

A review of 1776 by David G. McCullough

If you have a love of American History, this will make an excellent choice for your next reading if you haven't already read it. McCullough narrates or dramatizes from all the historical documents he and his associates could find dealing with the Revolutionary War just during the year of the Declaration of Independence, 1776. His sources included both British and American archives.

If your looking for material on George Washington's leadership, McCullough presents George Washington from two different perspectives—a public perspective and a more private, personal perspective. A typical description of George Washington in his public figure is from an eighteen-year-old lieutenant, James Monroe. "I saw him ... at the head of a small band, or rather in its rear, for he was always near the enemy, and his countenance and manner made an impression on me that I can never efface" (p. 247).

This account was given during the retreat from New York so to be nearest the enemy, George Washington took a position at the rear of his retreating forces. These forces were the remnants of his Army after four losses to the British and the fourth retreat.

During the siege on Boston a "newly arrived doctor from Barnstable, James Thacher" described George Washington thusly:

His Excellency was on horse back, in company with several military gentlemen. It was not difficult to distinguish him from all the others. His personal appearance is truly noble and majestic, being tall and well proportioned. His dress is a blue coat with buff colored facings, a rich epaulet on each shoulder, buff underdress, and an elegant small sword, a black cockade in his hat. (p. 34).

Washington's correspondence depicts a man who was not sure he should have been in the position of the leader "of the army of the United Colonies." Washington referred to his army as "Troops of the United Provinces of North America" (p. 24). In accepting his command, he addressed John Hancock with these words:

I am truly sensible of the high honor done me in this appointment, yet I feel great distress from a consciousness that my abilities and military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important trust. However, as the congress desire i[t], I will enter upon the momentous duty, and exert every power I possess in their service and for the support of the glorious Cause. ... I do not think myself equal to the command I [am] honored with. (p. 49)

McCullough says this about Washington:

Washington was a man of exceptional, almost excessive self-command, rarely permitting himself any show of discouragement or despair, but in the privacy of his correspondence with Joseph Reed, he now began to reveal how low and bitter he felt, if the truth were known. Never had he seen 'such a dearth of public spirit and want of virtue' as among the Yankee soldiers, he confided in a letter to reed of November 28. 'These people' were still beyond his comprehension. A 'dirty,

mercenary spirit pervades the whole,' he wrote. 'Could I have foreseen what I have and am like to experience, no consideration upon earth should have induced me to accept this command'. (p. 64)

It was strange to me to read the various accounts of Washington from the different perspectives because I have not been exposed to these views before. I have always viewed Washington as a great hero of our country and this book has not diminished that view, it has just added an element of humanity to Washington for me. I am not sure that if I had not read from a leadership perspective my view of Washington would have changed. We owe a debt of gratitude to the men and women who fought for our independence during this war of revolution against the strongest military in the world at the time.

Reference

McCullough, D. G. (2005). *1776*. New York: Simon & Schuster.