

**David McCullough**  
Two-times Pulitzer Prize Winner  
Author, *1776*

# 1776: The Fight for Independence

I'm on a book tour and this is my fifteenth city, and it's been exhilarating and exhausting and entirely rewarding to see so much of what's going on all over the country, things of a kind that are too seldom reported—wonderful new city libraries, wonderful programs in education, wonderful philanthropic activities by people of all kinds. To go into a present-day bookstore is something we should never take for granted. I asked the manager of a big Barnes and Noble in New York how many different titles were in the store to choose from. He said, "Oh, about 150,000." So recently I've been asking some of the large independent stores how many different titles are in this store—"About 150,000." Now, imagine a civilization that can offer its citizens 150,000 different choices of what to read. That's a phenomenal civilization. The variety of choice we have is among the foremost American achievements and blessings that we have, among the many in this great country.

First of all, I think it's very important for all Americans to understand that the Revolutionary War is the most important struggle, the most important conflict, in all of our history because it's what made us possible. It's what made possible the reality of the high, noble sentimental statements of the Declaration of Independence. The first year of the war, in 1775, Americans weren't fighting for independence. They were fighting for their rights as freeborn Englishmen. During the battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, that's what they were fighting for, not independence. Independence only came later, and that began to happen in 1776. 1776 is the most important year in the most important struggle of our history and important for reasons beyond the Declaration of Independence. In fact, if it weren't for what Washington and his troops and those who supported them accomplished, the Declaration of Independence would have been nothing more than words on paper. I felt this strongly when I was writing my biography of John Adams. Adams was very much in the thick of it—in the drama taking place in Independence Hall in Philadelphia—but there was much else going on in New York, Boston, New Jersey, that was off-stage, so to speak, and one couldn't go off and write about that because in a biography you have to stay pretty close to your subject. But I wanted to write about it. I wanted to write about it if only because I

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felt that attention, understanding, credit was long overdue to the people who did the fighting, who did the dirty, difficult, bloody and heroic job that they did.

When you enter into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, you have to make a huge shift in scale—everything is much smaller. The country is much smaller, it's essentially strung along the eastern seaboard to a depth of only about 50 miles and if you get beyond that it begins to turn into forest. Two-thirds of Massachusetts was still forest, for example. I'm talking about forest, not woods. Two-thirds of Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh, the furthestmost reach of civilization, was not even called the "gateway to the West" yet. The population amounted to about 2,500,000—500,000 of whom were black men, women and children held in slavery.

The two million people who were not in slavery enjoyed the highest standard of living of any people in the world in 1776—something that's too little understood. They enjoyed more freedom than any other people under the British system. The British system, the monarchy but with its parliament, was the freest system on earth at that time. So, they were not like the impoverished, starving Paris mobs, rising up to put down the monarchy of France because they simply couldn't stand it any more. It wasn't that kind of a revolution. In some ways, it was a revolution of conservatives. They wanted to conserve what they already

had and what they thought was their rightful position. But a speech given by the King of England, George III, before parliament in late October of 1775 changed everything. In that speech, before a joint session of both the House of Commons and the House

of Lords—very much like a State of the Union speech—the King comes forth to state his policies before both Houses. He said that the American colonies were in rebellion, that the political leaders of the rebellion were traitors, and thus would be hanged if apprehended, and that England was sending sufficient force to end the rebellion.

army larger than the entire population of the largest city in the country at that time—Philadelphia. When they sailed into New York it was a spectacle such as no American had ever seen, or any of the British had ever seen. It was thrilling. I would give a great deal to have seen that spectacle. Ship after ship, all under full sail, coming up through the narrows into the fiber of New York where they had complete control of the waters – the East River, the Hudson River, New York Harbor – if they so chose, because we had no navy.

picked up when he was in France. It's essentially a French house, whereas Mount Vernon is like nothing else.

