The large young man gazed intently at the point where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers — the "Forks of the Ohio" — joined to form the mighty fluid avenue of advance into the Ohio country. It was 23 November 1753, and George Washington was on a mission for Governor Robert Dinwiddie to determine if the hostile French intended to show a permanent interest in the "Forks," and, if so, if it were feasible for the English colonists of Virginia to erect a fort there or nearby first.¹

With a wisdom far more mature than his twenty-one years might indicate, Washington reported perspicaciously his impressions of the locality.² This demonstration of the young Virginia officer's good eye and judgment of terrain would be repeated in the Trenton-Princeton operation of 1776-1777 — the Revolutionary War's crucial campaign. As Douglas Southall Freeman states it, Washington "was learning on the frontier what he could not have acquired in any town on the narrow coast where England's rule might be challenged."³

So it was not as a stranger to southwestern Pennsylvania that Colonel George Washington returned to this area in 1755 as a volunteer on the staff of English General Edward Braddock in the latter's ill-starred campaign to capture Fort Duquesne from the French and Indians. It was here, at the Battle of the Monongahela, that Washington demonstrated the courage and resoluteness that were to mark his conduct at Trenton some twenty-one years later. In weakened condition from an illness, and barely able to keep his saddle,⁴ Washington,

An address delivered at a meeting of the Society on February 22, 1965. Dr. Hassler is Professor of American History at The Pennsylvania State University.—Ed.

³ Freeman, George Washington, I, 289.
⁴ Ibid., II, 78.
when Braddock's column was intercepted and cut up by the French and Indians, strove heroically to check the British rout, and succeeded in extricating the remnants of the force. During the mêlée, he had two horses shot from under him and his uniform was pierced by four bullets, an experience that was to be almost duplicated at Princeton in 1777. "I expected," said a man near Washington, "every moment to see him fall." He was conspicuous, declared another officer present, for "the greatest courage and resolution." Although a member of a defeated expedition, Washington, at Monongahela, "had set an example of courage and diligence in action" that was to stand him in good stead in later trying situations.

There was one more instructive training ground for Washington's later services in the Revolution. This was his distinctive participation in the difficult but successful 1758 campaign of John Forbes for the capture of Fort Duquesne. Although still but twenty-six years of age, the young Virginia officer showed "his skill in dealing with most of those in authority." In the events leading up to the capture of the fort from the French and Indians, Washington demonstrated "sound conceptions [of strategy] and just appreciation of the value of the wisely timed offensive." "Men took it for granted, if they knew him at all, that he would discharge the duty entrusted to him . . . would do it so certainly that doubt might be dismissed."

After the capture of the stronghold that was renamed Fort Pitt, Washington, though of an acquisitive nature and never disinterested in wealth, refused any salary in 1759 from the colony of Virginia for his services — an unselfish practice that he would continue through the eight years of the Revolution. Upon the success of the Forbes expedition, the measure of Washington's ability to arouse the enthusiasm and win the trust of his subordinates — absolute essentials of military leadership — was shown by a testimony signed by his

7 Freeman, George Washington, II, 73.
8 Ibid., 99.
9 Ibid., 385.
10 Ibid., 380.
11 Ibid., 383.
12 Ibid., 399.
twenty-seven company officers. In the rather florid language of the day, it read as follows:

In our earliest infancy you took us under your tuition, trained us up in the practice of that discipline which alone can constitute good troops, from the punctual observance of which you never suffered the least deviation . . . . Your steady adherence to impartial justice, your quick discernment and invariable regard to merit, wisely intended to inculcate those genuine sentiments of true honor and passion for glory, from which the great military achievements have been derived, first heightened our natural emulation and our desire to excel. How much we improved by those regulations and your own example, with what cheerfulness we have encountered the several toils, especially while under your particular direction, we submit to yourself, and flatter ourselves that we have in a great measure answered your expectations . . . . In you we place the most implicit confidence . . . . the man we know and love.14

These were, indeed, sentiments that were to be repeated often during the darkest days of the war for American independence. Washington was only twenty-six when he helped Forbes capture the fort at the forks of the Ohio; but his conduct here, and the rhetorical eulogies of his young officers, were to be echoed frequently down the perilous years of destiny during the 1770's and '80's. As historian George Bancroft phrased it, "... never in the tide of time has any man lived who had in so great a degree the almost divine faculty to command the confidence of his fellow-men and rule the willing." 15

When the revolution against British rule erupted in 1775, Washington was from the first the preponderant and then the unanimous choice for commander of the American Continental Army.16 Reluctantly accepting "the momentous duty," Washington pledged that he would "exert every power I possess . . . for the Support of the glorious Cause," but expressed "great distress from a consciousness that my abilities and Military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important Trust . . . . and Command I am honoured with." 17

At first, victory crowned his efforts against the naval and military might of England. After a skillful siege of many months, Washington forced the British to evacuate Boston on St. Patrick's Day, 1776.18 Here, as previously demonstrated at Fort Duquesne, the General revealed certain characteristics that were to prove invaluable in the decisive campaign later that year. "The man possessed," writes Willard M. Wallace, "an extraordinary singleness of purpose and a dogged

