COLONIAL TERRORIST, AMERICAN HERO: TWO HISTORIES OF THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN INSURGENCY

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Two books on the American Revolution – one history and one novel – offer some surprising insights into the nature of America's first encounter with insurgency: it's own. As these the books demonstrate, the American rebels, ably led by George Washington, adopted insurgent-style tactics to defeat their British counterparts. The lessons learned (and ignored) by the British, and the experiences of both armies offer valuable insights to contemporary observers of the United States' efforts to combat insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Washington's Crossing
David Hackett-Fischer
(2004. New York: Oxford University Press.), 564 Pages.

The Glorious Cause
Jeff Shaara
(2002. USA: Random House, Ballantine.), 680 Pages.

Jeff Shaara introduces his novel *The Glorious Cause* with a note to the reader that attempts to capture the grandeur of the American Revolution. It was, he writes, "in many ways our first civil war, and eventually [it] became the first true world war" (Shaara 2002, viii). While perhaps true, his novel and a recent Pulitzer Prize winning historical examination, *Washington's Crossing* by David Hackett-Fischer, together reveal that the Revolution provided still another first—America's first insurgency. To the typical contemporary American observer of international relations, the term *insurgency* evokes an ideologically driven foreign menace. In 1776, the founding fathers and their followers fit precisely into such a description in the minds of the British superpower. These two books offer a portal to that time and to the founding myths of the United States. Their authors tell the stories of Washington, Hamilton, Lafayette, and Knox, and reveal unknown back-stories with a historian's glee.

Jeff Shaara's 680-page tome provides a macro perspective, depicting the whole of the revolutionary war, while Hackett-Fischer's more focused account examines the lead-up and immediate aftermath of George Washington's fateful amphibious assault on Trenton, New Jersey. The fighting force that carried out the risky attack at Trenton is skillfully characterized by Hackett-Fischer as a motley crew: part militia, part army, and all rebel. His book uses this nascent Continental Army as a prism through which to see the birth of a nation. Conversely, Shaara's novel traces the birth of an army, from small bands of uncoordinated attackers to a

unified, well-drilled, and disciplined force. Both books lend credence to Mao Tse-Tung's famed assertion that "Guerilla hostilities are the university of war" (Tse-Tung 1961,73).

While the political backdrop of the revolution (from the Boston Tea Party to the Declaration of Independence) is well known, the works of Shaara and Hackett-Fischer together expose a second, more immediate type of politics. They describe the imperative of local support in an insurgency. For example, each battle was not only fought *against* the British army, but also *for* public opinion. General Washington's victory at Trenton defeated only 1,500 opposing soldiers, and even then these soldiers were German mercenaries (the *Hessians*), not the polished Red Coats of the English Empire. The importance of that victory, however, was not merely military but also emotional, as it demonstrated to the fledgling American nation that the war could actually be won. Recognizing the insurgency as a domestic phenomenon has important implications for contemporary U.S. policy, as policy-makers struggle to understand and properly react to maturing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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The back cover of *The Glorious Cause* ironically evokes the centrality of George Washington's Christmas Night crossing of the Delaware River as the central development in the Revolutionary War. The novel that precedes the back cover, however, seems minimally interested in the details of the said crossing. What constitutes the crux of Hackett-Fischer's history garners only three lines in Shaara's novel, "With a sharp cry, growing into a long high cheer, the troops began to charge into Trenton. [Line Break] The Route was complete, the Hessians completely stunned by the surprise assault" (Shaara 2002, 158). The rest is left to the reader's imagination. This style, which forgoes detailed descriptions of battles and tactics, marks the most notable departure of Jeff Shaara's writing style from that found in his father Michael's civil war masterpiece, *The Killer Angels.* This absence of detail certainly disappoints in terms of the richness of the reading experience, but those so interested can look to a historian-come-story-teller like Hackett-Fischer who revels in precisely such details.

