

# Washington's Crossing Exemplified the Importance of Adaptability in Warfare

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A painting of George Washington (1776) by Charles Willson Peale. Brooklyn Museum, Public Domain

OPINION

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## *Commentary*

The morning of Dec. 26, 1776, did not start according to plan. The night before, George Washington had led 2,400 Continental Army soldiers across the Delaware River, thinking that two additional troop columns were doing the same at other designated crossing points. The Patriots were tasked with neutralizing a garrison of Hessian auxiliaries at Trenton, New Jersey, before pivoting to nearby British outposts.

Instead, only one column succeeded in crossing the Delaware, and hours behind schedule. Yet in this confluence of challenge, error, and bad breaks, Washington exhibited an enduring priority of the American military: adaptability. He pressed the attack, and his victory saved the Patriot cause.

Washington's crossing of the Delaware River was a desperate act. As 1776 drew to a close, the commander-in-chief feared that the defeat of the American rebellion was at hand. British General William Howe had captured New York City in mid-November, ending months of fighting for control of the American capital city. Running low on supplies and morale, Washington removed the Continental Army to Pennsylvania to rest and reset.

Throughout December, the situation of Washington's army became desperate. Many of his soldiers were sick and wounded—a little less than 4,000 were fit for duty, which was almost 1,000 under strength. Expiring enlistments worsened the situation, and the new year would bring the end of service for yet more men.

“Our little handfull is daily decreasing by sickness and Other causes,” Washington wrote to John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress. “Without aid, without considerable Succours and exertions on the part of the people,” he predicted that America would lose Philadelphia.

But back in New York City, General Howe felt confident of an impending British victory over the rebellion. He pivoted to focus on undermining the Patriot cause through imperial power. He established

outposts of troops in the mid-Atlantic interior, including a 1,500 Hessian garrison in the quiet town of Trenton, New Jersey.

Another commander might have resorted to winter quarters and wound licking. But instead of wallowing in these circumstances, Washington was tenacious—and adaptable.

Together with his officers and aide-de-camp Colonel Joseph Reed, Washington began meticulously planning a tactical surprise against Trenton. Three columns of troops marching in close order would cross the Delaware River and march to the garrison. Washington would personally command the column that would mount the pre-dawn northerly attack. Two more columns of Pennsylvania militia and Continental Army soldiers would cross further south. One would wage a diversionary attack against the British garrison at Bordentown, New Jersey, while the other prevented the enemy's retreat in that direction.

The entire operation would be conducted efficiently, and especially with secrecy. Washington commanded that “a profound silence ... be enjoyn'd” among the soldiers during the march.

Yet almost immediately the plan went awry. The crossing of Washington's column was delayed by low supplies and weather. A soldier recalled that “it alternately hailed, rained, snowed, and blew tremendously.” Infantrymen fought the elements as they loaded themselves and 18 3-, 4-, and 6-pound cannons into 40-60 feet long wooden flat-bottomed bateaus to make the less than 300 yard crossing. The column did not begin crossing the river until an hour and a half past sunset. Alongside the boats, cavalymen waded in chest-deep water, swimming their horses through frigid, icy water.

These difficult conditions delayed the column even further, rendering a pre-dawn attack impossible. Pressing on toward Trenton, Washington received word that one of his officers, General Adam Stephen, unaware of the planned attack, had attacked the garrison earlier that morning in a bid to avenge a recent engagement. Thinking the element of surprise now moot, Washington nonetheless pressed his men onwards.

When they arrived at Trenton, belatedly at 8 am, the column was cold and tired, but Washington had softened the opposition already. Earlier in the month, the commander-in-chief had stationed militia divisions at [crossing points on the Delaware River](#). These militia harassed the Hessian encampment, raiding sentry outposts and attacking foraging parties.

In response, commander Colonel [Johann Rall](#), an experienced German officer, had run his men ragged through observation duties and readiness exercises. Thus, Washington's column met an overstretched and paranoid outpost. The exhaustion of the German troops, together with a Christmas Day winter storm that seemed to negate any possibility of further attacks, relaxed Trenton's defenses at the opportune moment. Standing on the edge of the town after a long night of setbacks and delays, Washington's adaptability came to fruition. He commanded his men to attack.

The American military still prizes the adaptability that Washington showcased at Trenton. The [2024 Maneuver Warfighter Conference](#), held annually by the U.S. Army to showcase the latest military technology and discuss the priorities of the U.S. Armed Forces, focused on rapid adaptation.

Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle, Jr., the commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, said at the conference that "we train for certainty, we educate for uncertainty, and then we develop for the unknown." Washington understood the importance of contingency readiness, even as his competent military leadership, manifested in his placing militiamen along the Delaware to harass the British, improved his chances of victory at Trenton.

Washington's columns pressed the Hessians first into retreat, then to surrender. The American victory gave the Continental Army the morale and popular support it needed to fight another day, leading to subsequent victories at Assunpink Creek and Princeton.

Trenton is a testament to the importance of military adaptability, which remains a critical component of American military doctrine today.

*From RealClearWire*

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