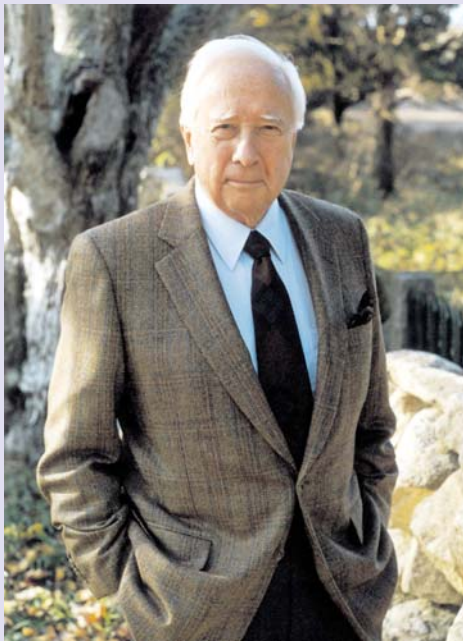
Washington's abilities were considerable. He was in essence a political general, which may not sound like that would be advantageous but in fact we've been very fortunate, we Americans, in our political generals. In Washington, for example, or George Marshall, or Eisenhower, just to name two more generals. They are people who hold high command but who understand how our political system works and never forget who is boss.

In 1776 Congress was in charge, Congress was the boss. We had no president. In effect, Washington was the president as the Commander-in-Chief, but he had to report always to Congress. As difficult as that proved to be for him, and very often frustrating, trying to get Congress to understand how dire was his situation, how realistic were his needs, he

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nonetheless patiently, time after time, kept going to them with all due respect and with all proper political tone.

He was, after all, one of them and that's why they picked him. They knew him as a fellow legislator, as a fellow politician. They didn't know him as a general. He was a man they felt they could trust. They knew his character, they knew his integrity and he knew perfectly well, as he said very clearly in his speech on the floor of Congress, that he was not up to the job. He warned them – "This is beyond my



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The man who was put in command of our forces wasn't the George Washington of the Gilbert Stuart paintings. He wasn't the man with the white powdered hair and the awkward teeth who looks at us from the dollar bill. He was a young man in his prime. He was 43 years old when he took command, and he had never commanded an army in battle before in his life. He was a Virginian. To the nines he was a Virginian: elegant, a superb horseman—Jefferson called him the greatest horseman of the age. He was a fox hunter; he was a slave-holding planter living in grand style, as we all know at his home on the Potomac. Mount Vernon is a far more interesting building than most people understand. George Washington never wrote an autobiography, but Mount Vernon, in its way, is his autobiography because it was designed entirely by him with great loving detail and passion for architecture, landscape architecture and interior decoration. He was fascinated by all of that and the house, if you go and really know how to look at it, is one of the most interesting buildings in American architecture, in many ways surpassing Monticello because Monticello, as superb as it is, is largely derived from what Jefferson

of Lords—very much like a State of the Union speech—the King comes forth to state his policies before both Houses. He said that the American colonies were in rebellion, that the political leaders of the rebellion were traitors, and thus would be hanged if apprehended, and that England was sending sufficient force to end the rebellion.

The sufficient force would turn out to be the greatest armada ever sent forth by any nation up until that point, dispatched to defeat a distant foe. Four hundred ships, 32,000 troops: an

ability, and who knows what circumstance will bring forth,” but he also knew that if he wasn’t up to the job he was more up to it than anybody else. He appeared in Congress in his full splendid uniform signaling that yes, he was available.

So off he went. One of the best decisions any Congress ever made was to put Washington in command, and as soon as he arrived in New England he realized he couldn’t stand New Englanders. It’s a fascinating part of this story. He thought they were dirty, unruly and rude, and they had this odd intolerable idea, from his point of view, that they could decide things for themselves. They would vote on whether they wanted to do something or not as soldiers. They wouldn’t serve under officers unless they could elect their own officers. Well, of course, one of the ways many of the officers got elected was by requiring very little of the soldiers in the way of discipline or orderliness or ever punishing them for infractions of the rules. And Washington saw that this would have to change.

