

George Washington, Excerpt: Boston

Washington had his hands full with one emergency after another. General Richard Montgomery captured Montreal on November 12th, only to have a third of the troops ravaged by smallpox. In Virginia, Governor Dunmore attempted to use the slaves against the Continental Army by created the Royal Ethiopian Regiment. Dunmore issued a decree that “I do hereby further declare all indented servants, Negroes or others free that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s troops... for the more speedily reducing of the Colony to a proper sense of their duty to his Majesty’s crown.”⁸⁹ Many black regiments that took up residence on battleships in the harbor at Norfolk Virginia. Unfortunately for those who joined the British, many on the ships died of smallpox and other illness, as did some of the British. A later friend and confidant, Thomas Paine would arrive in Philadelphia in November of that year. He would soon start his writings that would be the spark “fire kindled in America” in the hearts and minds of those in the colonies.

The year 1776 opened for George Washington with a realization of how truly dire their situation really was. The Army’s survival would depend on miracles that only Providence could provide.

The reflection on my situation, and that of this army, produce an unhappy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few people know the predicament we are in, on a thousand accounts; fewer still will believe, if any disaster happens to these lines, from what cause it flows. I have often thought how much happier I should have been, if, instead of accepting the command under such circumstances, I had taken my musket on my shoulder and enter the ranks, or, if I had justified the measure to posterity and my own conscience, have retired to the back country and lived in a wigwam.If I shall be able to raise superior to these and many other difficulties which might be enumerated, I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the eyes of our enemies; for surely if we get well through this month, it must be for want of their knowing our disadvantages we labor under.⁹⁰

George Washington and the Continental Congress’s war efforts would be bolstered by the release of Thomas Paine’s pamphlet, *Common Sense*, released in early January of 1776. The pamphlet was critical of the “Monarchical tyranny in the person of the King” and his rule over the colonies. *Common Sense* also pointed out “the absurdity of divine rule” or divine right of Kings to rule, the country’s abundant natural resources and the strength they had in unity. Many a copy was passed between friends and neighbors. As he wrote in the appendix in the *Common Sense* “had the spirit of prophecy directed the birth of this production, it could not have brought it forth at a more seasonable juncture, or a more necessary time.”⁹¹ Fortunate for the Colonies, Thomas Paine’s well-timed writings would prove that the pen was as mighty as the sword.

In a letter to Congress from Cambridge Massachusetts, January 1776, Washington wrote, “It is not in the pages of history, perhaps, to furnish a case like ours. To maintain a post within musket-shot of the enemy, for six months together, without ammunition and at the same time to disband one army, and recruit another, within the distance of twenty-odd British regiments, is more, probably, than ever was attempted. But if we succeed as well in the last, as we have heretofore in the first, I shall think it the most fortunate event in my whole life.”⁹² In a letter to Joseph Reed on January 4th he wrote, “For more than two months past I have scarcely immersed from one difficulty before I have plunged into another - how it will all end, God in his great goodness, will direct. I am thankful for His protection to this time.”⁹³

By late January, George Washington sent a former Boston book seller, Henry Knox “north to bring back the armament, sorely need, that Ethan Allen mentioned. He returned with 42 sleds, loaded with 14 motors, 39 cannons, one barrel of flint and more than a ton of lead.”⁹⁴ This was almost an impossible task of dragging 42

heavily laden sleds [by eighty yoke of oxen], across ice and snow over mountains hundreds of miles to Boston. Henry Knox would stay on to become Washington's artillery commander. With the heavy artillery in place, Washington prepared for his first move against the British Fort in Boston. He was ready to make his move even though as he later wrote, "having received a small supply of Powder then - very inadequate to our wants." The Continental Congress had given permission to destroy the town if necessary

"During the night of March 4, 1776, Washington [directed General Thomas] moved 3,000 men to the base of Dorchester Heights, a very risky operation because the location was in full view of British forces. But, suddenly, a low mist rolled in, in perfect time to conceal Patriot movements, while at the same time leaving the top of the hill perfectly clear, fully lighted by a bright moon, thus aiding the Patriots who were building fortifications. Boston and the red coats remained shrouded in fog throughout the night, and so could not see what was happening. In addition, a breeze blew noises made by Patriot engineers away from British ears."⁹⁵ "At three in the morning, work was completed. The 3,000 builders departed, and 3,000 fresh soldiers moved in. At dawn, the British looked upon the Patriot fortifications with amazement. Captain Charles Stuart wrote that the guns appeared 'like magic.'⁹⁶ "The British General Howe exclaimed. 'The rebels have 'done more in one night than my whole army would have done in months.'⁹⁷

