

TEN Crucial Days

THE ROAD TO LIBERTY

Lesson Plans Developed by
American Institute for History Education

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To accompany NJN Public Television's Documentary
Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty



Public Television

George Washington as Hero Figure

Grade Level: 9–12 *United States History*

Time Needed: One 45-minute period

Objectives: Students will be able to:

1. Define for themselves the term *hero*.
2. Explain how or if Washington's actions during the planning and execution of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton exemplified "heroic" qualities.

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.
- 6.1.A.4.** Analyze data in order to see persons and events in context.
- 6.1.A.8.** Compare and contrast competing interpretations of current and historical events.

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.
- Frontal assault** n. A battle tactic in which one side attacks the enemy by sending large numbers of troops directly against their positions.
- Strategic retreat** n. A retreat not done because the army is losing a battle, but for a tactical purpose, such as to draw enemy troops into a more vulnerable position or to prevent your own army from being trapped in an indefensible location.

Background:

It has certainly become a cliché that George Washington was a hero of the American Revolution. But, having said that, we need to consider what that actually means. This is especially true today, when the term *hero* is used very freely to describe everything from a person who fearlessly risks his/her own life to save the lives of others to just a very big sandwich.

Perhaps we need to agree on a definition of what a hero is. Here are some suggested definitions:

1. a mythological or legendary figure, often of divine descent, endowed with great strength or ability
b: an illustrious warrior c: a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities d: one who shows great courage
2. the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work a: the central figure in an event, period, or movement
3. an object of extreme admiration and devotion : [IDOL](#)

Adapted from *Webster's Dictionary*

2. From the [Greek](#) in [mythology](#) and [folklore](#), a *hero* (male) or *heroine* (female) are characters who, in the face of danger and adversity, or from a position of weakness, display [courage](#) and the will for selflessness, that is, *heroism*, for some greater [good](#), originally of [martial](#) courage or excellence but extended to more general [moral](#) excellence.

Stories of heroism may serve as [moral examples](#), impressing a culture's ethical code, especially for the young. In classical antiquity, *hero cults*, veneration of deified or semi-deified heroes such as [Heracles](#), [Perseus](#), or [Achilles](#), played an important role in [ancient Greek religion](#). Later emperors employed hero worship for their own [apotheosis](#), that is, [cult of personality](#). From this usage, *hero* much like [idol](#) may simply refer to a [celebrity](#).

In mythology and legend, a man, often of divine ancestry, who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his bold exploits, and favored by the gods.

A person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life.

Does Washington at Trenton and Princeton live up to these definitions? We can apply the definitions to Washington more easily by breaking them down into individual points:

1. Faced danger and adversity
2. Position of weakness ("underdog" factor)
3. Displayed courage
4. Displayed selflessness, including putting his/her life at risk. Motivated by drive to achieve some "greater good" or nobility of purpose, not just narrow self-interest'?
5. Displayed military or moral excellence
6. Served as role model for others, especially children
7. Heroic qualities led to "cult of personality"
8. Displayed physical and/or moral strength

9. Received praise or fame for his/her actions
10. Favored by deities
11. Central figure in an event

In the course of this event, the video *Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty* demonstrates how Washington exhibited at least 11 of the 12 characteristics mentioned in the definitions of a hero. After successfully forcing the British, under General Sir William Howe, to evacuate Boston, Washington moved the army south. That move was designed to prevent the British from occupying the port of New York, which seemed like their most logical next move. When Howe's forces did arrive in New York, Washington's army, now numbering over 20,000 men, put up strong resistance but could not stop the reinforced British army and fleet from taking the city. In heavy fighting, but always keeping an escape route open, Washington practiced a strategic retreat across New York and New Jersey, engaging the British when he could, but never allowing himself to be cornered. He recognized that the Revolution was alive as long as he still had an army at large to fight it, and preserving that army became a major part of his strategy.

By the fall and early winter of 1776, Washington's army, shrunken by casualties, illness, and expired enlistments, was on the run. The British army had driven them across New Jersey, and the Patriots took refuge to lick their wounds across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. General Howe was confident that his army could rest through the winter, believing that Washington's army was severely weakened (which it was) and posed no threat to British control of New York and New Jersey. He left a string of small garrisons in a number of central New Jersey towns to monitor Washington, and brought the bulk of the British force back to the relative comfort of New York City for the rest of the winter. It should be remembered that armies in those days seldom fought during the winter. Military leaders generally found the logistics of winter fighting much too difficult to make it worthwhile. Although Howe was a loyal British soldier, he had long been a critic of British policy toward the colonies, was sympathetic toward the colonists, and was hopeful of working out a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

By early December, Washington's position was becoming quite desperate. His army numbered only about 3,000 men, many of whose enlistments were due to expire on January 1; he was low on funds and supplies; and he was faced with harsh winter conditions. He reached the conclusion that without some change, some dramatic turnaround, the army could only last about ten more days. Around December 20, he received reinforcements of about 2,000 men, bringing his force up to a total of slightly more than 5,000 troops.

