone who enjoys discovering a new twist on an old story, or who loves the adventure of a thrilling historical narrative.