

# TEN Crucial Days

*THE ROAD TO LIBERTY*

Lesson Plans Developed by  
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To accompany NJN Public Television's Documentary  
*Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty*



Public Television

## How to Win a War You Should Lose

**Grade Level:** 6–12 *United States History*

**Time Needed:** Two periods

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

1. Describe the events of December 1776–January 1777 involving the victories of Washington at Trenton and Princeton.
2. Identify the factors affecting Washington’s situation in December 1776.
3. Analyze the factors and choose a course of action.
4. Compare the effects of the use of force and the use of public opinion on the outcome of wars.

### **NJCCC Standards Grades 6–12:**

- 6.4.E.4.** Analyze strategic elements used during the Revolutionary War, discuss turning points during the war, and explain how the Americans won the war against superior resources.
- 6.4.E.5.** Analyze New Jersey’s role in the American Revolution, including New Jersey’s Constitution of 1776 as a revolutionary document, why some New Jerseyans became Loyalists, and the Battles of Trenton, Princeton, and Monmouth.
- 6.1.A.2.** Use critical thinking skills to interpret events, recognize bias, point of view, and context.

### **Key Terms:**

- Hessians** n. German soldiers, from Hesse-Cassel, Hesse-Hanau, Brunswick, and several other small German states, who were hired by the British government or sent to fight with the British army to repay a debt to the British king.
- Musket** n. A standard firearm issued to both British and American soldiers in the Revolutionary War. Muskets were single-shot, smooth-bore weapons with an accurate range of under 75 yards.
- Bayonet** n. A three-sided blade with a sharp point that could be attached to the end of a musket, allowing the musket to be used as a pike or a spear, as well as a firearm.

**Background for Teachers:**

By the end of the year in which the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, it looked as if the Declaration would soon be just another piece of wasted paper. The heady successes of the early stages of the Revolutionary War—when the Americans had driven the British out of the Massachusetts countryside, bottled them up in Boston, punished them when they forced the Americans off Breed’s Hill in 1775, and besieged Boston until they retreated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in March 1776—seemed like distant memories by December 1776. The British had regrouped, received reinforcements, and marched from Canada to occupy a more strategic location at New York City. From there they could control access to the Hudson Valley and be within easy sailing distance of New England or the South.

George Washington had brought his new army south to New York to try to prevent a British occupation of this strategic city, but the Continental army was clearly overmatched by the expanded forces of the British. In one battle after another, Washington was forced to withdraw, often in a hurry, before the lockstep British battle machine. It reached the point where a key facet of Washington’s battle plan was to guarantee a safe escape route. By the fall, Generals William Howe and Charles Cornwallis had chased Washington from Brooklyn to Harlem to White Plains and then across the Hudson and across New Jersey. When New Jersey, too, proved an unsafe haven, Washington retreated across the Delaware into the relative safety of Pennsylvania. His army, which had comprised more than 20,000 men in the summer, had shrunk to around 3,000 by the end of November. At the Battle of Trenton, Washington’s army had been bolstered by reinforcements to approximately 5,000 men. Twenty-four hundred of these soldiers would successfully cross the Delaware and attack Trenton on the morning of December 26. The British appeared so confident that there wouldn’t be an attack during the winter months that they withdrew their main force back to the comforts of New York City for the winter. In doing so, they left a string of fortified towns throughout New Jersey, including Perth Amboy, Brunswick, Princeton, Trenton, Bordentown, and Mount Holly. But the nine to ten miles between these occupied towns left them somewhat isolated and unable to offer each other mutual support.

By mid-December, things had gotten even worse for Washington and his men. Food and supplies were scarce in Washington’s winter camp. Many soldiers had gone home, and the enlistments of many others were slated to expire in January. Washington himself became convinced that the army could only last another ten days, and that when it dissolved, so would the fledgling nation’s bid for independence. Yet, as underdogs had sometimes done in the past and would do again, Washington came up with a plan to wrest victory from the jaws of defeat. By deploying his small forces in the most effective way and using shrewd psychology, careful planning, reliable intelligence, courage, and determination, he could outweigh his adversary’s advantage in numbers.