Don’t picture an army in uniform. Nobody had a uniform except some of the officers and many of them only had half uniforms – a military jacket left over from the French and Indian War, for example. Washington was the exception. Washington always looked the part and he espoused this to his officers: it’s not just enough to act like a leader but to look like one. He also sought to keep a distance between the officers and the men. When Washington came into camp and saw an officer shaving one of his soldiers he thought that was too much. Old Israel Putnam—”Old Put” as he was called—General Israel Putnam from Connecticut—was about as tough an old warrior as anybody could be. He would get in the shower line with all

the troops just like anybody else and Washington had to tell him to stop doing that.

But you see, that wasn’t the New England way, and there was a real cultural regional difference. All through 1776 and into much of the rest of the war there is this constant fear that regional animosities and differences are going to pull the army apart, are going to pull the country

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apart. It’s there even before we become a country, this divisiveness between regions, primarily between north and south.

Washington was not an intellectual like Adams or Jefferson. He wasn’t an educated man, he had no college education, as did Adams and Jefferson and many others. He only had the equivalent of about a fifth grade education. His father had died when he was 16 and he was on his own thereafter. Experience had been his greatest teacher all through life. He would make dreadful mistakes in this first year of his command—1776—serious mistakes, mistakes that nearly cost us the war, but he always learned from his mistakes and the Congress was tolerant of his mistakes, knowing the man. What Washington had, along with the capacity to learn from those

mistakes, was the capacity to see things as they are and not as one would wish they were, a very, very important point. And he had phenomenal self-command. In his private correspondence, and this has been one of the great pleasures of writing about him, in his private correspondence he reveals a very different man than the one everybody saw at the time. He reveals enormous doubt about how things were going, tremendous fear about what the outcome might be, tremendous self-pity, he’s feeling very sorry for himself that he has to carry this terrific burden when things are so bad he can’t even tell his own general officers how bad they are because he’s concerned that they will become demoralized. And he goes out from those late-night musings on paper the next morning looking to all the world as though he is a man that’s bothered by nothing. John Adams called him one of the great actors of his time, meaning that as a compliment.

Now, people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century did not read American history. There was no American history yet – hadn’t been written. There was a history, of course. We’d been here a long time before 1776. I’m often amazed by people who are otherwise well informed and educated who have no idea there was a 17<sup>th</sup> century, too, in America. They read and took seriously, took to heart, classical history—Greek and Roman history—even those who didn’t have the benefit of a college education, which would mean you read both Greek and Latin as did Jefferson and Adams, for example. They understood the classical history largely through translations and/or a very famous play called *Cato* which was written by Joseph Addison, an Englishman. They would quote lines from *Cato*, borrow lines from *Cato* again and again in their letters. There’s a famous line in the

play which goes about like this: “We can’t guarantee success in this war, but we can do something better. We can deserve it.” When I first read that line in a letter that John Adams wrote, I stopped dead in my tracks. I thought, what a wonderful piece of philosophy, insight and how different from our own times where all that matters is getting to the top, all that matters is being number one, who cares what terrible things you do, what betrayals, what elbows you use to get there. This is completely different. This is saying the ultimate outcome is not in our hands, it’s in the hands of God or chance or fate or providence, or whatever you want to call it, but how we perform our role, how we participate we can control. That’s up to us. We can deserve it, deserve to succeed. Well, then I saw the same line in a letter by Washington and I thought, “Well, wait a minute. How did this happen?” and I thought they must be quoting something, so I got down the old *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* and began going through the 18<sup>th</sup> century entries, and bingo—there it was—*Cato*.

When Nathan Hale, the celebrated martyred spy of the Revolutionary War was caught and was about to be hanged by the British he was told he could have a few last words. He famously said, “My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for my country.” Now, Nathan Hale was one of six brothers who went to war, six brothers of a Connecticut family. He was totally miscast as a spy – it was a terrible choice. The people who sent him across the lines bungled it. He was too naive, he was too trusting, and there were several reasons why it was inevitable that he was going to be caught. So there he is, 21 years old, he’s told that in a few minutes he would be hanged. Who in the world could ever think up some memorable, immortal lines to say? He couldn’t and didn’t. The line is from the play *Cato*.