He then decided on a thoroughly surprising and dramatically risky course of action. He would do the last thing the British would expect him to do—attack in the winter, at an unlikely spot, when the enemy's guard would be down. The plan was to attack the town of Trenton, which was garrisoned by about 1,500 Hessian troops, on the morning of December 26. He took 2,400 of his men, nearly all the men fit for active duty at that time, boldly crossed the Delaware River, and led a march along icy, snow-covered, dirt roads with cannons and horses. The Patriots made it to Trenton without being detected by the Hessians. The weather during the march was so severe that two of Washington's men died of hypothermia along the way.

The attack was a success. The Hessian troops were caught by surprise, fought well, but were overcome by Washington's superior numbers and shrewd tactics. Twenty-two of the Hessians were killed and about 900 were taken prisoner. The remainder retreated back to Princeton. Washington took the prisoners and badly needed supplies, and went back to Pennsylvania. Word of this surprise

victory spread quickly and galvanized the Patriots' cause.

When General Howe heard of the surprise attack, he sent General Cornwallis to Princeton with reinforcements. A few days later, Washington came back and reoccupied Trenton. Cornwallis led his troops from Princeton to attack Washington's forces, fighting their way into the northern part of Trenton. During the night, Washington left a small force in Trenton, with a large number of campfires burning, to give the impression that the whole force was there. Meanwhile, using information about a back road to Princeton that the British were unaware of, Washington moved most of his troops toward Princeton, encountering advancing units of the British outside of Princeton. When British and Patriot troops saw each other, fighting began on the Clarke Farms. The battle raged for a short time, and Washington was seen by all courageously leading a crucial attack against the British, conspicuous on his horse and a likely target for British muskets. Many of his officers were sure he would be killed. Fortunately for the Revolution, he survived, and the battle was a victory for the Continental army. The British withdrew, scaled back their occupation of Central Jersey to two towns closer to New York, and once again went into winter quarters.

The big change was that the British no longer thought of the war as almost over. They acknowledged that the colonists were not as worn down as they had believed and that the war would take longer than previously believed. Public opinion in England, which had always been divided about colonial policy, became even more divided over the war, and soon the British public was impatient for it to end. The other big change was that the colonists were now more energized and had more faith that their cause was winnable. Even though the victories, as battles went, were small-scale ones, the psychological effect was immense. Washington had established himself as a bold, courageous leader, not just a master of the strategic retreat. He was now also a true hero figure, who personified the Revolution in the minds and imaginations of the American rebels.

Procedures:

- I. Students will review definitions of the term hero. They will be asked to provide their own definitions first and then review the definitions provided in the Background section of this lesson plan.
- II. Students should list the characteristics of a hero, as discussed in class and as listed in the Background section.
- III. Students will watch the NJN video Ten Crucial Days, focusing on the actions of George Washington.
- IV. Students will break into groups of three and, using a checklist of characteristics of a hero, mark off which ones applied to Washington in this situation. Full-class discussion will try to establish whether Washington was heroic and, if he was, what value that had to the cause of the Revolution at the time.

Assignment:

Select a current public figure and, using the list of heroic characteristics developed in class, determine whether that person qualifies as a hero or not. Submit a written explanation for your answer.

Assessment:

Students should score 80 percent or higher on a content-based quiz on the material about the Battles of Trenton and Princeton in the video.

Assess students' understanding of the characteristics of a hero and the effect on society of heroes, as students work with these concepts in class discussion and in the homework assignment.

Links:

Hessian Barracks:

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

Battle of Trenton:

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

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

Characteristics of a Hero Worksheet

A person considered to be a hero exhibits many of the following qualities. Add more to the list that you feel might have been missed:

1. Faces danger and adversity
2. Position of weakness (“underdog” factor)
3. Displays courage
4. Displays selflessness, including putting his/her life at risk
5. Motivated by drive to achieve some “greater good” or nobility of purpose, not just personal interests
6. Displays military or moral excellence
7. Serves as role model for others, especially children
8. Heroic qualities lead to “cult of personality”
9. Displays physical and/or moral strength
10. Receives praise or fame for his/her actions
11. Favored by deities
12. Central figure in an event
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____