



An American Crisis: George Washington and the Dangerous Two Years After Yorktown, 1781-1783

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Most people believe the American Revolution ended in October, 1781, after the battle of Yorktown; in fact the war continued for two more traumatic years. During that time, the Revolution came closer to being lost than at any time in the previous half dozen. The British still held New York, Savannah, Wilmington, and Charleston; the Royal Navy controlled the seas; the states--despite having signed the Articles of Confederation earlier that year--retained their individual sovereignty and, largely bankrupt themselves, refused to send any money in the new nation's interest; members of Congress were in constant disagreement; and the Continental army was on the verge of mutiny.

William Fowler's *An American Crisis* chronicles these tumultuous and dramatic two years, from Yorktown until the British left New York in November 1783. At their heart was the remarkable speech Gen. George Washington gave to his troops encamped north of New York in Newburgh, quelling a brewing rebellion that could have overturned the nascent government.

An American Crisis: George Washington and the Dangerous Two Years After Yorktown, 1781-1783 Details

Date : Published October 4th 2011 by Walker Books (first published September 27th 2011)

ISBN : 9780802717061

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Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : History, North American History, American History, Military History, American Revolution, Nonfiction, American Revolutionary War, Politics, Presidents



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Bob Price says

The American Revolution ended with the battle of Yorktown, right? Or so I've been led to believe.

William Fowler's book, *An American Crisis* examines the brutal and dangerous period *after* the Battle of Yorktown.

Washington's army was malnourished, and underpaid. The Congress didn't have the money to pay the army, and considered disbanding it before the British threat was truly eliminated. Even after the disaster at Yorktown, many British soldiers wanted to continue the fight until the battle was won.

All of these elements come to play in Fowler's book.

Fowler's depiction of this time period is compelling and he utilizes rich characterization to bring the personalities to light. This is a fast paced book and one that grabs your attention from the get go.

I highly recommend this book for students of history, even if you are mildly interested in the time period.

Bert says

Most Americans, even those of the declining population who actually consider themselves students of their country's history, think that the Battle of Yorktown effectively ended the War of Independence against Britain. Nothing could be further from the truth. The years 1781 through 1783 were every bit as troubling for the fledgling country. Citizens were filled with war fatigue," funding was next to impossible to secure, morale was low, and soldier desertions were commonplace. This author is masterful in refreshing our recollections of exactly just how fragile our young democracy had become, and how close to the edge of the abyss we came to losing the war. Rating: ? ? ? ? ?

Richard Lim says

When we think about George Washington's finest moments, most people recall the image of him desperately leading a rag tag army across the Delaware River in the winter cold. Others may recall his leadership during the presidency, laying the foundation of the national government. However, the one moment that distinguishes Washington from almost all other historical figures is his resignation to the Congress in 1783 after 8 long years of war, firmly establishing the principle of civilian supremacy in the United States. The very idea of a victorious military figure relinquishing power was so novel at the time that King George III, shocked upon hearing of Washington's action, said that it would make him "the greatest man in the world." Dr. Fowler's book recalls the final two years of the war, between the final battle at Yorktown in October 1781 and Washington's resignation in December 1783, where Washington faced enormous and historically

unprecedented challenges in keeping the army together and preserving what had been won in battle. Rather than a mere interregnum, those two years featured crisis after crisis, as the army threatened mutinies, uprisings against congress, the states and the federal government battled bankruptcy, and the British, French, and Spanish continued to jockey for power and threaten the sovereignty of the new nation. Dr. Thomas Fleming previously covered this same period in his book, *The Perils of Peace*. Dr. Fowler's contribution is a wonderful narrative that is well-researched and yet highly readable for the popular audience.

Dr. Fowler provides the point of view from multiple perspectives, enhancing our understanding of the context. He views that critical period from the perspective of British parliament, American loyalists, patriot soldiers, and legislators. Along the way, he introduces us to the complex and enigmatic figures of the day, such as Lord North, Prime Minister Germain, Sir Guy Carleton, Henry Knox, Nathanael Green, and, of course, George Washington. Thus, we have an even-handed portrait of these figures, understanding the unique dilemmas that each of these figures faced. Carleton is portrayed sympathetically, as he was given the historically thankless and logically impossible task of removing the British Empire from North America. Dr. Fowler's rendering of Washington's famous speech at Newburgh, where he singlehandedly prevented a coercive takeover by the army, is masterful, as he balances detail while also conveying the drama of the moment.

I highly recommend this book to both scholars and popular audiences alike. It is my hope that this book continues to reveal that Washington's truly greatest moment was not necessarily on the battlefield but in his daily affirmation of civilian supremacy and the will of the people. Audiences will have a greater appreciation of Washington's steadfast pursuit of principle, never wavering in his conviction for republican values.

Alec Gray says

We probably aren't taught much about the last two years of the revolution because there were no great battles and victories- what did happen we probably want to forget-threatened mutinies by our troops, the officer corps extracting bonuses from congress, vicious partisan acts with the Tories. But this was a crucial time when the fruits of the long war, and the nation's founding hung in the balance.

Margaret Sankey says

I am always interested in the last two years of the American Revolution, but this is a prime example of the kind of American history I really hate--upfront, it frames itself as a hagiography of Washington and his single-handed saving of the Revolution, but uses absolutely no British sources except for the printed proceedings of Parliament. Fowler's style is to use American letters and diaries to impute emotions and motives and humanize Founding Fathers, but he then does exactly the same thing to British figures without the same sources--and I know damn well that they exist. Fowler talks about Loyalists and doesn't even engage with the SECONDARY works (like Mary Beth Norton's) that use British sources. This is fantastically lazy and the worst kind of American exceptionalism.

