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1776
Vintage David McCullough

By Marc Jordan

Marc Jordan

This year, many Americans will purchase David McCullough's *1776* for loved ones to mark transitions from matriculation to graduation. But this volume is itself a gift to America in a time of transition. Indeed, as our nation struggles to help Iraq make the leap from tyranny to democracy, David McCullough reminds us that while the battle for freedom is difficult and prospects seem grim, victory can be achieved through a combination of faith, serendipity, persistence, intellect and courage.

1776 provides a vivid portrayal of the American Revolution and the fight for our country's independence. It is rare for historical writing to combine factual accuracy and vivid storytelling, but *1776* achieves both. In most revolutionary accounts, we are told the story of America's fight for independence, but not the story of the daily struggles and tragedies of our ragtag militia that McCullough tells.

McCullough takes readers into the minds of the British, bringing to life their attitudes toward America's quest for independence. When debating how to handle the rebellion in America, Lord Sandwich, in the British House of Commons, referred to the American militia as "raw, undisciplined, cowardly men." British generals referred often to the war as a fox hunt, yet failed to capture the biggest fox of them all -- Washington and his army. The British sorely misjudged the resolve of America's "rabble in arms." One general was overheard saying, "If a good bleeding can bring those Bible-faced Yankees to their senses, the fever of independency should soon abate."

Americans obviously know the outcome of this great quest for freedom as we enjoy its fruits daily. McCullough, however, takes a much more detailed approach at the American Revolution. His vivid accounts of battle scenes give the reader a greater understanding of the seemingly insurmountable task of freedom. It's a miracle the Continental Army survived so many early defeats to fight another day. At several points throughout McCullough's portrayal, wind, rain and storm saved the rebels from imminent disaster. Many soldiers, including Washington himself, attributed these interventions to the Divine Hand of Providence. There were worn shoes, sparse rations, torn and tattered clothing, and letters about absent loved ones and death. Unlike other historical accounts of the Revolution, McCullough paints a picture of the American struggle leaving the reader with a sense of despair at the realities of the war.

"These are the times that try men's souls," Thomas Paine wrote during the fateful year of 1776, and indeed they were. Struggling and barely persevering from humiliating and costly defeats, plagued by sickness and desertions, the American army staggered across New Jersey with British and Hessian troops in close pursuit. Enlistments of all the American troops were due to expire January 1, 1777, and their beleaguered leader George Washington wrote: "I think the game is pretty near up."
When all seemed lost, Washington in a desperate attempt to strike a blow before his army disintegrated, led his men across the Delaware River in a winter storm and surprised a Hessian force at Trenton, taking nearly 900 captives. News of the stunning victory spread as rapidly as horses could travel, breathing new life to war-torn America. Trenton was the decisive battle, the miraculous turnaround that affected the fate of the American Revolution. Of that battle, British historian Sir George Otto Trevelyan wrote, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting effects upon the history of the world."

Humiliated by the American victory and not to be outdone, the British sent Cornwallis with 8,000 men to finish off Washington's army. Leaving 3,000 men at Princeton, Cornwallis marched on Trenton with the rest, but Washington slipped behind him and fell upon the British force at Princeton, winning another decisive victory in the struggle for American independence.

Indeed, 1776 is remembered by historians not only as America's birth date, the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed, but also as the year in which a series of terrible setbacks for the rebels -- along with dreadful suffering, illness, hunger, disillusionment, discouragement and fear -- gave way in December to a stunning reversal of fortune, when for the first time it seemed possible that the fledgling country and its ragtag army might actually have a chance against the mighty British Empire.

The Revolution would last nearly six more years, but these pivotal battles turned the tide and gave America the confidence it needed to ultimately defeat the British Empire. McCullough's account is thorough, instructive, and well written. It is truly appreciated that David McCullough would engage his historical expertise to bring to life America's truly greatest generation. *1776* is a lesson in history every American could benefit from presently.