15 Bancroft, History of the United States, VII, 400.
18 See Richard Frothingham, History of the Siege of Boston (Boston, 1851).
determination to carry out his design notwithstanding the obstacles created by nature, the enemy, or his own army." 19

But after the capture of Boston, Washington and the American cause fell on evil days. When General Sir William Howe returned with a veteran army of some 32,000 men to capture New York City, Washington, with but 14,000 effectives, determined to defend Manhattan by standing and fighting at Brooklyn Heights. With a green army and many incompetent officers, and still inexperienced himself in handling comparatively large numbers in a stand-up battle, Washington was defeated in the Battle of Long Island in August 1776, and managed only by dexterous efforts to withdraw his army to Manhattan Island. 20 Then, retreating northward up the island, the American commander exposed himself recklessly in the futile attempt to check the enemy's forward movement at Kip's Bay, 21 succeeded only in repulsing the British for the moment in his capable defense of Harlem Heights, 22 and just managed to slow temporarily Howe's turning movement at White Plains. 23

On Manhattan Island, along the eastern bank of the Hudson River at a place called Jeffery's Hook, stood Fort Washington. 24 When General Washington returned to that vicinity on 14 November from Peekskill, he discovered that one of his most trusted subordinates, General Nathanael Greene, instead of evacuating troops and supplies from the endangered fort, had thrown additional men into the place, voiced confidence in the strength of the fort, and now urged the Continental commander to defend it. 25 After several inspection visits to the fort, Washington, for one of the few times during his military career, vacillated painfully. Congress had passed a resolution asking that he hold Fort Washington so that, with the help of Fort Lee across the river, British ships might be denied passage up the

23 Otto Hufeland, *Westchester County During the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New York, 1926), passim.
24 For a convenient map, see Freeman, *George Washington*, IV, 244.
Hudson. Reluctantly acceding to Greene's entreaties, Washington suffered the fort to be attacked, and he must bear a share of the onus for the resulting capture of the place by the enemy. Although several of the British assaults were repelled, the American garrison, crowded into a small area where resistance was impossible, was compelled to surrender.

The loss of Fort Washington, writes Claude H. Van Tyne, "was one of the severest blows suffered by the American army during the war." The casualties Washington's army suffered at the fort were staggering: 53 men killed, 96 wounded, and no less than 2,837 prisoners — a total loss of nearly 3,000 men. In addition, enormous quantities of badly needed supplies had been captured by the British: 146 cannon; 12,000 artillery projectiles; 2,800 muskets; 400,000 musket cartridges; plus entrenching tools, tents, etc. Enemy losses were 78 killed, 374 wounded, and 6 missing. "From every point of view," writes Francis Vinton Greene, "it was a terrible disaster" — a view corroborated by Christopher Ward. Yet, in his relations with the errant and now grieving General Greene, Washington never showed a lack of confidence or a trace of criticism, and that worthy grew to be one of Washington's most trusted and capable subordinates during the rest of the war.

But the catastrophe could not be minimized. "The loss of so many men and munitions in the forts," asserts Willard Wallace, "was a body blow to Patriot hopes . . . . The outlook for the Americans was black." Fort Washington was believed to have been a place of such great natural strength that a contemptuous British officer exclaimed, "Fortunately for us, the Americans behaved as dastardly as usual."

26 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 139.  
33 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 193.  
34 See George W. Greene, Life of Nathanael Greene (New York, 1867-1871), passim.  
35 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 123.  
36 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 140.
Ever faithful in his representations to the Continental Congress, Washington admitted to his civilian superiors that "the situation of our affairs is truly critical." A little later, he evaluated circumstances thusly: "In a word, . . . if every nerve is not strained to recruit the new army with all possible expedition, I think the game is pretty near up, . . . "

Having captured Fort Washington so easily, General Howe determined to follow up his success. "The way was now open," John C. Miller writes, "for the British to invade New Jersey where on level ground their immense superiority in men and matériel might be fully realized." Consequently, Howe threw five thousand men under the command of the energetic Lord Charles Cornwallis across the Hudson on 18 November in an endeavor to surprise Greene's garrison and seize Fort Lee. But Washington had learned the lesson of Fort Washington, and wisely ordered Greene to withdraw his two thousand troops from Fort Lee and to cross the Hackensack River into New Jersey. However, a complete escape from Fort Lee was not effected. A goodly number of Greene's men plundered the sutlers' liquor supply and were so inebriated that they could not march. Among the booty captured there by the enemy were 30 cannon; 300 badly needed tents, blankets, and camp equipment; 1,000 barrels of flour (the gunpowder had fortunately been removed). American casualties were 8 or 10 men killed and 105 captured.

