

From: Heather Cox Richardson from Letters from an American heathercoxrichardson@substack.com
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To: alba68sandrews@gmail.com



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HEATHER COX RICHARDSON

DEC 19



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“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 their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

These were the first lines in a pamphlet that appeared in Philadelphia on December 19, 1776, at a time when the fortunes of the American patriots seemed at an all-time low. Just five months before, the members of the Second Continental Congress had adopted the Declaration of Independence, explaining to the world that “the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled...do...solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.”

The nation’s founders went on to explain why it was necessary for them “to dissolve the political bands” which had connected them to the British crown.

They explained that their vision of human government was different from

that of Great Britain. In contrast to the tradition of hereditary monarchy under which the American colonies had been organized, the representatives of the united states on the North American continent believed in a government organized according to the principles of natural law.

Such a government rested on the “self-evident” concept “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Governments were created to protect those rights and, rather than deserving loyalty because of tradition, religion, or heritage, they were legitimate only if those they governed consented to them. And the American colonists no longer consented to be governed by the British monarchy.

This new vision of human government was an exciting thing to declare in the heat of a Philadelphia summer after a year of skirmishing between the colonists and British regulars, but by December 1776, enthusiasm for this daring new experiment was ebbing. Shortly after colonists had cheered news of independence in July as local leaders read copies of the Continental Congress’s declaration in meetinghouses and taverns in cities and small towns throughout the colonies, the British moved on General George Washington and the troops in New York City.

By September the British had forced Washington and his soldiers to retreat from the city, and after a series of punishing skirmishes across Manhattan Island, by November the Redcoats had pushed the Americans into New Jersey. They chased the Continental Army all the way across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

By mid-December, things looked bleak for the Continental Army and the revolutionary government it backed. The 5,000 soldiers with Washington who were still able to fight were demoralized from their repeated losses and retreats, and since the Continental Congress had kept enlistments short so as not to risk a standing army, many of the men would be free to leave the army at the end of the year, further weakening it.

As the British troops had taken over New York City and the Continental soldiers had retreated, many of the newly minted Americans outside the army were also having doubts about the whole enterprise of creating a new, independent nation based on the idea that all men were created equal. Then things got worse: as the American soldiers crossed into Pennsylvania, the Continental Congress abandoned Philadelphia on December 12 out of fear of a British invasion, regrouping in Lancaster (which they complained was dirty and expensive).

“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

The author of *The American Crisis* was Thomas Paine, whose January 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* had solidified the colonists’ irritation at the king’s ministers into a rejection of monarchy itself, a rejection not just of King George III, but of all kings. In early 1776, Paine had told the fledgling Americans, many of whom still prayed for a return to the comfortable neglect they had enjoyed from the British government before 1763, that the colonies must form their own independent government.

Now he urged them to see the experiment through. He explained that he had been with the troops as they retreated across New Jersey and, describing the march for his readers, told them “that both officers and men, though greatly harassed and fatigued, frequently without rest, covering, or provision, the inevitable consequences of a long retreat, bore it with a manly and martial spirit. All their wishes centred in one, which was, that the country would turn out and help them to drive the enemy back.”

For that was the crux of it. Paine had no doubt that patriots would create a new nation, eventually, because the cause of human self-determination was just. But how long it took to establish that new nation would depend on how much effort people put into success. “I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but on every state: up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel: better have too much force than too little. when so

great an object is at stake,” Paine wrote. “Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it.”

In mid-December, British commander General William Howe had sent most of his soldiers back to New York to spend the winter, leaving garrisons across the river in New Jersey to guard against Washington advancing.

On Christmas night, having heard that the garrison at Trenton was made up of Hessian auxiliaries who were exhausted and unprepared for an attack, Washington and 2,400 soldiers crossed back over the icy Delaware River in a winter storm. They marched nine miles to attack the garrison, the underdressed soldiers suffering from the cold and freezing rain. Reaching Trenton, they surprised the outnumbered Hessians, who fought briefly in the streets before surrendering.

The victory at Trenton restored the colonists’ confidence in their cause. Soldiers reenlisted, and in early January they surprised the British at Princeton, New Jersey, driving them back. The British abandoned their posts in central New Jersey, and by March the Continental Congress moved back to Philadelphia. Historians credit the Battles of Trenton and Princeton with saving the Revolutionary cause.

There is no hard proof that Washington had officers read *The American Crisis* to his troops when it came out six days before the march to Trenton, as some writers have said, but there is little doubt they heard it one way or another. So, too, did those wavering loyalists.

“Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered,” Paine wrote in that fraught moment, “yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value.”