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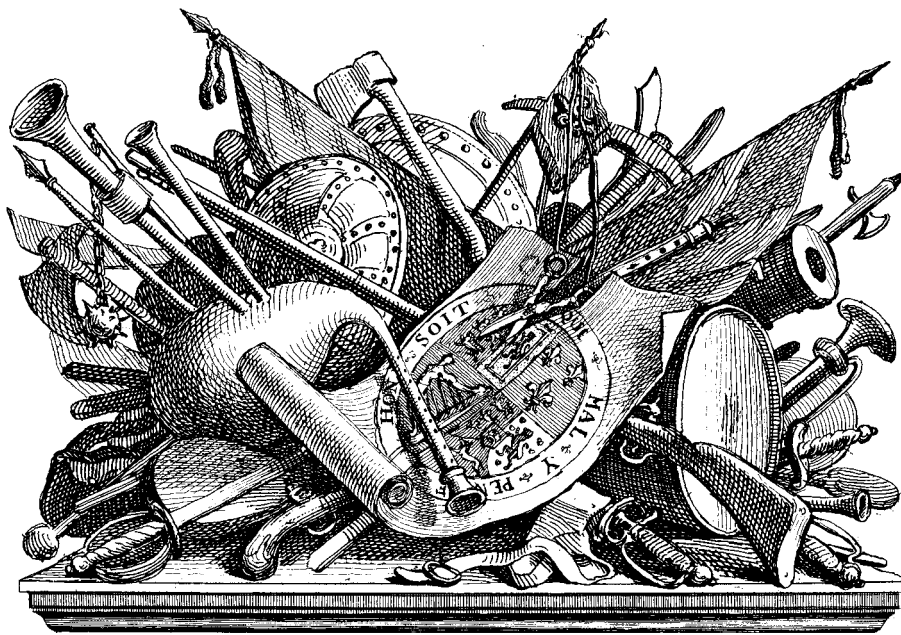
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Book Review by Darren Staloff

THE TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS

The Fate of the Day: The War for America, Fort Ticonderoga to Charleston, 1777–1780, by Rick Atkinson.
Crown Publishing, 880 pages, \$42



Etching by William Hogarth

RICK ATKINSON KNOWS HOW TO TELL A story. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist (he retired from *The Washington Post* in 1999) turned Pulitzer Prize-winning military historian, Atkinson has authored nine widely read books devoted to America's wars and warriors. *The Fate of the Day*, the second volume of his Revolution Trilogy, covers the middle years of the war of independence. Thoroughly researched and richly illustrated, it is popular history at its very best, leading with narrative and rich detail while making often compelling but more analytical insights in passing, obliquely, even occasionally by implication. Much more than a simple retelling of battles, the book includes an immense amount about the craft of war, its relationship to and impact on politics and society, and the role of grand strategy in fixing the course of conflict. It also raises a profound question about the role of principle in statecraft.

Divided into three parts, the book recounts the major military engagements from 1777 to 1780, each part neatly detailing the events of a year's campaign (only the third bleeds over into the following year). Part One's primary focus is the crushing defeat of British General John Burgoyne's New Canada army at Saratoga in October of 1777 and General William Howe's lopsided victories against George Washington's Continental Army at

Brandywine, Paoli, and—after the capture of Philadelphia—Germantown, Pennsylvania at roughly the same time. Part Two's highlight is the Battle of Monmouth Court House where, in New Jersey in late June 1778, Washington's force held the field for the first time in a major, large-scale engagement. The successful (albeit temporary) capture of Newport, Rhode Island by a joint French and American operation is vividly told and is offset by the British capture of Savannah, Georgia later that year. The pace of the book slackens in Part Three due to a dearth of major battles. British attempts to raid the American shoreline (successful in Hampton Roads, Virginia; disastrous in Stony Point, New York) achieved little, and an American frontier campaign against American Indian tribes loyal to the crown produced nothing but predictable carnage and cruelty. Another joint French and American campaign to recapture Savannah proved utterly fruitless. Perhaps the most dramatic chapters in the third part follow American naval commander John Paul Jones's audacious cruises in British waters, culminating in his victory over the HMS *Serapis* and the subsequent British capture in May 1780 of Charleston, South Carolina (and, with it, the entire American Southern Continental Army and its materiel) and the beginning of British attempts to pacify the interior.

Every battle is accompanied with admirably clear maps demarking the dispositions and movements of the various combatants. Each commander's objectives and plans are clearly explained. After-battle reports assess the decisions and actions taken and present a thorough "butcher's bill" of casualties. The fighting itself is crisply described in a thoroughly engaging manner that only occasionally becomes a tad florid, as when "firelocks winked along the parapet" in Savannah, "punctuated by vivid yellow flame licking from British cannon muzzles." The narrative overall is well paced and gripping, enhanced by ample quotations from diaries and correspondence as well as official accounts, many quite blunt and even graphic. I suspect most readers will find the book difficult to put down.

LIKE ANY GOOD MILITARY HISTORIAN, Atkinson provides an account about far more than marches and flanking maneuvers. He imparts an immense amount of fascinating information about military technology, tactics, and operational imperatives in the late 18th century. To cite one example, the woeful inaccuracy of musket fire (no more than 1% of muskets found their mark) was compensated by professional armies like the British with coordinated volleys from tightly packed formations that were therefore, in



turn, exposed to increased danger from enemy artillery. Even so, the relative ineffectiveness of musket fire in either massed or open formations meant that much combat, and often the most decisive, was done at close quarters with the bayonet, resulting in high rates of fatality and trauma.