The Continentals' retreat continued across the Passaic River to Newark, where a short halt was made. Wrote one American soldier sardonically, "... no lads ever shewed greater activity in retreating than we have . . . . Our soldiers are the best fellows in the world at this business." Washington realized that he had in his overall com-

37 Jared Sparks (ed.), The Writings of George Washington (Boston, 1858), IV, 190.
38 Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 398.
39 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 140.
40 5 Force (ed.), American Archives, III, 1058.
41 Frothingham, Washington, 158.
43 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 158.
46 The American Journal of Ambrose Serle (San Marino, Cal., 1940), 144; 5 Force (ed.), American Archives, III, 861, 1058.
47 Frothingham, Washington, 158.
mand, besides the 5,400 men with him at Newark, some 5,500 men under General Charles Lee at New Castle, and General William Heath's 3,200 at Peekskill. But he knew also that, in light of expiring enlistments, he would have with him, as of 30 November, only 2,000 soldiers of the Continental Army to oppose Howe and Cornwallis west of the Hudson. And as the frequent cold November rains continued to fall, the American army continued to dwindle in numbers and in strength. Washington realistically appreciated the terrible situation confronting him, nor did he have any delusions as to the cohesiveness of many of his troops. The disgrace at Fort Washington, he contended — as at Long Island, Kip's Bay, and White Plains — was "the story of men who would not stand up and fight for their freedom." Many of his militia officers, he felt, were "not fit to be shoe blacks." On 19 November, thinking of Congress' reluctance to shift from short- to long-term enlistments, Washington wrote as follows to his brother, John Augustine, "... it is impossible under such a variety of distressing circumstances to conduct matters agreeably to public expectation, or even of those who employ me, as they will not make proper allowances for the difficulties their own errors have occasioned."

Washington was awaiting at Newark the arrival of Lee's forces which he had left east of the Hudson. He had sent Lee a series of messages urging him to march swiftly to unite with the American army now striving to defend New Jersey and Philadelphia. But Lee dragged his feet disgracefully. Second-in-command of the Patriot army, Lee had a high opinion of his own abilities and a low one of Washington's; besides, he nursed hopes, apparently, of getting an independent command of his own, and of soon replacing Washington as commander-in-chief. As Van Tyne states, "Charles Lee was vain-glorious and wilful to the point of treason." So Lee moved at the

50 Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 245.
51 Diary of Frederick Mackenzie (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), I, 114.
53 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 255.
55 Ibid., 245-46.
57 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 152; Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 159; Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 288.
58 Frothingham, Washington, 159.
59 Van Tyne, American Revolution, 122.
proverbial snail's pace toward Morristown, his continued absence forcing Washington to abandon Newark on 28 November and withdraw to the south across the Raritan, the bridge over which was destroyed in an effort to delay the English and Hessians.  

Cornwallis, ordered by Howe to drive Washington beyond New Brunswick, stopped for five days at that place to feed and rest his troops. Aware, even if he fell back across the Delaware, that the river might freeze over and enable the enemy to continue his pursuit, Washington flung forth the challenge, "I will not despair." "Defeat," he declared, "is only a reason for exertion." The colony of Maryland, he learned, was ready to renounce the Declaration of Independence and seek an accommodation with the British. An Anglo-American named Thomas Paine, marching with the Continentals, then penned these immortal words: "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country . . . ." Washington had Paine's clarion call for support for the cause read to his entire army in vain hopes that most of the men whose terms of enlistment were expiring would stay on a little longer.

Howe joined Cornwallis on 6 December, and the augmented British-Hessian army pressed forward, impelling Washington to retreat to Princeton. "If the Americans made a stand," asserts Wallace, "they were too small in numbers to succeed, for the Pennsylvanians had sent only two thousand men and, to Washington's bitter resentment, the Jersey militia had scarcely raised a helping hand." Although he called upon New Jersey farmers to scorch the earth before the invader, they turned out to welcome the British as deliverers. "A large part of the Jerseys," Washington remarked, "have [sic] given every proof of disaffection that they can do." Saying that his "neck

64 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 198.
65 Van Tyne, American Revolution, 44.
66 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 199.
68 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 165.
70 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 123; see also L. Lundin, Cockpit of the Revolution (Princeton, 1940), 143-46.
71 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 145.
72 Ibid.
does not feel as though it was made for a halter," the General was determined, if necessary, to retreat beyond the Alleghenies in Virginia to carry on the struggle.\textsuperscript{73} The American commander owned that he had "not above 3,000 men and they much broken and dispirited," and that, as he phrased it, the country was "almost a dead Flat."\textsuperscript{74} Colonel Joseph Reed, Washington's adjutant general, termed the Patriot force "the wretched remains of a broken army."\textsuperscript{75} In addition, there were no picks or shovels available for entrenching.\textsuperscript{76} Against Washington's less-than-3,000 men, the British had 14,000 veteran soldiers now marching into New Jersey.\textsuperscript{77}

From Princeton, Washington had no alternative, in the face of the unrelenting enemy pressure, but to retreat across the Delaware.\textsuperscript{78} The American leader himself was forward with the pioneers, who were felling trees in an effort to slow the British advance.\textsuperscript{79} As Freeman phrases it, "The ghost of the American Army must be transported across the Delaware and, if possible, must be revived."\textsuperscript{80} Falling back via Trenton, Washington ferried his army across the Delaware on 8 December,\textsuperscript{81} with scarcely 3,000 effective answering the roll call.\textsuperscript{82} Not only was he able to bring all his guns and stores to safety, but he collected practically every boat for seventy miles along the river and brought them to the southwest bank of the Delaware.\textsuperscript{83} This ploy discouraged the British from pursuit when they reached the northeast bank of the river.\textsuperscript{84} But Washington's soldiers were "exhausted, bare-footed and ragged, without medicine or hospitals, they suffered and died by hundreds."\textsuperscript{85}