Now what he is doing is, he’s quoting back to the English, in effect, a line that’s sort of secular scripture and they know the line. Addison, after all, is an English author. He’s *their* author. So, I think if you understand that, you can much more readily identify with poor Hale’s position and it makes it, in my view, much more interesting because I don’t think we’ve understood how he delivered the line. I think he said, “My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for *my* country, not *your* country, you Brits, *my* country. Go ahead and hang me, but it’s my country and I’m throwing that line right back into your teeth.”

You can’t understand these people unless you understand the culture. You can’t understand what moves them, why they would go through what they did unless you understand the culture. Part of the culture was that they had been cast in roles of historic importance. This is right out of their sense of Roman history, especially, and that they had better play their parts to the hilt as best they can, give it all they have, because history of the future was going to judge them. History isn’t just knowing what is behind you, it’s the sense that you are soon going to be behind what comes next.

None of these people, by the way, ever lived in the past. They lived in the present – their present, not ours. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Nathan Hale, they didn’t walk around saying, “Isn’t this fascinating living in the past? Aren’t we picturesque in our funny clothes?” They’re living in the present and if you think about it that way as their present, not ours, it’s a different present from ours. For one thing, life is much harder, life is more intense or real, death is with you, surrounds you, you see it all your life. I doubt that there was a single soldier when he signed up to march off in this war who hadn’t already seen someone

die – at home, on the job, wherever. They knew that life was a battle. Certainly anybody trying to make a go of it on a New England farm knew life was a battle. Life beat them up. You could see it in their faces; you could see it in their bodies. Nathaniel Greene, in many ways the most interesting figure of the whole story in my view, had a severe limp from a childhood injury. John Trumbull, who painted the picture that’s on the [book] cover of the surrender at Trenton, only had the use of one eye because of a childhood injury. Henry Knox, the Boston bookseller who had the inspired idea to bring the great guns of Ticonderoga 300 miles over the Berkshire Mountains to Boston in the nick of time to put them on top of Dorchester Heights, had had two fingers of his left hand blown off in a hunting accident. Washington had pockmarks from smallpox on his face. People had films in their eyes,

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they’d lost teeth, they had heads that would be cocked over towards their shoulders, and so forth. They weren’t those sort of dandified powdered characters that you see in some motion picture versions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and by the time the year was coming to its end they were all in rags—those that were still in the fight.

They weren’t all heroes. Hundreds, thousands quit when their enlistments were up, would just go home. Or they wouldn’t even wait for their enlistments to be up, just deserted

and went home or went over to the enemy. Hundreds and hundreds of our troops went over to the enemy. But those people who stayed the course stayed to a very large degree because of George Washington. George Washington wasn't an intellectual; he wasn't a great orator; he wasn't a brilliant Napoleon kind of general, but he was a leader, and these men would follow him through hell and did. He was courageous.

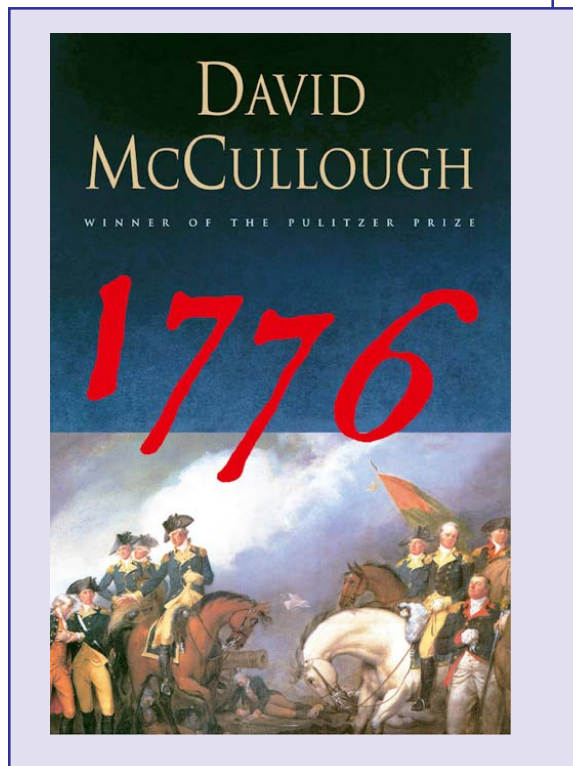
Marshal Maurice de Saxe was a celebrated European general at the time who wrote a famous book on military leadership, saying that the three basic ingredients were very simple: The first, upon which all the others depended, was courage; the second was intelligence, and the third was good health. Washington had phenomenal courage, moral courage and physical courage. He was very intelligent. He was not brilliantly educated. He didn't have one of these skyrocketed intellects like Alexander Hamilton, but he was very intelligent. He saw through to the essence of a problem very quickly; he had great common sense, and common sense, as I'm sure you all have experienced in life, is not common; and he would not quit. He would not quit no matter what.