Hackett-Fischer, despite (or perhaps because of) limiting his focus to a relatively short timeframe (the winter of 1776-1777), provides a fantastically readable and surprisingly (for its scope) epic snapshot of the American nation in transition. This painstakingly researched volume demonstrates, through detailed analyses of tactics and maneuvers, how George Washington came to order the Christmas night attack across the Delaware River. Interestingly, he describes how the American insurgents were not like today's insurgents, who are characterized by a relative dearth of technology. On the contrary, he writes that while "the standard practice in European armies during the 19th century was to use two or three 'battalion guns' for every thousand infantry, the Americans advanced on Trenton with seven or eight guns for every thousand muskets, a very large proportion" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 223). Henry Knox, the artillery captain for the revolutionary

army plays a central role in both books, and demonstrates that insurgents are not defined by the weapons they wield.

The American Revolution, as described by Hackett-Fischer and Shaara, reveals several other vital insights into insurgents and counter-insurgency. While the term "asymmetric warfare" normally refers to an imbalance of fire-power between two foes, these books shed light upon a secondary asymmetry – one of unequal *motivations*. From the British perspective, it was a war of limited aims (to return a colony to the empire's rule), and one fought by soldiers and officers driven by honor. The American rebels, by contrast, fought a decidedly *un*limited war for their survival as a self-determined nation. Hackett-Fischer contrasts Europe's "aristocratic elites, who thought of war as a nobleman's vocation and a pursuit of honor" with Americans who "fought not for the sake of fighting, but for the sake of winning" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 370). Shaara provides the color in his depiction of one of the many rants of British General Clinton who criticized that pyrrhic victory at Bunker Hill (termed Breed's Hill by the British) and claimed "there was the perfect opportunity to go around, cut the rebel retreat from behind…but of course, there would not have been such…*pageantry*"(Shaara 2002, 40). The British took a straight-down-the-middle approach at Bunker Hill, and despite winning the battle, the heavy losses they sustained reverberated throughout the war and colored the strategies of the Commander-brothers, General William Howe and Admiral Richard Howe.

For the American rebels, fighting and winning was no small task in this battle of David and Goliath proportions. Both Hackett-Fischer and Shaara evoke the landing of the British Navy in New York harbor and the awe that such a magnificent display of force inspired in the local population. Hackett-Fischer puts the numbers of the attacking force at a full *two-thirds* of the British army, complimented by nearly 30,000 troops-for-hire from Germanic States (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 33). Their various landings and movements throughout the colonies during the war went largely unimpeded. Yet, among the most important lessons these books teach is that a war is not won through troop movements alone.

How did the ragtag American rebels, whose bloodied feet stained the snow-bound trails upon which they marched, defeat the most skilled army in the world? Hackett-Fischer and Shaara both describe how the British contributed to their own defeat through their behavior and biases. The British Army, and to an even greater extent, the highly professional Germanic troops who accompanied them, held a profound disrespect for their enemy. Hackett-Fischer writes of the Hessians, "they despised the American language of liberty and freedom as the cant of cowards, traitors and poltroons" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 59). To these European troops, the rebels were not only unworthy opponents, they were war criminals as well. "By eighteenth century European rules of war, civilians in arms could be put to death," writes Hackett-Fischer (2004, 180). Yet American militias for much of the Revolutionary War were little more than civilians in arms. As even the American General Charles Lee refers to them in *The Glorious Cause,* they were an "outrageous band of amateurs, these farmers" (Shaara 2002, 430). Such disrespect yielded an ill-advised dismissal of the enemy

and a reasoning that seemed to dismiss the fighting capabilities of the Americans simply because they employed different techniques.

The British dismissal of American troops was compounded by the fact that while force-projection was the logistical feat that allowed the war to occur, the force projectors (i.e. the policy-makers) in London scarcely had any connection to the war itself. When British General Lord Cornwallis returned to London on leave during the war, he was astonished by the detachment of the government from the foreign war. "Now that I am here," Shaara quotes Cornwallis, "I begin to understand how very far away [the war] is. It is simply not *real*. To the ministry, even to His Majesty, it seems that America is only some place on a map" (Shaara, 2002, 475).