The seemingly irresistible enemy advance, however, was finally grinding to a halt at the Delaware. Not only had Washington's boat-gathering tactic hampered them in an attempted crossing, but even before that time the felling of trees and destroying of bridges by the Americans slowed the British and Hessians. He "repeatedly deceived

\textsuperscript{73} William Gordon, \textit{History . . . of the United States of America} (London, 1788), II, 354.
\textsuperscript{74} Fitzpatrick (ed.), \textit{Writings of George Washington}, VI, 298. Many of these soldiers' terms of enlistment would end on 31 December 1776.
\textsuperscript{75} Bancroft, \textit{History of the United States}, V, 82.
\textsuperscript{76} Ward, \textit{War of the Revolution}, I, 280.
\textsuperscript{77} Miller, \textit{Triumph of Freedom}, 147, 149; cf. Alden, \textit{American Revolution}, 107.
\textsuperscript{78} Fitzpatrick (ed.), \textit{Writings of George Washington}, VI, 320-22.
\textsuperscript{79} Enoch Anderson, \textit{Personal Recollections . . .} (Wilmington, Del., 1896), 28.
\textsuperscript{80} Freeman, \textit{George Washington}, IV, 275.
\textsuperscript{81} Frothingham, \textit{Washington}, 161.
\textsuperscript{82} 5 Force (ed.), \textit{American Archives}, III, 1035.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid.}, 1027, 1120, 1152.
\textsuperscript{84} Alden, \textit{American Revolution}, 107.
\textsuperscript{85} Miller, \textit{Triumph of Freedom}, 147.
the British into believing that he was planning to make a stand, and the British were 'very Cautious & doubtfull in pursuing.'”

General Howe admitted that Washington's movements were "very extraordinary ... and not a little perplexing." Nor was the lively firing of American artillery across the river any encouragement to the invaders. Howe finally decided to halt his advance at the line of the Delaware and go into winter quarters, with strong garrisons posted at such strategic points to the northeast of the river as Trenton.

Then came shocking news. Charles Lee, who was still dallying in the vicinity of Morristown instead of coming forward to join Washington, was ignominiously captured by the British in the middle of the night at a tavern, and unceremoniously hustled off while still dressed in an elaborate flannel bathrobe. Most Americans lamented his loss. "The struggle for American liberty moved apparently to its last gasp." It was indeed, as Christopher Ward avers, "the darkest hour of the war." Many of the few soldiers remaining with Washington were prostrated by illness. The General wrote that, unless reinforcements came forward quickly, "I think the game is pretty near up." Even John Dickinson, an early espouser of liberty, now reversed himself and, in this crisis, urged peace "before we suffer indescribable calamities." Europe looked upon the American cause as hopeless.

Worse, yet, was to come. Many New Jersey and Pennsylvania farmers and merchants now eagerly sold all kinds of goods to the British, and withheld the same from Washington's soldiers. The American commander furiously denounced these "diabolical and Insidious acts" of the New Jersey Tories, but to no avail. Thousands of colonists, in all walks of life, hastened during the next several weeks to avail themselves of the amnesty offered them on 30 November by

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86 Ibid., 142.
87 Ibid., 137.
88 Ibid., 145.
91 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 162.
94 Ibid., 398.
95 William T. Read, Life and Correspondence of George Reed (Philadelphia, 1870), 253-54.
96 Van Tyne, American Revolution, 124.
97 Ibid., 126.
the Howe brothers in return for taking an oath of allegiance to the British crown. 99 “No man,” said Washington, “ever had a greater choice of difficulties and less means to extricate himself from them.” 100 The British-Hessian officers and men — in a buoyant and aggressive spirit themselves — had little respect for the courage of the American troops, and they had learned from captured dispatches of the miserable condition of Washington’s army and the low morale of his troops. 101 One American soldier exclaimed that “A thick cloud of darkness and gloom covered the land and despair was seen in almost every countenance.” 102 “The British,” wrote another, “will soon have it in their power to vanquish the whole remains of the continental army.” 103 “Ten days more,” Washington proclaimed on 20 December, “will put an end to the existence of our Army.” 104

It was not comforting to the American commander, either, to know that, on 12 December, Congress, after quelling some internal opposition, had fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore. 105 Before leaving, Congress had given Washington “full power to order and direct all things relative to the department and to the operations of war” 106 — thereby making him virtual military dictator for a period of six months. At the same time, Washington was reporting that large numbers of his men were unshod, “many of [them] being entirely naked, and most so thinly clad as to be unfit for service.” 107 Howe and Cornwallis were convinced that Washington’s army was unable to continue the contest, and that the war was over. 108 Howe and Henry Clinton wished to pull the British-Hessian forces back to New Brunswick, but Cornwallis successfully urged that the line of the Delaware be maintained. 109 As Thomas G. Frothingham observes, “… to the mind of Howe, it only remained to go into winter quarters as if in a conquered territory, without a suspicion that it was possible for the