In the last month of 1776, December, that little army, that beat-up, defeated, half-starved, sick army was down to about 3,000 men—that is all. Everything depended on 3,000 men. Everything we believe in, everything we have—our country, our whole outlook as Americans, all hanging on 3,000 men. When he escaped from the oncoming British army and got them across the western side of the Delaware River in Pennsylvania, having destroyed all the boats the British might use to chase after them, he began to take stock and it was very clear that the war was over and we had lost. The British had concluded this, most of the

American people had concluded it and the British commanders, admirals and General Howe had announced a proclamation whereby any Americans who came in and signed a loyalty oath might not be prosecuted and would be welcomed back into the British commonwealth. Thousands of New Jersey people were flocking in great lines to the British camps to sign that oath. The war was over and we'd lost.

But Washington and enough of the people who were still with him refused to see it that way. So, they did what you often have to do under such circumstances: they attacked. They went up the Delaware the night of Christmas 1776, crossed the Delaware, famously, through the ice-choked river in the midst of a blizzard, a northeast storm, snow, hail, sleet, everything, these ragged people, many without shoes, their feet wrapped in rags, and they then marched nine miles down the river through the night to strike at Trenton. The nine-mile march was really the worst of the whole night. These people were so inadequately protected against the storm and weather, heaven knows what the wind chill factor was, two of them froze to death on the march. They struck at Trenton the next morning and won. They beat the British. It was the first time they'd beaten them—beaten them not just by hauling guns from Ticonderoga, which was an extraordinary stroke; not just by managing the evacuation of Brooklyn, crossing the East River at night, which was the Dunkirk of the Revolution. They'd beaten them in a fight. It wasn't a huge battle the way Brooklyn had been. Brooklyn was an enormous battle and we lost pathetically. Trenton

was small, but we won and this transformed morale, transformed the outlook of the country towards the war and transformed the outlook of Washington's troops.



One last incident to get across this point of Washington's leadership qualities: On December 30, second to the last day before the end of the year, having won the battle of Trenton, Washington knew that his entire army, the next day, would be free to go home, their enlistments were all up. They only signed up for a year. He also knew they were hungry, their clothes were in a wretched condition, and who could blame them for leaving? So he called them all out into formation and he announced that if they would stay on for another month he would pay them a bonus of \$10. Now, \$10 was a lot of money, their pay was about \$6 a month. He had no authority to do that; he was desperate. And he said "All of you who will stay with me, step

forward,” and the drums rolled and nobody stepped forward. What a moment. By all the signs, that was it, nobody was going to re-enlist. So being Washington, he turned on his horse. Imagine: he looks like a character in a play, in his superb uniform with everything exactly right. He turns on his horse, rides off a little way and wheels the horse around and comes back and speaks to them again. The first didn’t do it, so speak to them again. And this time it works. You see,

he won’t quit, he won’t give up. What did he say to them? He’d already promised them \$10. At this point he said, in essence, when will you ever in your whole lives have a chance to do something of greater importance for your country than now? Which, of course, is very like the speech in *Henry V*—men asleep in their beds today will wish that they were here. Washington loved theater, he loved Shakespeare. I can’t prove this, but I think he knew exactly the inspiration for that speech, and it worked.

Thank you.

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