That place on the map played host to a palpable strategic tension within the wartime army. Before being sent to America as Commanders, the aforementioned Howe brothers were "moderate Whigs" who "did not support strong measures against America," and instead "sympathized with American demands for rights" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 70). They favored an overall strategy of *pacification*, which was accompanied by the minimally aggressive, slow moving tactics of occupation and conversion of the people, including invitations to take an oath of allegiance to the Crown in order to avoid punishment (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 161). From a theoretical standpoint, this strategy could have worked by eventually convincing the local population that the British army was generally benevolent and, more importantly, not going anywhere. However, this strategy represented only one pole of the invaders' behaviour.

The other pole was what the Germanic troops called *Shreklichkeit.* This was war by punishment—a philosophy that routinely denied the typical mercy granted to captured soldiers, allowing instead for summary executions and abuse of the local population. As Hackett-Fischer writes, "plundering became pillage, so pillage became rape" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 179). Shaara offers a more haunting perspective from the American spy, Nathan Hale, hidden deep within a British camp in New York, who hears the screams of a young woman being raped and sees, among the British officers, "smiles, reacting to the screams of the woman only as some shared experience" (Shaara 2002, 83). As a result, before the American colonials could be pacified by the British strategy, they were radicalized by the German mercenaries' tactics. Thus, the conflict between the two poles of British strategy provided for the ultimate failure of both.

This destructive tension between the tendencies of the Howe brothers and those of the Germanic officers reflects the differences between counter-insurgency and anti-insurgency strategies. The Howe brothers understood that counter-insurgency hinged on the necessity of recapturing the sentiments of the American population. The Germanic anti-insurgent tactics hoped to extinguish the insurgents one-by-one. Yet, as the British experience in America demonstrates, a poorly executed anti-insurgency can ruin even the best-laid counter-insurgency plans.

While Shaara is no military historian and his prose largely avoids discussions of military philosophy, he does contribute one particularly informative insight about the centrality of land occupation in the European way of war. In *The Glorious Cause,* Shaara effectively paints the British leadership as obsessed with the holding of territory. As Washington discovered, General Howe believed "defeating your opponent is best accomplished not by defeating his army, but by capturing his capital" (Shaara 2002, 239). In a land the size of the United States in 1776 (essentially the east coast of the current United States), such a strategy was doomed to failure. Hackett-Fischer describes how Howe attempted to create an "extended chain" of garrisons from the Delaware River to the Hudson River: "the area was less than five percent of New Jersey and a tiny fraction of the continent, and yet it stretched the resources of the British Army to the limit" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 188). Even the most powerful armies can be spread only so thin. Observers of insurgency, such as journalist Robert Taber, agree; "the 'clear and hold' strategy is always doomed to failure because the government … cannot hold many such areas without dangerously scattering its forces" (Taber 2002, 86). Washington responded to the tactics of the British by fashioning a guerilla-style strategy, which placed minimal value on land. Soon after capturing Trenton (following the Delaware crossing), Washington quickly abandoned it to keep his army on the move. Hackett-Fischer posits, "he resolved to keep his army in being, but it would be a 'retreating army,' defending what it could, yielding when it must" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 102). While to some the American Revolution represented the birth of the modern West, the tactics employed by General Washington had a distinctively eastern bent—a yin and yang character that evokes Mao's famed lines, "the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue" (Quoted in Taber 2002, 17). At their foundations, all insurgencies are marked by a profound flexibility.