99 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 163; Freeman, George Washington, 276n.
102 Delaware Archives (Wilmington, 1911-1916), III, 1358.
104 R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, Military Heritage of America (New York, 1956), 83.
106 Ibid., VI, 1027.
107 Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 346, 355, 381.
108 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 148.
109 Ibid., 154-55.
defeated Americans to attempt to move against his troops.” 110 “The [British and Hessian] troops will be in perfect security,” Howe proclaimed.111 But as the flame flickered, “The virtues of” Washington, writes Bancroft, “touched the sympathies of [the Continental] officers and men; they bore each other up with perseverance, as if conscious, that, few and wasted as they were, they were yet to save their country.” 112

It seems incredible, even today, across the span of nearly two centuries, that, at this terrible moment, Washington was actually contemplating taking the offensive113 — but it was true! “In retrospect,” R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy write, “it is hard to see how a general in Washington’s circumstances could have considered offensive action . . . . [But] without some sort of dramatic success to electrify the country, and to inspire his troops, he had no hope of holding an army together during the winter, or of recruiting more men before the next spring campaign . . . . Failure, of course, as Washington knew, would mean the end of the Revolution, as well as complete disaster for himself. This, however, would also be the likely consequence of inaction.” 114

But what could be done with the tiny force remaining? Even after being joined by the troops of Horatio Gates and John Sullivan (the latter having taken over command of the troops of the captured Lee), Washington had fewer than 6,000 men,115 and the terms of enlistment of all but 1,400 of these would expire on 31 December.116 On the other side, there were no less than 12,000 enemy troops in the vicinity of Trenton, Princeton, and nearby points.117 The General “even used the authority of Congress . . . to raise troops in person.” 118 In reporting this latter action to the Congress on 20 December, Washington stated, “It may be thought I am going a good deal out of the line of my duty, to adopt these measures, or to advise thus freely. A character to lose,

110 Frothingham, Washington, 163.
112 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 212.
114 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 165-66.
118 Frothingham, Washington, 164.
an estate to forfeit, the inestimable blessings of liberty at stake, and a life devoted, must be my excuse." 119

In making his momentous decision to cross the Delaware on the night of 25 December and assail the enemy in New Jersey, Washington said that "necessity, dire necessity will, nay must, justify [my] attack." 120 And the British played somewhat into the American's hands: Howe himself had returned to New York, to which place Cornwallis had also repaired prior to his anticipated departure on leave for England, leaving the inept General James Grant in command of the scattered British and Hessian garrisons in New Jersey. 121 Howe later acknowledged that his long line from the Hackensack to the Delaware was "rather too extensive." 122 Especially inviting to Washington's attention was the Hessian garrison at Trenton, numbering over 1,400 men, with six guns. 123

The Hessian commander of this nearly deserted village of about 100 houses 124 was Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rall. This capable officer had "distinguished himself for gallantry at White Plains and Fort Washington. His brigade was one of the best in the British service." 125 But now in garrison, Rall "was truculent and cocksure . . . and he was a confirmed drunkard" who was convinced that the Americans were beaten and the war virtually over. 126 He believed that Washington would not dare to try to cross the Delaware and attack him at Trenton, and that if the Continental commander did so, he would never recross it alive. Rall contemptuously termed the American soldiers "country clowns." 127

Washington's "daring and splendid plan" 128 was to have the right wing of his little army cross the Delaware and launch a holding feint against Burlington or Bordentown; in another diversionary effort, the center division was to cross and move directly upon Trenton, the real object of the counterattack; and the left wing — numbering some 2,400 men 129 — under Washington's personal command, was to deliver the main attack by crossing the Delaware above Trenton and

119 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 222.
120 5 Force (ed.), American Archives, III, 376.
121 Ibid., 1318.
122 Ibid., 1317.
123 Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 40; Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 127; Alden, American Revolution, 108.
124 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 155.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 156.
129 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 311.
falling upon its garrison from the north. 130 The British officers had been warned by American deserters of the time and place of Washington’s attack, but thought it likely to be only a small hit-and-run raid, like similar ones that they had recently repelled. 131 “The whole venture was a hazardous operation” 132 — “a desperate idea” 133 — the password of which was, “Victory or Death.” 134 Washington’s order of 25 December to his troops warned that “A profound silence [was] to be enjoined, and no man [was] to quit the ranks on pain of death.” 135

Christmas night was fearfully cold, with a bitter wind that brought a driving snow- and sleet-storm; the Delaware River was a mass of floating blocks of ice. The commanders of the other two American forces which were to make the diversionary attacks felt that it was absolutely impossible to cross the river and gave up their attempts, both believing that Washington would be unable to cross his own force in the face of the cruel elements. 136 “It was,” said a Continental officer present, “as severe a night as ever I saw.” 137

But Washington was undaunted, and “carried out his own assignment perfectly.” 138 He and artillery chief Henry Knox worked feverishly to ready the boats and prepare the crossing. 139 Special fifty-foot boats — called Durham boats — were employed; these were handled by John Glover’s amazing Marbleheaders, who had brilliantly removed Washington’s beaten army from Long Island to Manhattan. 140

The famous crossing of the Delaware was described three days later by Henry Knox in these words: “The floating ice in the river made the labor almost incredible. However, perseverance accomplished what at first seemed impossible. About 2 o’clock [A.M.] the troops were all on the Jersey side; we were then nine miles from the object [Trenton]. The night was cold and stormy; it hailed [and sleeted] with great violence; the troops marched with the most profound silence and good order.” 141