Heather G says

Ok

I've been reading up on the Revolutionary and immediately post Revolutionary time frame so I am more

inclined to recommend *Perils of Peace*, but this work is almost up to the task, just drier.

Amy says

Fascinating time in US history, fairly well written. A bit hard to get into, as it's a little confusing as to who is who and it jumps around a bit in time and between continents more than is easy to follow. But, a fairly good read for all that.

Grady McCallie says

Running from Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown in October 1781 through Washington's return to Mt. Vernon as a civilian at Christmas in 1783, this scholarly history offers a blow-by-blow narrative of George Washington's management of the Continental Army. The challenge for most of this period for Washington was that hostilities were potentially but not inevitably over, and neither the Continental Congress nor the states had the will to raise adequate funds for the Army. The British faced the question of what to do with thousands of loyalists who could not safely stay in the colonies. The book is solid and decently-paced, but not particularly incisive - not the place to start reading about the Revolution, but perhaps worthwhile as part of a program of reading about the Army, George Washington, or the Continental Congress.

Don Thompson says

This was a very well researched book and the details and informational background on the Players from both the American, British and French were simply well.... WOW. It gave the reader the real opportunity to see into the minds and times from both sides. Very well done. The parts that disturbed me were the constant shabby treatment that Congress handed out to the American soldiers. What is worse is that is continued on even after the war. In fact the feeling that Congress treated not only their own soldiers poorly, but felt entitled to make demands of their French allies for more and more money. The French spent so much money helping the Americans that they emptied their national coffers and was in fact one of the main reasons for the French revolution that followed in France later. As well the way both the English and Americans treated the Loyalist's / Tories. I felt sorry for them. The Americans called them traitors and killed them, ran them out of the country and stole their properties. Yet it was Jefferson later who said that the war was fought by 1/3 patriots, 1/3 cowards and 1/3 traitors. This gives a fair summary on how many people in the Colonies did not want to take up arms against the British. As well Fowler points out to the reader as well that in the south how the Americans hated the British were viewed as pillagers and robbers for taking food and supplies from the plantations. However the American's did the exact same thing in New York (they had no options as Congress was broke and could not pay).

This is a very well done book which I enjoyed and would recommend to readers. I think my next search is for a book that touches more on the Loyalist view point and more on how they were treated by both sides. Good reading..

Jeff says

Terrific account and wonderful read.

Lauren Albert says

A government without income is like a car without gas: you can steer the wheel any way you want but it ain't going nowhere. That was the primary lesson learned by the American leaders after Yorktown and this was when the tension between states' rights and the need for a central government became a battleground.

There were around 50 mutinies during the Revolution. There was a 20-25% desertion rate. Why? While not all of these events can be blamed on money, a majority of them can. Officers and soldiers went without pay for long periods of time. The new government begged for loans from all sympathetic countries. But the stark truth was that without a source of income (which would have made the loans mostly unnecessary) they could never pay the loans back. The French refused further loans while pointing out that the states were refusing to fund the war so why should they? With a unanimous vote necessary, the government could never get taxes approved.

The other issue Fowler discusses is the peace negotiations. They stalled over treatment of Tories after the peace and the payment of debts to British merchants. Negotiators put both matters into the hands of the states guaranteeing that mostly nothing was done. The British sacrificed both the American Tories and their Native American allies in their drive towards peace.

Talmadge Walker says

Interesting account of the period between the last battle of the Revolution & the actual departure of English troops from American soil. Much of the focus is on Washington's struggles to get Congress to pay his troops & his efforts to keep his officers from mutinying when Congress & the states would not do so.

Victor says

Interesting, But Not Essential

A fairly quick read, full of interesting material on a relatively unknown period, it's not quite essential reading. This won't fall into the ranks of memorable works of history, mostly due to a lack of having anything specific to say, but it's not a bad read by any means. Feels like it should have been more of an argument about the weakness of Congress and the ambitions of the nationalist than it ended up being.

As for this Kindle ebook version, there are typos. Names in the first lines of chapters aren't capitalized for some reason.

Jesse says

Although the book was informative about a piece of American history that is usually just glossed over, the book never really sold the drama behind the events that were unfolding. The historical figures, although presented in reasonable detail, remain distant and not that well known to the reader.

To be perhaps more fair to the author, I am simply looking for more readable and entertaining history. Fowler did a fine job aligning his research and covering the topic, and I perhaps unjustly hold him accountable simply for not making the presentation more entertaining.

Crysta says

I am a great lover of American history, especially pre-Civil War. But I found this book to be rather dull. Although it is perhaps an important time in the birth of our nation, to call it a "crisis" and those times "dangerous" led me to expect a little more action. Basically after Yorktown, the war was over, except there were still British troops in America. So Washington, being a good general, felt compelled to try to keep American troops stationed at the ready. They were cold, unfed, and unpaid, so they were less than thrilled. I only got to page 100 (my cutoff point for deciding whether to stop a book or carry on) and by that point, this is all that happened. The army didn't want to be the army anymore, Britain didn't have the power to attack further, and everyone was at a stalemate. Not enough danger or crisis for me.