Washington's flexible style of leadership was epitomized by emphasis on an open exchange with his fellow generals—a crucial element of Hackett-Fischer's history of the Delaware crossing. In a feat of research, Hackett-Fischer offers insight into the details of the various tactics proposed during these exchanges. For example, Horatio Gates, according to the author, advocated a "Fabian Defense," whereby "Americans should avoid a big battle, retreat into the interior…and wear down the European armies by slow attrition" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 78). This is precisely how Taber characterizes guerilla war: *campaigns* of attrition in place of *battles* of attrition (Taber 2002, 98). General Lee, a near villain in Shaara's account, advocated still another style of attack, one premised upon guerilla-style lightening attacks of small groups against the stronger British ally, followed by subsequent retreat (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 78). Hackett-Fischer asserts that Washington and the American Revolutionaries adopted a hybrid approach, assimilating both strategies when necessary. Sun-Tzu – who said that the ideal attack is one against your enemy's *strategy* – would have certainly approved (Sun-Tzu 1963, 77).[i]

For even the casual observer of international relations, it is difficult to read Hackett-Fischer and Shaara's accounts and not think of the current experiences of the American military juggernaut in its struggles against the comparatively primitive Iraqi insurgency. When Shaara's General Cornwallis returns home to England and confronts the disconnect between war abroad and life-as-usual at the English court, an observer of contemporary American politics might find an obvious corollary in the policy of domestic tax cuts during a time of foreign wars. The comparison is even more evident for Hackett-Fischer who chooses his examples to illustrate the connection; following the Declaration of Independence, revolutionaries "pulled down a handsome equestrian statute of George III…cut off its head and carried the body through the town" (Hackett-Fischer 2004, 29). Written in 2003-04, Hackett-Fischer knows such an example can and will evoke the famed images of a Saddam Hussein statue pulled down by American forces following the fall of Baghdad.

What can the experiences of the Revolutionary War teach American policy-makers and military officials about how to better execute the war in Iraq? The implications are not promising. Will more troops solve America's problems in Iraq? Not likely, according to these two stories of the American Revolution. Howe's system of garrisons across New Jersey only served to weaken the capacity of his army while doing little to truly cover the vast colonies. Might the American Army be able to make a better effort to win hearts and minds? Judging by Shaara and Hackett-Fischer, the time has likely passed for that. The anti-insurgency tactics of *Shreklichkeit* employed by the Germanic tribes and the practices of forage, plunder, and eventually pillage that were necessary to support a huge army eliminated the possibility of a successful execution of Howe's *pacification* strategy. Given the abuses at Abu-Grahib and Haditha, among others, as stains on the reputation of the American military in Iraq, the American efforts there may have passed the point of no return. While it is would be unwise to assert that each and every lesson of the American insurgency of the 1770s applies to the Iraqi insurgency of the 2000s, the underlying themes are informative of both mistakes made as well as opportunities still available.

There is one final opportunity exposed by these histories of the American Revolution that does not appear to be of great likelihood for the United States at this point: co-opting the potential foreign alliance of the domestic insurgents--Iran in the case of Iraq. Some of Jeff Shaara's most engaging portrayals detail Benjamin Franklin's war-within-the-war as he works desperately in Paris to achieve a formal alliance between France and the American colonies. Skillfully playing off tensions between the British and the French, Franklin eventually secures the French alliance and the scales of battle are tipped in favor of the Americans. Arguably, Britain could have offered the French a deal to stay out of the Revolutionary war. Today Iran, by most accounts, offers material and logistical support to Shiite insurgents in Iraq. Should a full-out civil war engulf the country and threaten the region, Iran might choose to formally ally itself with

Iraqi Shiites. Given this potential, convincing Iran to permanently withdraw its support, however unlikely, may be the only viable option for the United States to successfully weaken the Iraqi insurgency.

With regards to viability, the question that both Shaara and Hackett-Fischer leave us with is perhaps the most disconcerting: can an insurgency *ever* be defeated? Does a war on *insurgency* itself, or even on *insurgents*, make sense strategically? On this final question, the evidence is inconclusive. What would have happened if British General Clinton had his way and the strategy had been to relentlessly attack Washington's army? As it was, Washington and company were only a hair's width away from extinction. On the other hand, had his strategy proven successful, and defeated Washington, these books suggest that another hero might have taken Washington's place in the history books, regardless of the talents and charisma of America's favorite founding father. Either way, these two books illuminate the march of history, which we ignore at our own peril.

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[i] Sun-Tzu, Trans. Samuel B. Griffith, *The Art of War* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 77.