How he managed to do this is one of the great stories of the Revolution, made even greater by the fact that it is not a legend or an exaggeration. It is just what he did.

**Procedures:**

Previous Night's Homework:

- I. On a map of New York, students should mark the locations where Washington's troops tried to stop the British from occupying New York, and the route of Washington's retreat through New York, New Jersey, and into Pennsylvania in the second half of 1776. Use at least one textbook source and one Internet source to gather this information.

Day 1:

- II. Do Now: Students should take out their maps from homework and add arrows, showing the direction of both armies' movements during the actions described above.
- III. Anticipatory Set: Teacher Question: From the homework you did, can we safely assume that the British won the war and put down Washington and the rebellion?
  - A. (Students will probably say no, since they should know that we're independent of Britain.)
  - B. If you know that the British didn't win, how is that possible? We will explore that today.
- IV. Show the first few minutes of the video *Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty*, up to the point where Washington is quoted as saying that the army can't hold out more than about ten more days.
- V. Divide students into groups of three to try to plan a strategy for Washington that will accomplish the following goals:
  - A. Keep his army from getting destroyed
  - B. Score a significant victory against British troops
  - C. Create the impression among Americans that Washington can defeat the British in the long run
  - D. Create the impression among the British that the war will be long and difficult for them to win

Materials:

Maps of the New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania area, with the ferry crossings and garrison strengths included.

Statistics: British troops: approx. 50,000 total; 30,000 in New York area

American troops: approx. 5,000

Weather information:

- December 1776: Severe weather in the NJ/NY/PA area. (Two of Washington's men froze to death on the way to Trenton; the temperature warmed up in January to about 50 degrees.)
- Roads: Virtually no paved roads outside major cities of New York and Philadelphia. No snowplows. Moving large numbers of men, horses, and wagons in winter is

slippery, then becomes extremely muddy and slow going.

- River transportation: Difficult due to icy conditions.

For all the above reasons, most military operations were done in the late spring, summer, and early fall, with little activity in the winter.

VI. Before the end of the period, several groups may present their plans, if complete.

## Day 2

VII. Presentations, cont.

- A. Have remaining groups present their plans.
- B. Show remainder of video Ten Crucial Days.

VII. Assignment:

Students will answer the following questions, based on the video and their own group work:

- A. How did Washington's plan seek to keep the army from being destroyed?
- B. What did he do so that the Americans had a chance to defeat the British?
- C. Which side seemed to show the greatest motivation? Why do you think so?
- D. Could Washington have defeated the British army altogether?
- E. What mistakes did the British make?
- F. How do you think the situation facing Washington's army might change as a result of these two victories?

### **Homework:**

Find examples from other wars, before or after the American Revolution, in which motivation and resourcefulness allowed smaller, less powerful armies to defeat larger and more powerful ones. Explain one such case[Insert 'in an essay'?].

### **Assessment:**

- Students should score 80 percent or higher on a content-based objective quiz on the topic of this lesson.
- Assess the understanding of the basic concepts in the group work presented by students in class.
- Students should apply the concept of the victories at Princeton and Trenton to other battles that they research for homework.

**Links:**

Hessian Barracks:

<http://www.barracks.org/>

Battle of Trenton:

[http://www.theamericanrevolution.org/battles/bat\\_tren.asp](http://www.theamericanrevolution.org/battles/bat_tren.asp)

<http://www.patriotresource.com/battles/trenton.html>

<http://www.myrevolutionarywar.com/battles/761226.htm>

[http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle\\_trenton1776.html](http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle_trenton1776.html)

Battle of Princeton:

<http://www.patriotresource.com/battles/princeton.html>

<http://www.myrevolutionarywar.com/battles/770103.htm>

<http://virtualology.com/revolutionarywarhall/BATTLEOFPRINCETON.COM/>

Revolutionary War in New Jersey

<http://www.doublegv.com/ggv/NJrev.html>

[http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/HISTORICALMAPS/REVOLUTIONARYWAR/Revolutionary\\_War.html](http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/HISTORICALMAPS/REVOLUTIONARYWAR/Revolutionary_War.html)

<http://www.njskylands.com/hsAmRev225.htm>