130 Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 293.
131 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 156; Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 297.
132 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 130.
134 Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 166.
135 Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 114.
137 Letters To and From Caesar Rodney, 1756-1784 (Philadelphia, 1933), 150-51.
140 Seymour Dunbar, A History of Travel in America (Indianapolis, 1915), I, 282.
141 Greene, Revolutionary War, 67.
In the grim march to Trenton,\textsuperscript{142} Washington himself was at the head of the column.\textsuperscript{143} "I have never seen Washington so determined as he is now," said an American officer participating in the march. "He is calm and collected, but very determined."\textsuperscript{144} Despite all efforts, the column fell behind time and, contrary to the General's wishes, the force did not arrive in attacking position until after daybreak.\textsuperscript{145} Having had his officers synchronize their watches with his,\textsuperscript{146} Washington expertly coordinated his two-pronged surprise attack on the drowsy but uninebriated\textsuperscript{147} Hessians in Trenton.\textsuperscript{148} In a rolling combat of about an hour,\textsuperscript{149} in which Rall and the Hessians fought back hard,\textsuperscript{150} the Americans, though most of their muskets were too wet to fire, relied upon artillery and the bayonet, and roundly defeated the mercenaries and forced most of them to surrender.\textsuperscript{151} Among the wounded was seventeen-year-old James Monroe;\textsuperscript{152} among the mortally wounded was the gallant Rall.\textsuperscript{153}

The casualties in this "brilliant exploit"\textsuperscript{154} were, on the American side, 2 men frozen to death on the march and 4 or 5 men wounded; on the Hessian side, over 100 were killed and wounded and about a thousand captured, plus the loss of 6 cannon, a thousand muskets, 6 wagons, and 40 horses.\textsuperscript{155} Although Greene probably wished to move directly against the British force at Princeton,\textsuperscript{156} Washington decided that, since his men had been marching and fighting without sleep for 36 to 50 hours,\textsuperscript{157} and since some of them had overimbibed in captured German liquor in Trenton,\textsuperscript{158} it was judicious to withdraw with his prisoners and captured booty to the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware.

\textsuperscript{142} See Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 362; Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 168.
\textsuperscript{143} Freeman, George Washington, IV, 314; Greene, Revolutionary War, 67.
\textsuperscript{144} Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 295.
\textsuperscript{145} Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of Washington, VI, 442.
\textsuperscript{146} Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 375.
\textsuperscript{147} Isaac J. Greenwood (ed.), The Revolutionary Services of John Greenwood . . . (New York, 1922), 37.
\textsuperscript{148} Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 442; Freeman, George Washington, IV, 316n.
\textsuperscript{149} Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 172; Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 158.
\textsuperscript{150} Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 171-72.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Greene, Revolutionary War, 68.
\textsuperscript{153} Frothingham, Washington, 168.
\textsuperscript{154} Van Tyne, American Revolution, 131.
\textsuperscript{156} Greene, Greene, I, 300.
\textsuperscript{157} Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 303.
\textsuperscript{158} Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 206; Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 158.
and this was capably done. Upon his return to the Pennsylvania side, Washington saw that half of his pitifully few men were temporarily incapacitated by the extreme hardships of the Trenton campaign.

Nevertheless, "it was a great victory for the Americans, the more important because it was won at such a crucial time." Washington himself exclaimed, "This is a glorious day for our country . . . !" "Until that hour, the life of the United States flickered like a dying flame." In the most desperate hour of the life of the Army," writes Freeman, "less than a week from its virtual disbandment, the Continentals had won their greatest success." British historian George O. Trevelyan, speaking of the great privations which Washington asked of his soldiers, asserts that "This was a long and a severe ordeal, and yet it may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world." Washington himself wrote, "The behavior of our [troops] in general far exceeded anything seen. It's worth remembering that not one officer or private was known that day to turn his back," and he issued a noble congratulatory order to his men on their extraordinary feat.

"The effect upon the American people was . . . instantaneous," writes Christopher Ward. "From the depths of despair they rose to new confidence. From every direction came news of militiamen on the march to serve for two months, while the new Continental army was being organized." "The country awakened to the belief that its general was a genius." Howe was appalled at the news received from Trenton. He wrote as follows to his civilian superior in London, Lord George Germain: "... the unfortunate and untimely defeat at Trenton has thrown us further back than was at first apprehended." Germain himself summed up the situation by owning that

159 Frothingham, Washington, 168.
161 Ibid., 302.
163 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 235.
164 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 322.
166 Washington to John Pope, 29 Dec. 1776, Chicago Historical Society mss.
168 Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 305.
171 Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 482.
"All our hopes were blasted by the unhappy affair at Trenton." The mastery of the carefully timed offensive, which Washington had learned so thoroughly in Western Pennsylvania in the area around Fort Pitt, was now proving to be of decisive importance in the struggle for American independence.

