

These Are the Times for Thanks

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It's Thanksgiving Day of this sesquicentennial year of these United States. The big 250th anniversary celebrations (to the extent there was any) focused on the early July days 250 years ago when the Continental Congress declared the independence of the states from Great Britain and its crowned head, King George III. But how thankful were the rebels in the newly independent states for their lot in late November, when we, two and one half centuries later, celebrate Thanksgiving?

Late November 1776 was one of the darkest periods of the American Revolution, the low point of the patriot cause.

On the Sixteenth, British and Hessian forces stormed Fort Washington in upper Manhattan, capturing roughly 2,800 American troops along with vital stores of weapons, ammunition, and tents — the worst American loss of the war.

Three days later, General Cornwallis crossed the Hudson and threatened Fort Lee in New Jersey. Washington's army barely escaped with the artillery saved, abandoning the fort, its supplies — even the soldiers' cooking pots.

Left with only a few thousand demoralized, ill-equipped soldiers, Washington led a hasty and dispirited retreat towards Princeton and New Brunswick. British forces followed in close pursuit, entering Newark before the end of the month.

Congress, fearing an advance on Philadelphia, prepared to abandon the city, fleeing to Baltimore in mid-December.

Thousands of Jersey residents took oaths of allegiance to the Crown as British forces approached. The rebellion sure seemed effectively over.

It was during this retreat — around late November and early December — that Thomas Paine, serving as an aide in the retreating army, began writing one of his most famous pamphlets, *The American Crisis*, with its famous opening: "These are the times that try men's souls." Published in December, it helped steady flagging morale.

Declaring independence had been comparatively easy; achieving it proved extremely difficult, and by late November 1776 the Continental Army was shrinking daily, many enlistments expiring at year's end. General Washington's position looked bleak indeed, and the survival of the United States looked well-nigh impossible.

The turnaround would come only weeks later with the surprise attacks at Trenton and Princeton.

Had the rebels given up on what is now our Thanksgiving, we might have much less to give thanks for today.

And it may very well be that we are entering a difficult period to rival the cause of independence in November 1776. We would do well to resist giving in when times get extremely tough, and remember our sesquicentennial, which provides good lessons not limited to the celebratory.

Give thanks, and carry on. Happy Thanksgiving.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.