



The Strategy of Victory: How General George Washington Won the American Revolution by Thomas Fleming.

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In *The Strategy of Victory*, distinguished and prolific¹ historian Thomas Fleming aims to demonstrate the importance of George Washington's character and military expertise during the War of Independence against Great Britain and then as America's first president. Throughout, he makes excellent use of primary source materials in the George Washington Papers, and at the US Military Academy library and other repositories.

Fleming vividly depicts the all-or-nothing stakes facing leaders of the American Revolution:

For George Washington the war was the revolt of the thirteen American colonies against Great Britain, the most powerful nation in the world in 1776. To win was to open a glorious future for America. To lose was to vanish over one of history's precipices, never to be seen and scarcely to be mentioned again. Small wonder that Washington's strategy aroused violent hostility and even more violent affirmations by men who cared passionately about its outcome. (2)

In the popular imagination, the patriot soldiers who fought during the American Revolution were backwoods frontiersmen. Fleming notes that many of those who participated in the opening battles at Lexington and Concord had in fact trained for months and were veterans of previous conflicts. The relative success of American efforts in 1775 raised hopes for a quick victory, but the next year American forces were routed and driven out of New York. Washington, who favored a protracted conflict of attrition, tirelessly argued with the Continental Congress over its policies regarding short-term militia service, pay for officers, and a one-battle-and-done "general action" strategy. His attack against the British Army's Hessian auxiliaries on the Delaware (26 Dec. 1776) went far to restore morale.

By 1777, it was the British who were looking to score a quick knockout. But the engagement at Germantown and the American victory at Saratoga made such an outcome less likely. Still, another set of serious challenges confronted Washington in 1778, including the dreadful encampment at Valley Forge, disloyal subordinates, continuing legislative opposition to pensions for officers, and the ill-effects of currency depreciation on troop recruitment. Fleming exposes lesser known facts about America's alliance with France, most of which do not paint a positive picture. For example, American commanders at sea accused French leaders of abandoning a major naval battle near Rhode Island; French military personnel stationed in the Boston area were ill-treated by locals; and Admiral D'Estaing's failed siege of Savannah in 1779 had a devastating impact on Continental currency.

In the uncommonly frigid winter of 1779-80, Washington's forces were decimated by desertion and food shortages. The surrender to British Gen. Sir Henry Clinton at Charleston in May

1. He has written over fifty books before the one under review here, which followed its immediate predecessor by three months!

damaged American morale. Even after a series of battlefield victories in New Jersey seemed to energize his troops, Washington had to convince that state's governor not to fill positions in the Continental Army with militiamen and, by late 1780, he was dealing with treasonous events at West Point and the perils of pursuing a north-south strategy while short of manpower.

Fleming's account of the epic events of 1781 differs from what most people learn in school: Washington and French leader Rochambeau differed on whether to make the alliance's next move in New York or Virginia. While the allies eventually chose Virginia, British commanders chose New York. Thus, Washington's forces benefited from a diminished enemy presence at Yorktown and a lack of communication and coordination among British military leaders.

The British surrender at Yorktown did not end the American Revolution. Washington's warning to remain at the ready proved well-advised, for the war raged in the West Indies and the Mediterranean throughout 1782. And the following year, the Continental Congress's reversal of officer pensions and failure to disburse back pay caused a near-revolt among troops. Though Washington convinced the legislature to allow enlisted men to keep weapons issued to them as a parting gift following the Treaty of Paris, his advocacy of a permanent standing army was ignored.

Washington resigned his commission at Annapolis in early 1784, but his enduring popularity and the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation thrust him into leadership posts, first as chair of the 1787 Constitution Convention and then as the first president of the United States.

In his final chapter, Fleming examines how the Washington administration dealt militarily with a troublesome British-Indian alliance and (with overwhelming force) the protests of western Pennsylvanian farmers over a whiskey tax. These successes led Congress to reconsider Washington's call for a standing professional military.

The book has its deficiencies. Fleming disproportionately stresses events associated with the American Revolution, allotting only a single chapter to Washington's presidency. His cursory afterword hardly qualifies as a proper conclusion for the volume. And his battle narratives are sorely lacking in maps or diagrams. Finally, his fixation on army development downgrades the contribution of naval forces to ultimate victory.

True to his subtitle, the author gives Washington primary credit for the success of the American Revolution. But this ignores recent and compelling arguments² that other founding fathers played major roles in the struggle for independence and that Washington's experience with Native Americans profoundly affected his military and political careers.

These reservations aside, Thomas Fleming offers a welcome, lucid, rather contrarian view of the American Revolution, specifically in his discussion of the training of the Minutemen in Lexington, the wobbly Franco-American alliance, and congressional support for Continental forces. In the process, he dispels a number of persistent myths.

2. See, e.g., John Antal, *7 Leadership Lessons of the American Revolution: The Founding Fathers, Liberty, and the Struggle for Independence* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013).