



CASE STUDY

General Washington & Major General Nathanael Greene



By mid-December 1776, with his army freezing, starving and on the brink of collapse, George Washington became determined to attack a garrison of 1,500 Hessian soldiers quartered in Trenton across the Delaware River. The attack would be a last-gasp effort to restore his army's morale and re-ignite the American spirit for independence, which was near extinction after the patriots had suffered a series of humiliating defeats attempting to defend the strategically important island of Manhattan. Pushed all the way out of New York and across New Jersey, Washington knew his attack would be a gamble, as evidenced by his code name for the mission, "Victory or Death."

On Dec. 22, General Washington called a council of war with his top officers to discuss his plans for attacking the Hessians at Trenton. He informed the group that despite the loss of New York and the onset of a harsh winter, militia and other Continental troops had rallied to join his small band of men along the banks of Delaware.

The commander in chief also discussed what he knew about the enemy's strength. The Hessians' only real defense was the placement of several thinly manned outposts, each about a mile out from the town's center. Staffed both day and night, the outposts guarded the town from all directions. In the town itself, one regiment was always on alert. But the Hessians had made no fortifications such as earthworks or redoubts. Nor had they placed any artillery at the town's perimeter where it could be of value. Instead, cannon was stationed near their commander's headquarters downtown.

Washington and the officers came to agree that while an attack on Trenton would indeed be no easy task, there could be a reasonable chance for success. The Americans would not be required to attack an enemy firmly entrenched behind fortifications. Moreover, they would have numerical superiority along with greater artillery firepower.

The conversation soon turned to how to accomplish the attack. Washington wanted to surprise the Hessians using all manpower available. To achieve this, he advocated a coordinated night crossing of the Delaware River by the three separate American forces now positioned along the Pennsylvania banks of the river. One force would cross the Delaware above Trenton, one almost directly across and one farther south. Troops of the southern most crossing, about 1,800 in total under the command of Colonel John Cadwalader, were to act as a diversionary force against several battalions of Hessians and a regiment of Highlanders stationed at two posts in Bordentown and Burlington, both south of Trenton. The Americans landing near Trenton, a brigade of 800 Pennsylvania militia commanded by Colonel James Ewing, were to seize the bridge over the Assunpink Creek, thus blocking the only route south and east out of the town. Washington and 2,400 veteran Continentals would cross upstream at McConkey's ferry and then march 10 miles south to enter the town from the north and the west.

Thousands of men, nearly 100 horses, box loads of ammunition and 18 cannon would have to cross the river in dozens of boats in one night, a heroic feat even if the dead-of-winter weather cooperated. (It had taken the Americans several days to cross the river on their retreat into Pennsylvania just a few weeks earlier.)

Once across the river, Washington's men would have to march knee-deep in snow in the dark of night several miles before reaching the town, but not before they would divide into two divisions, one commanded by Major General John Sullivan and the other by Major General Nathanael Greene. These two divisions, taking very different routes, would be expected to converge at the town at the same time. Their movements were to be in complete synchronization with Ewing's men, who would presumably be at the Assunpink bridge at the first sound of gunfire, and Cadawalder's patriots farther south of the town.

Clearly, Washington's plan was daring and complex. It would require speed, timing and near-flawless execution – skills his army had not displayed in defeat after defeat for the past four months. It relied heavily on the division commanders and regimental officers who would be leading the rank and file. Fragmented and isolated by several miles, Washington's units would be unable to effectively communicate with each other, working independently without his steady hand of guidance.

As Washington explained Sullivan's and Greene's role during the council of war, it was apparent that Greene would have the harder task of the two. Once the army was split, Sullivan's division would proceed along the River Road to "enter the town by Water Street." Greene's division would travel inland along several roads, marching mostly uphill over rough, uneven foot trails and a good bit further than Sullivan's. Greene's mission would be to enter the town from the north, right into the teeth of where the enemy would be waiting. Many in attendance at this already tension-filled council of war wondered to themselves whether Greene would be up to the task or whether Washington was once again placing too much confidence in his most trusted lieutenant, who just a few weeks earlier had been responsible for the biggest and most humiliating patriot defeat of the war to date.

