

1776

Measured by the size of its importance to those fighting for the Cause of America, those everywhere in the country who saw Washington and his army as the one means of deliverance of American independence and all that was promised by the Declaration of Independence, Trenton was the first great cause for hope, a brave and truly "brilliant" stroke.

From the last week of August to the last week of December, the year 1776 had been as dark a time as those devoted to the American cause had ever known-indeed, as dark a time as any in the history of the country. And suddenly, miraculously it seemed, that had changed because of a small band of determined men and their leader.

A century later, Sir George Otto Trevelyan would write in a classic study of the American Revolution, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting effects upon the history of the world."

Closer to the moment, Abigail Adams wrote to her friend Mercy Otis Warren, "I am apt to think that our later misfortunes have called out the hidden excellencies of our commander-in-chief." "'Affliction is the good man's shining time,' "she wrote, quoting a favorite line from the English poet Edward Young.

Mercy Warren, the wife of James Warren and an author, would write in her own history of the American Revolution that there were perhaps "no people on earth in whom a spirit of enthusiastic zeal is so readily kindled, and burns so remarkably, as among Americans. The energetic operation of this sanguine temper was never more remarkably exhibited than in the change instantaneously wrought in the minds of men, by the capture of Trenton at so unexpected a moment. From the state of mind bordering on despair, courage was invigorated, every countenance brightened."

With the New Year, news arrived from England that on October 31 in London, His Majesty King George III had once again ridden in splendor from St. James's Palace to Westminster to address the opening of Parliament on the still-distressing war in America.

Nothing could have afforded me so much satisfaction [said the King] as to have been able to inform you . . . that my unhappy people [in America], recovered from their delusion, had delivered themselves from the oppression of their leaders and returned to their duty. But so daring and desperate is the spirit of those leaders, whose object has always been dominion and power, that they have now openly renounced all allegiance to the Crown, and all political connection with this country...and have presumed to set up their rebellious confederacies for independent states. If their treason be suffered to take root, much mischief must grow from it.

Another military campaign would be undertaken in America.

The same Whig leaders in Parliament spoke out as they had before, ardently denouncing the "wicked war." Lord Germain, in response, said the army in America would be reinforced. And as it had before, in what seemed the long-ago October of 1775, the Parliament approved the King's policy by an overwhelming margin.

When, in March 1777, the news of Trenton reached England, it was said (in the London General Evening Post and elsewhere) that the defeat of the Hessians, while "disagreeable," was "more than counter-balanced" by the capture of General Lee. Lord Germain saw at once that the importance of the news was the effect it would have on American opinion. Still, he had no doubt that the rebel army was all but finished.

In New Jersey the fighting would continue sporadically as winter wore on. The war itself would continue, endlessly it seemed to many. In all, it would be another six and a half years before the Treaty of Paris ending the war was signed in 1783.

Financial support from France and the Netherlands, and military support from the French army and navy, would play a large part in the outcome. But in the last analysis it was Washington and the army that won the war for American independence. The fate of the war and the revolution rested on the army. The Continental Army not the Hudson River or the possession of New York or Philadelphia was the key to victory. And it was Washington who held the army together and gave it "spirit" through the most desperate of times.

He was not a brilliant strategist or tactician, not a gifted orator, not an intellectual. At several crucial moments he had shown marked indecisiveness. He had made serious mistakes in judgment. But experience had been his great teacher from boyhood, and in this his greatest test, he learned steadily from experience. Above all, Washington never forgot what was at stake and he never gave up.

Again and again, in letters to Congress and to his officers, and in his general orders, he had called for perseverance - for "perseverance and spirit," for "patience and perseverance;" for "unremitting courage and perseverance." Soon after the victories of Trenton and Princeton, he had written: "A people unused to restraint must be led, they will not be drove." Without Washington's leadership and unrelenting perseverance, the revolution almost certainly would have failed. As Nathanael Greene foresaw as the war went on, "He will be the deliverer of his own country."

The war was a longer, far more arduous, and more painful struggle than later generations would understand or sufficiently appreciate. By the time it ended, it had taken the lives of an estimated 25,000 Americans, or roughly 1 percent of the population. In percentage of lives lost, it was the most costly war in American history, except for the Civil War.

The year 1776, celebrated as the birth year of the nation and for the signing of the Declaration of Independence, was for those who carried the fight for independence forward a year of all-too-few victories, of sustained suffering, disease, hunger, desertion, cowardice, disillusionment, defeat, terrible discouragement, and fear, as they would never forget, but also of phenomenal courage and bedrock devotion to country, and that too, they would never forget.

Especially for those who had been with Washington and who knew what a close call it was at the beginning - how often circumstance, storms, contrary winds, the oddities or strengths of individual character had made the difference - the outcome seemed little short of a miracle.