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A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution
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Book Review: David McCullough's *1776*

While most American history students can probably identify the year 1776 as one of critical significance to their nation's history, few would likely be able to evaluate its importance much beyond the signing of the Declaration of Independence. David McCullough's book accomplishes much in giving this single year its due historical deference, at once putting a human face on a story often told at arm's length, and matter-of-factly in American history textbooks. In his signature narrative style, McCullough provides insight into the British perspective, an aspect of the War for Independence often overlooked by history students and teachers alike. In addition, he breathes life into a story, not only about Washington, but about the men on both sides of the conflict, which is at once frighteningly uncertain and intensely human.

One thing that McCullough does effectively is to showcase the significant odds that were stacked against the American colonists, and in favor of the British. Though many history students may recognize that American victory was somewhat of a long shot, McCullough makes the fear that was felt by the American military leaders tangible by weaving primary source accounts, their very words, into his prose. For example, in a letter from Washington to Joseph Reed, Washington admits, "Few people know the predicament we are in."[1] Later, one of Washington's top aides, Nathaniel Greene, admitted to John Adams that, "The Congress must not be overconfident. The fate of war is very uncertain."[2] Noting that the war was, in many ways a civil war, McCullough also brings to the reader's attention the fact that New York, a center of commerce and of significant value to the colonies in general, was actually a haven for Tories. To that effect, "Two-thirds of the property in New York belonged to Tories. The year before,

[1] McCullough, 79
[2] McCullough, 130

in 1775, more than half the New York Chamber of Commerce were avowed Loyalists. . . Across the East River on Long Island . . ., Loyalists were a decided majority."[3] With a dearth of support in many of the colonies, he makes it abundantly clear that it was not simply a possibility that the Americans would lose, but a likelihood.

Perhaps even more effective is McCullough's contrast of the British army with that of the Americans. While textbooks often portray British soldiers organized in lines, outfitted in proper red uniforms, and show Americans scattered in plain clothes, they do not do justice to the real differences that existed between the two sides. McCullough highlights not only their differences in resources, but the distinctly disparate nature of their training, discipline (or lack thereof), and composition. In one instance, McCullough tells of a point, during the siege of Boston, where the colonial army, starved of supplies and having received no real commitment from the Continental Congress for their desperately needed reinforcements, happened upon a British ship ladened with supplies that the Americans happily pilfered for their own use.[4] This clearly demonstrates the desperate nature of the colonial force, and its rather jarring reliance on "providence". During the British assault on New York, McCullough reports how "the contrast between such disorder and flagrant disregard for authority [of the Americans] and the perfectly orchestrated landing by Howe's troops could not have been more pronounced."[5] In addition, numerous anecdotes are provided to showcase the state of the colonial forces in their quest to fend off the British. Often half of the men in any given regiment were unfit for duty, either because of sickness (camp fever, small pox, dysentery), or a lack of adequate supplies. During their campaign in New York, for example, "180 men, nearly two-thirds of the regiment, including the commanding officer . . ., were too sick for duty."[6] McCullough also sheds light on the sometimes outright unbecoming conduct of many of the American soldiers. An entirely volunteer army (compared with Britain's

[3] McCullough, 118-119
[4] McCullough, 64
[5] McCullough, 161
[6] McCullough 150

professional military), the Americans were plagued with desertions which damaged their already modest forces. Also, as the American militia had only recently been organized, the expected term for duty was only a single year. At the end of that time, most men reported home to their real jobs, on farms or in the cities. This represents a stark contrast to the rosy picture often painted by textbooks of the American militia, not only about their ability to fight the British, but their devotion to doing so.

Among the most striking difference McCullough highlights between the American and British forces is with regard to leadership. Americans proudly pay homage to George Washington as a founding father and hero of the Revolution, but fail to recognize (or admit to) his very human shortcomings. Showing both his unique combination of grace under fire and his unfailing determination to do the best he could with what little he had, Washington is made a real hero for reasons that while he was extraordinary, he also had faults. One startling contrast was that of Washington with the British General Howe: ". . . at forty-five, or approximately the same age as George Washington, he had far greater experience than Washington, a far more impressive record, not to mention better-trained, better-equipped troops. . . He also had the ostensible advantage of experienced subordinate officers, professionals all, several of whom had marked ability."[7] McCullough criticizes Washington's leadership in conjunction with his praise of him, an important factor in the true and accurate appreciation of any historical figure. To that end, Washington was keenly aware of exactly how outnumbered, out-resourced and out-experienced he was. Despite these odds, he persevered, stating only that ". . . lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentlemen in the room that I this day declare with utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with."[8] This is one of the most valuable aspects of this book in its entirety. McCullough explores Washington in depth, revealing a side of him that few history students could say

[7] McCullough, 77
[8] McCullough, 184

that they knew. That is to say, that there is certainly more to Washington then tales of cherry trees and wooden teeth.