Son of a Quaker father and mother, Greene was a 35-year old Rhode Island native with no formal education or military training. But he had quickly gained Washington's favor as one of the few reliable, trustworthy and competent commanders of the Continental Army. During the siege of Boston in the spring of 1776, Washington noted Greene's conduct: He acted with celerity when given a task; demanded extreme discipline among his troops; abhorred profanity; refrained from excessive drinking; and believed in the power of hard work, constant education and self-improvement. Moreover, unlike generals Horatio Gates and Charles Lee, Greene did not harbor grandiose military or political aspirations. Nor did he partake in secretly deriding Washington's leadership to other colleagues or members of Congress. In many respects, Greene was a man cut from the same cloth as Washington.

After the Americans lost at White Plains on Oct. 28, 1776, Washington gave Greene the high responsibility of overseeing two key forts designed to protect the Hudson River and Manhattan. Greene overestimated the strength of the fort on the New York side, Fort Mifflin, and when the British and Hessians attacked on Nov. 16 it was a horrific loss. Fifty-three Americans were killed, 96 wounded and an staggering 2,800 men taken prisoner. The British also captured 34 cannon, two howitzers and scores of tents, blankets and ammunition.

Four days later, the British and their Hessian allies successfully crossed the Hudson and captured Fort Lee on the New Jersey side.

While the loss of the forts squarely rested with Greene, Washington was equally to blame. In the days leading up, Washington had become preoccupied with other matters. Washington had recently decided to split the army in four parts to protect as much of the countryside as possible. He was also concerned the British would attempt a march on the capital of Philadelphia and was thus making defensive plans in New Jersey several miles away from Fort Washington. Washington believed Greene, being onsite, would know best how and if the forts should be defended. Yet much to his eventual chagrin, Washington was skeptical of Fort Washington's value, writing to Greene just a few days prior to its loss, "If we cannot prevent vessels passing up it (the Hudson River), and the enemy are possessed of the surrounding country, what valuable purpose can it answer to attempt to hold a post from which the expected benefit cannot be had?"

Greene countered that the fort, which was heavily outfitted with cannon and towered an impressive 280 feet above the water's edge, could be defended and would be an effective stalwart at suppressing the British juggernaut that was now sweeping everything before them.

Washington remained skeptical and conflicted. A staff officer noticed that the general "hesitated more than I ever knew him on any other occasion, and more than I thought the public service admitted." The ever-spurious American General Charles Lee piled on, writing, "Oh! General—an indecisive mind is one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall an army."

The debacles of Fort Washington and Fort Lee were by far the worst defeats of the war. Not only had the patriots lost two strategic outposts protecting the Hudson Valley, thousands of men and much needed supplies, but Washington's leadership was being called into question. Members of Congress, officers, aides and even soldiers within Washington's own camp believed he had placed too much trust and responsibility with Greene. It was also apparent that their commander in chief hesitated in his decision-making, unsure or untrusting of his own intuition.

Now, on the eve of the most important military operation of the war – indeed nothing less than the future of the country was at stake – Washington was assigning perhaps the most important task to the man who had just failed him. When others might have demoted Greene, reassigned him or even drummed him out of the army (as some were suggesting he do) after the falls of Fort Washington and Fort Lee, Washington kept Greene's status and rank in tact. Washington was again trusting in Greene, believing that this man – and he himself – would not make the same mistake twice.

Washington ended the meeting by stating that the crossing would commence on Christmas night and that the Americans would fall on the Hessians before dawn the next day. Would the American plan succeed or end in complete failure, ending any American chance for independence? Washington was gambling all on his men, believing they could rise to the occasion.

Provocative Questions:

- Knowing Greene's recent mistakes at Fort Washington and Fort Lee, would you have assigned him such an important role for the attack on Trenton? Why or why not?

- Why do you think Washington stuck by Greene?
- What contingencies might Washington make for ensuring Greene's success at Trenton?
- Did Washington's plan seem too complex or appropriate given what you know about the situation and the past performances of his men?
- Who was more to blame for the disasters at Fort Washington and Fort Lee: Washington or Greene?
- What could Washington or Greene done differently to prevent the failures there?
- Why do you think Washington was willing to give so much autonomy to Cadwalader and Ewing? What measures could Washington have taken to measure their progress or ensure their success?

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