"Quickly as possible General Howe began to bombard the new fortifications on Dorchester Heights... all throughout the day he cannonaded the little American Army and, under the cover of bombardment, prepared to land twenty-five hundred picked men at night, and carry the Heights by storm. His guns did little damage, however... Washington was present in person, encouraging the soldiers, and directing them in strengthening the fortifications. Under the darkness of night General Howe sent twenty-five hundred of his best soldiers, in transports to capture the "rebel works."⁹⁸ "Then the sky blackened with what soldiers on both sides considered the most awesome storm they had ever seen."⁹⁹ "But a furious north-east storm arose, and beat upon them with such violence, that it was impossible to land. They were compelled to postpone the attack until the next night. But the storm continued, and even increased. The wind blew a gale, and the rain descended in torrents, all through the following day and night, shutting up the enemy within their quarters, and allowing the Americans time to multiply their works, and render them impregnable. When the storm ceased, an English officer declared that the American position was invincible in their strong position."¹⁰⁰

"General Lee, who was a godless scoffer, remarked derisively: "God is on the side of the heaviest battalions" but, in this case, the storm favored the weakest battalions."¹⁰¹ "Others referred to the storm as a "hurricane," Boston selectman Timothy Newell simply said it was a "manifest interposition of Divine Providence." Hurricanes are rare in Boston, and if any they occur in fall, not in the spring. By any meteorological standards today, backed by recorded history this would be considered a miracle. What else could one call a hurricane in New England, in the springtime? It was a perfectly timed storm that saved the Continental Army and prevented massive blood shed.

Washington understood what had happened and was thankful for divine intercession. In a letter to his brother John Augustine he wrote, "upon their discovery of the Works next Morning, great preparations were made for attacking them, but not being ready before the Afternoon and the Weather getting very tempestuous, much blood was Saved, and a very important blow prevented. That this remarkable Interposition of Providence is for some wise purpose, I have not a doubt."¹⁰² And what a remarkable and timely interposition of Providence it was indeed. Washington had made a bad military decision to position his troops on Dorchester Heights behind hastily erected fortifications. Had the storm not occurred, General Howe would have been able to land his troops driving Washington and his troops off Dorchester Heights. Depending on the severities of the losses and if Washington was killed or captured, the war likely would have been over before it even started.



It was a joyous occasion when Dorchester Heights was captured by General Thomas on the 4th, which compelled the enemy to evacuate. The army and citizens of Massachusetts celebrated; they celebrated with discharge of firearms and with fasting and prayers. General Orders, Cambridge, March 6, 1776:

Thursday, the 7th instant, being set apart by the honourable the Legislature of this Province, as a day of fasting, prayer and humiliation, ‘to implore the Lord and Giver of all victories, to pardon our manifold sins and wickedness, and that it would please him to bless the Continental arms with his divine favour and protection, ‘all officers and soldiers are strictly enjoined to pay all due reverence and attention on that day to the sacred duties to the Lord of Hosts for his Mercies already received, and for those blessings which our holliness and uprightness of life can alone encourage us to hope through his mercies to obtain.¹⁰³

Cannons secured from Fort Ticonderoga, positioned on Dorchester Heights threatened the British Fort. General Howe not wishing to stay within enemy artillery range prepared to evacuate Boston on May 7th of 1776. By coincidence or hand of Providence, “a smallpox epidemic sweeping through the city hastened their withdrawal.” The disease was spreading among his troops. ...“About a thousand loyalists fled with the soldiers. On the seventeenth of March, a fleet of more than a hundred ships sailed from Boston to Halifax [Nova Scotia]. The Tory refugees so crowded the vessels that Howe left behind 250 cannon, more than 3000 tons of coal, 5000 bushels of grain, 100 barrels of oil, and 150 horses, a boon to the poorly supplied patriots.”¹⁰⁴

For Washington and the Continental Army, Howe’s evacuation was the first victory of the war. It was a

real boost for the war effort and could not have come at a better time. Howe's humiliating retreat, with the assistance of Providence proved to be instrumental in swaying public opinion and the opinion of many holdout states in the Continental Congress to vote for Independence. Georgia on April 5th, North Carolina on April 12th, Rhode Island on May 4th followed by Virginia on May 15th authorized its delegation to vote for independence. It would prove however to be only a temporary victory as General Howe would be back in even greater numbers later in the year. "Instead of a victory celebration, Washington asked for a church service and thanksgiving. With his officers he listened to a sermon by Dr. Elliott, a Boston clergyman. Elliott preached on a Bible passage from Isaiah: "Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved." The passage concluded with the assertion that, "The Lord is our King; it is he who will save us."¹⁰⁵

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