Despite his subtle praise for Washington and the plight of the colonists, one cannot walk away from reading *1776* without a renewed appreciation for the British as well. Especially considering how often the British are villainized with regard to the Revolution, McCullough offers a different and refreshing perspective on those who fought to maintain the geographical and political integrity of Mother England. McCullough first addresses the question of the British by discussing the very real opposition that existed to the war in Britain itself: "To much of the press and the opposition in Parliament, the American war and its handling could not have been more misguided. The *Evening Post* . . . called the war "unnatural, unconstitutional, unnecessary, unjust, dangerous, hazardous, and unprofitable"[9] (though realistically, "the decided majority of the Commons, like the people at large, stood behind the king."[10]) In addition, he describes how the British were outraged and disgusted by the prospect of "shedding British blood by British hands."[11] McCullough not only humanizes the British, but makes their intentions, fears and misgivings clear. In the first few chapters, McCullough oscillates between discussing the American side of a given confrontation, and the British side. In so doing, he paints a complete picture, justly offering both sides of this complex story. Lastly, he enumerates (perhaps in a backhanded way) the odds the Americans overcame to win the war by demonstrating the colossal efforts put forth by the British to tame the "rebels" and bring them back into submission of the crown (which, it is worth noting, as McCullough does, the British did not do in an effort to advocate tyranny, but because they quite honestly believed themselves to be in the right). To this end, he quotes

[9] McCullough, 9
[10] McCullough, 16
[11] McCullough, 12-13

a young British officer, who aptly states: “Recollect the strength, the resources, and above all the spirit of the British nation, which when aroused knows no opposition.”[12]

The Americans of course saw it differently. In the space of only a few pages, McCullough describes just how the purpose of the war shifted from “defense of their country and of their rightful liberties as freeborn Englishmen”[13] to freedom from the tyranny of the crown, and, implicitly, independence: “Never was a cause more important or glorious than that which you are engaged in. . . for if tyranny should prevail in this great country, we may expect liberty will expire throughout the world.”[14] As the war dragged on and it became increasingly clear it would not end as quickly as many had expected, the American leadership became bolder and more determined to win. This is demonstrated by the following quotation from Washington, used to rally his troops before the confrontation at Dorchester Heights, referring to the Boston Massacre: “remember it is the fifth of March, and to avenge the death of your brethren.”[15] The concept of liberty as an outcome of the Revolution was of course steadfastly championed by the timely signing of the Declaration of Independence, which for many breathed new life into the American effort. Despite its significance as a founding document and rallying call for the colonial militia, McCullough’s book spends little time discussing the Declaration itself, in favor of the trials and hardships suffered and overcome by Washington and his men (which success was admittedly necessary for the lofty words of the Declaration to carry any weight). He instead focuses on the actions of the men, great and small, that kept the effort going despite overwhelming obstacles; his underlying purpose being to show that without the courage and perseverance of these men, Declaration or not, the war could not have continued to the point of American victory as it did.

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[12] McCullough, 14
[13] McCullough, 54
[14] McCullough, 63
[15] McCullough, 95

Ultimately, *1776* is valuable in a number of ways: as a resource for teachers looking to deepen their knowledge of Washington and the early part of the war; as a means to show that those that fought in the Revolution on both sides were human; as an opportunity to offer the British perspective of the "war of rebellion" and as a means to develop historic empathy for those whose determination to not give up is largely responsible for the eventual American victory in the war.

As a teaching tool, *1776* could be utilized in several ways. Its narrative style, virtually constant incorporation of primary sources and structure which resembles a series of vignettes, makes it easy to excerpt and incorporate into different lessons on different aspects of the Revolution. For example, his discussions of the British army (disciplined, trained, equipped) versus the American militia (rowdy, inexperienced, lacking in supplies) could be used to highlight the strengths and weaknesses presented by each side. Additionally, *1776* is valuable in terms of the study of historical perspective. American history students often read primary source documents pertaining to American leadership and the experience of American soldiers, but these accounts, while valuable, only tell half of the story. McCullough's incorporation of British primary sources facilitates this type of comprehensive and fair discussion, helping students to become familiar with the British perspective. Lastly, *1776* enables students of history to explore aspects of the study of history which are routinely overlooked, such as the role of chance, and the contributions of so-called "minor" players in history. By describing the very real odds that the Americans were up against, how significant the role "providence" played, and just how often the Americans were rescued from near desperate circumstances by luck, McCullough illustrates how easily the end result could have been different (leading to an abundance of "what if" scenarios). He also shows how significant a role people like Nathaniel Greene and Henry Knox played in assuring if not American victory, then at least that they would stay in the war long enough to address the next challenge. Ultimately, *1776* offers teachers of history a plethora of options for its in-class use, and

represents a resource that makes American history and the practice of historical habits of mind accessible and available to students in a way a textbook never could.

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