



Remarks at the  
Centennial Celebration  
of the Statue of  
George Washington  
in Washington Park, Newark  
**November 2, 2012**

Timothy J. Crist

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# Remarks at the Centennial Celebration of the Statue of George Washington in Washington Park, Newark November 2, 2012

Over the past thirty years, I've passed this statue of George Washington hundreds of times, and the question that keeps occurring to me is, "Why is Washington standing?"

Guy Sterling's invitation to speak at this celebration led me to come up with my own answer to that question.

We tend to think of our leaders in heroic poses: leading troops into battle, making a stirring speech, or gazing confidently into the future. Consider the iconic images of George Washington that are familiar to all of us: crossing the Delaware, windswept and leaning forward in the prow of the boat; or tall and proud and resolute outside the Federal Building in lower Manhattan; or in profile looking like a Roman senator on the quarters we carry in our pockets.

But in Newark, our country's leaders appear in more human poses. At the Courthouse we have a seated Lincoln and here in Washington Park we have a standing Washington. Even in Gutzon Borglum's magnificent Wars of America sculpture in Military Park, George Washington may be in the lead, but Borglum didn't forget the wounded soldier or the grieving widow and children.

Our statues in Newark remind us that History does not unfold in a straight-line. Even the most just of causes, like ending slavery or the civil rights struggle, play out in fits and spurts with lots of setbacks and dead-ends. And of course, we know that's true of our individual lives. We may be among the fortunate few with a very clear sense of where we want to go and what we want to accomplish, but inevitably there are challenges and disappointments and failures that test our resolve and make us rethink our plans.

236 years ago this month, when George Washington marched his troops into Newark, he was in the thick of one of those testing periods—that in-between time of figuring out what comes next. Retreat or advance? Surrender or carry on? Stay the course or come up with a new plan?

November 1776 was one of real low points of the American Revolution. The odds against victory for the colonists, never high to begin with, were now almost overwhelming.

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The war was already 18 months old and still had almost five more years to play out. Leaders of the Continental Congress, gathered in Philadelphia, had pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor just four months earlier, on July 4, 1776. From the British perspective, the colonists had crossed the line into outright treason. They responded with the 18<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of shock and awe: 33,000 soldiers and sailors who formed the largest expeditionary force yet to cross the Atlantic. With thirty warships and four hundred transport vessels, it was as though a forest was floating off Sandy Hook. The Colonists had never seen anything like it.

Washington's response was both bold and reckless. Rather than initiate a series of tactical engagements and withdrawals that might inflict casualties and weary the British soldiers without risking his troops in an all-or-nothing battle, he chose to engage the British head-on. He moved 15,000 troops into positions on Long Island and in Manhattan.

It was a disastrous decision, and Washington's forces suffered a major defeat. He lost Long Island in a day, with heavy casualties and many soldiers taken prisoner by the British. But then, rather than follow the advice of his generals to retreat quickly and live to fight again another day, Washington doubled down and decided to fight for Manhattan. Again, it was not a wise decision.

On November 16, 1776, nearly all of the three thousand defenders of the American fort on the New York side of the Hudson River, near the present-day George Washington Bridge, were captured or killed. It was a catastrophic end to the disastrous New York campaign. The war almost ended there and then. However, the British failed to close the trap, and Washington and the remnants of his troops escaped across the Hudson and began a rapid retreat across New Jersey.

Lord Cornwallis, who was later to surrender at Yorktown, chased after Washington's retreating army. In Fort Lee, Cornwallis got so close that Washington's troops escaped only by leaving behind their guns, hundreds of tents, even their breakfast cooking on the fire. The retreat southward across New Jersey began on November 21. After crossing the Hackensack River and then the Passaic River, the army reached Newark on November 22. The soldiers were not an impressive sight. The road down the west bank of the Passaic was sloppy with mud following heavy rains. Many men had no shoes and their feet were wrapped in rags. No doubt many were planning their journeys home, since for two-thirds of them their enlistments ended in nine days and they would be free to go.

So, it was in this darkest hour of the war that Washington dismounted his horse in Newark. For me, whatever the sculptor intended, it is this moment that our Washington statue captures – that necessary moment of taking measure of a desperate situation, of summoning the courage to carry on the cause, of deciding what comes next.

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It was raining hard when the troops reached Newark and set up camp. The soldiers had no tents, having left them behind in Fort Lee, so they were exposed to the cold and wet as the rain continued that night and again the next day. The British were sure the rebellion was just about over. “The fact is,” one of them wrote, “their army is broken all to pieces, and the spirit of their leaders and their abettors is all broken. . . . I think one may venture to pronounce that it is well nigh over with them.”<sup>1</sup>

By tradition, it was while Washington’s army was camped in Military Park and elsewhere in Newark that Thomas Paine started to write his famous call to patriotism. You know the words, but listen to them again and think about the miserable conditions in which Paine started to write them:

“These are the times that try men’s souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

So, it can be argued that Newark was where Washington gained the resolve to carry on, first by retreating further to New Brunswick and then by laying plans for the important victories at the Battle of Trenton and the Battle of Princeton.

But Newark was also where the war again almost ended in defeat. After the rains ended on November 25, Lord Cornwallis and his army of 10,000 took off after Washington. But the rains that had made the encampment miserable for Washington’s army also made the roads between here and Fort Lee so thick with mud, that it took the British troops three days to reach Newark with their heavy baggage trains and artillery. Nonetheless, the British fully expected to find the Continental Army still here and ready to take a stand. They advanced in two columns, arriving in Newark about 1:00pm on November 28. But they found Newark empty of American troops, and no battle took place.

So, why is Washington standing by his horse? I believe it’s because he needed to stop and think about what would come next. Retreat or advance? Surrender or carry on? Stay the course or come up with a new plan? You know Washington’s answer. And each time you look at this statue, I hope you’ll recall just how difficult it was for Washington to come up with that answer—and how fortunate for us that he did.

TIMOTHY J. CRIST

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1. Lord Rawdon, cited by David McCullough, *1776*, p. 251.