The British had fallen back a short distance from the Delaware, with a force of about 8,000 stationed at Princeton. With excellent intelligence bringing him accurate information, Washington, after resting his wearied troops several days, recrossed the Delaware back into New Jersey. He was determined to prove that Trenton was not an accident, and that the tide had really turned in his favor. The ice in the river was so bad that it took two days — until 31 December — to get his force across and to the vicinity of Trenton. To keep his own force of some 2,250 together, Washington personally appealed, in a moving speech, to some of his men to stay on. This, the effective efforts of Robert Morris, and Washington's timely offer of a special bounty of ten dollars — approved by Congress despite the exhaustion of money and public credit — helped raise the total force under his command to some 5,000 men, although many of these were absolutely raw, untrained militiamen. The buoyancy and élan of his army in the Trenton area was high, even though food provisions were low. The advancing Americans were hindered by snow up to a depth of six inches.

The British reaction to the disaster at Trenton, and to Washington's new crossing of the Delaware, was swift and incisive. It was a risky venture, this new American incursion into New Jersey; “pru-

172 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 235.
176 Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 461; Greene, Revolutionary War, 70.
177 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 332-33, 338.
179 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 331.
181 Frothingham, Washington, 171.
182 Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 308. This 5,000 man force included Cadwalader's 1,800, and 1,800 more whom Mifflin had sent to Bordentown (Frothingham, Washington, 171).
183 S Force (ed.), American Archives, III, 1487; Greene, Greene, I, 300.
184 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 327-29.
186 Wallace, Appeal to Arms, 131
dence dictated remaining on the west side of the Delaware." 187 It looked as if Washington had "overreached himself." 188 Cornwallis, having given up his leave, hastened to New Brunswick to assume personal command, and promptly ordered the 8,000 British and Hessian troops at Princeton to begin moving toward Trenton. 189 Meantime, a spy had brought Washington a rough but valuable map showing enemy defences, gun positions, and billets at Princeton. 190

Obviously, Washington reasoned, he could not stand and fight the superior enemy in Trenton. 191 So, on the afternoon of 2 January 1777, in a good delaying action, 192 he fell back behind the Assunpink River near the town, and held back the British with artillery fire. 193 But, in the cramped position in which it found itself, Washington's force appeared to be hopelessly trapped; 194 the British generals thought so 195 — so did many Americans! 196 "The moment was critical." 197 But the escape from this impasse was probably known to Washington before he let Cornwallis hem him into such a perilous position. 198 At a secret council of war, 199 the General put forth the bold plan 200 to withdraw around Cornwallis' left from the Assunpink and attack the three British regiments at Princeton, then to move upon New Brunswick, Howe's principal base on the main road from New York to Philadelphia. 201

So, leaving their campfires burning to deceive the British at

188 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 159.
193 Rodney's Diary, 31; Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 450, 466; Greene, Revolutionary War, 70.
194 Alden, American Revolution, 110; Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 159.
196 Stephen Olney, in Catherine R. A. Williams, Biography of Revolutionary Heroes . . . (Providence, R.I., 1839), 193-94; Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 482.
197 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 245.
198 Stryker, Trenton and Princeton, 270-73; Bill, Campaign of Princeton, 90-93; Freeman, George Washington, IV, 345n.
199 Rodney's Diary, 32-33.
Washington's soldiers moved in the "bright, serene . . . extremely cold" morning of 3 January along a rough, freezing road toward Princeton. They had given Cornwallis the slip. At a little before 8:00 A.M., on the road just south of Princeton, the Continentals encountered the 1,200 British troops commanded by the able Colonel Charles Mawhood, who naturally thought that these were fugitive Americans who had just been beaten by Cornwallis at the Assunpink. With this mistaken idea, Mawhood ordered a bayonet charge against Hugh Mercer's brigade. "The sight of the [British] cold steel was as usual too much for [the Continentals]. They broke and retreated in confusion." Mercer himself fell mortally wounded with seven bayonet wounds in his body. Colonel John Haslet, trying to rally the fugitives, fell dead with a bullet in his brain. The American troops fled in utter rout, John Cadwalader's as well as Mercer's now being driven back helplessly. It was another grave crisis.

But then Washington came riding onto the field. "He came," Ward writes, "upon a scene of desperate confusion, Mercer's men and Cadwalader's in disorganized retreat. Waving his hat to the huddled groups as he passed, and calling on them to stand their ground, he dashed to the front, into the hottest fire and within thirty paces of Mawhood's line, to encourage his troops by the force of his own example. The British soldiers were amazed at the sight of this big man on a great white horse so recklessly exposing himself. One of his aides thought to see him fall and covered his eyes to shut out the sight. A volley rang out from the enemy's line. The smoke from it shrouded Washington from all eyes. But when it blew away there he was, unhurt and still calling his men to come on. They did not respond. It seemed that they were completely beaten." But American rein-
forcements suddenly appeared at the last possible moment, and the British were themselves hurled back in defeat. Some of the redcoats were bombarded out of Nassau Hall on the Princeton campus, others surrendered in large numbers, while the remnant fled towards Trenton and New Brunswick. Washington himself led the pursuit for a time, shouting to his comrades-in-arms, "It's a fine fox chase, my boys!" At a cost of some 35 men killed, he had inflicted almost 300 casualties on the British.

Washington had hoped to be able to strike at the British at New Brunswick, but, learning that Cornwallis' superior forces at Trenton and elsewhere were trying to run him down, and observing that his own troops were exhausted from forty hours of marching and fighting, he successfully eluded his pursuers by marching to a safe haven at Morristown via Kingston and Somerset Court House, taking the precaution of destroying the bridges over Millstone River and Stony Creek. American harassment of enemy convoys on the British lines of communication hampered Cornwallis in supplying his superior-numbered forces, and he was obliged to retreat. "Howe was apparently so stupefied at Washington's audacity that he withdrew entirely from New Jersey . . . and made no movements of any importance for nearly six months." It was, indeed, as Freeman avers, "an incredible reversal of the situation that had existed Christmas Day."


217 Ibid., 315.
218 Wilkinson, Memoirs, I, 145; Bill, Campaign of Princeton, 110.
219 Fitzpatrick (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 481.
223 Greene, Revolutionary War, 72.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
226 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 358.
words echoed by Van Tyne and John Alden.  

An enemy officer said that Washington had knocked the British around in New Jersey "as if we had no feelings."  

Francis V. Greene calls it "a supreme effort of genius and daring."  

He goes on to say, "The planning of such an audacious stroke, the skill with which every feature of it was executed with ill-trained, half-clad, and bare-footed troops, the personal gallantry of the commanding general at a critical moment — all denote the great soldier."  

The same writer declares also, "Nor were the political effects less important . . . . it laid the foundation for the French alliance."  

"From Trenton onwards," states Trevelyan, "Washington was recognized as a far sighted and able general all over Europe . . . . He had shown himself . . . both a Fabius and a Camillus, and his march through the British lines was allowed to be a prodigy of leadership."  

"It scarcely was possible," writes Freeman, "to exaggerate the effect of the operations at Trenton and Princeton on the self-confidence of the Army, on the spirit of New Jersey, on the policy of Congress, and on the faith of all the States in the attainment of independence. A dying cause was revivified; timid men . . . now came cheerfully to camp."  

Said Cornwallis to Washington in surrendering at Yorktown in 1781, "Fame will gather your brightest laurels from the banks of the Delaware rather than from the Chesapeake.”  

But towering even over Washington's masterly successes in this pivotal campaign of the Revolution is the sublime character of the man himself. He was, in reality, a very human man, of flesh and blood and feelings, and certainly a man far from the cold, chilling, marble figure posterity has made of him. "His emotions," Bancroft writes, "come to us across the [years] like strains from that eternity which repairs all losses and rights all wrongs . . . ."  

Without of course knowing of the General's future distinguished eight years as first President of the new republic, Robert Morris had sized up Washington's stature just two months after Trenton and Princeton, saying, "He is the greatest man on earth."  

Morison evaluates the American leader in this fashion:

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228 Van Tyne, American Revolution, 131; Alden, American Revolution, 111.
229 Miller, Triumph of Freedom, 160.
230 Greene, Revolutionary War, 62.
231 Ibid., 73.
232 Ibid., 74. See also Van Tyne, American Revolution, 132.
233 Quoted in Ward, War of the Revolution, I, 316.
234 Freeman, George Washington, IV, 361. See also Fortescue, British Army, III, 205.
235 Quoted in Dupuy and Dupuy, Compact History, 183.
236 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 217.
237 Ibid., 256.
“Washington was more than a general: he was the embodiment of all that was noblest and best in the American people. With no illusions about his own grandeur, no thought of the future except an intense longing to return to his beloved Mount Vernon, he assumed every responsibility thrust upon him, and fulfilled it.”

In the Continental Congress, then meeting in 1777 in Baltimore, came these words on Washington from North Carolina Representative William Hooper:

Will posterity believe the tale? When it shall be consistent with policy to give the history of that man from his first introduction into our service, how often America has been rescued from ruin by the mere strength of his genius, conduct, and courage, encountering every obstacle that want of money, men, arms, ammunition, could throw in his way, an impartial world will say with you that he is the greatest man on earth. Misfortunes are the element in which he shines; they are the groundwork on which his picture appears to the greatest advantage. He rises superior to them all; they serve as foils to his fortitude and as stimulants to bring into view those great qualities which his modesty keeps concealed. I could fill the side in his praise; but anything I say cannot equal his merits.

And finally, an appreciation of George Washington from James Truslow Adams: “In the travail of war and revolution, America had brought forth a man to be ranked with the greatest and noblest of any age in all the world. There have been greater generals in the field and statesmen in the cabinet in our own and other nations. There has been no greater character. When we think of Washington, it is not as a military leader, nor as executive or diplomat. We think of the man who by sheer force of character held a divided and disorganized country together until victory was achieved, and who, after peace was won, still held his disunited countrymen by their love and respect and admiration for himself until a nation was welded into enduring strength and unity. . . . Without him the cause would have been irretrievably lost, and the thunder of the orators would have rumbled long since into forgetful silence. When the days were blackest, men clung to his unfaltering courage as to the last firm ground in a rising flood. When, later, the forces of disunion in the new country seemed to threaten disruption, men again rallied to him as the sole bond of union. Legacy to America from these troubled years, he is, apart from independence itself, the noblest heritage of all.”

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238 Morison and Commager, Growth of the American Republic (4th edit.), I, 203.
239 Bancroft, History of the United States, IX, 256.
240 James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America (Garden City, N.Y., 1933), 72.