The greatest challenge facing both armies was the logistical issue of supply. This was particularly acute for the British when they ventured into the interior. Stretching his supply lines beyond their limits proved Burgoyne's undoing at Saratoga far more than the superior field command of American generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold. Foraging parties were regularly ambushed and a particularly large one at Bennington, Vermont was utterly destroyed. With each day and each skirmish Burgoyne's forces were weakened from fatigue, hunger, and a growing shortage of military supplies, ultimately leaving him little choice but to surrender the remnants of his once formidable army. Although Howe's situation wasn't as dire as Burgoyne's, he found food and draft animals hard to procure from the patriot countryside. After entering Philadelphia, it took almost two months before he could clear fortifications and other obstacles in the Delaware River (at great cost in both vessels and personnel) in order to allow the resupply of his forces. The Continentals were hardly immune to such supply problems either. During a remarkably mild winter at Valley Forge, General Washington lost roughly 2,000 men to a lack of basic supplies like food and clothing.

ATKINSON OFFERS A FASCINATING view of the character of the respective armies. Despite the presence of some American loyalists (some 30,000 over the course of the war), the bulk of the British force was professional, well provisioned, carefully trained, and led by experienced officers whose elite social status buttressed their authority. At the same time, many recruits were green and liable to lapses in discipline, both in battle and in their treatment of civilians. The king's German mercenaries in particular seem to have thoroughly earned their reputation for occasional outbursts of violent plunder and rape.

The American Continental Army was a different matter entirely. Unlike the state militias that drew on the "middling sort" from their communities, Washington's army was recruited from the lower ranks of society, many of whom enlisted for bounties rather than out of patriotism. Including a significant number of African Americans and recent immigrants (almost a quarter of the Continen-

tals were Irish), Atkinson characterizes them as an army of "the landless young, the poor, the desperate, and sometimes the shiftless." Revolutionary America also suffered from a dearth of experienced and socially respectable officers, and those few with the requisite qualities often chose to serve in the state militias. Washington adapted by promoting hard-charging "commoners" who displayed "a knack for leading other men." None play a larger part in *The Fate of the Day* than Rhode Island anchorman Nathanael Greene. Although no gentleman, he was nonetheless appointed quartermaster during the 1778 winter encampment in Valley Forge. Greene feverishly threw himself into organizing the logistics of the starving army, eventually recruiting thousands of agents to procure and transport the full range of items necessary for its basic needs. Aided by increased support from the newly allied government of France, Greene was rapidly able to transform a situation that was truly dire into one that was merely onerous. Equally significant was the arrival at about the same time of Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, who, despite his inflated title, was by birth at least no gentleman. His inculcation of close order drill throughout the ranks, however, gave the Continentals the unit cohesion in maneuver and under fire they had previously lacked, allowing the army to hold the field against a large British force at Monmouth Court House later that summer—Washington's first significant victory since his raids on Trenton and Princeton the previous winter. This meant that Washington had isolated the British in New York City and Newport, and the king had effectively ceded control of both New England and the Mid-Atlantic. The Continental Army had come into its own as a credible and relatively professional force.

THE ARMIES MAY HAVE BEEN VERITABLE worlds unto themselves, but their presence and actions had an immense impact on the communities with which they came in contact. When British-controlled New York City swelled to some 30,000 residents, roughly two-thirds were soldiers. Those aligned with the American cause had fled with what few possessions they could carry, replaced by refugees and African Americans seeking their liberation. The celebrations and entertainments arranged by the crown's officers contrasted with the brutality of the occupation as American prisoners lay dying in droves from abuse, malnutrition, and squalid conditions in the prison ships surrounding Manhattan. Howe's occupation of Philadelphia similarly led most patriot sympathizers

to flee; those who remained were promptly, if briefly, imprisoned by their loyalist neighbors. When the British evacuated the city (desecrating patriot-affiliated churches along the way), returning patriots paid back the remaining loyalists with gusto. Everywhere that patriot and loyalist forces contested territory, plunder and repression followed. Atkinson describes the action in most Southern states as "unsparing, cruel, and internecine." Such destruction, conjoined with the British Navy's blockade of maritime trade, produced painful privation. In 1778 alone dozens of food riots broke out along the Eastern seaboard from Maine to Maryland. Nor was Great Britain immune to such stresses. Hostilities cut its overseas trade by a quarter, and massive expenditure by the government (80% was devoted to the military) meant that many economic resources were being diverted from domestic need to the war effort. As the war dragged on, disturbances cropped up throughout Great Britain, culminating in the infamous week-long anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in London in the summer of 1780.

TO PUT ALL THESE MILITARY MANEUVERS and social disruptions into context, Atkinson devotes half a dozen chapters to the formation of strategy in Great Britain and France. From the outset, the British plan was deceptively simple: use a show of overwhelming force to cow the small but dangerous gaggle of radical insurgents so that the vast majority of loyal Americans could rally to the king's standard and restore the authority of Great Britain. When New England proved rich in radicals and poor in loyalists, the British simply switched their attention to New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. When those pastures proved no greener, they were unable to generate "a coherent concept for winning the war." The best the American secretary Lord George Germain could suggest was "Roman severity." In fact, the planning of campaigns was almost as slapdash as the formulation of grand strategy. For example, Burgoyne's plan to cut off New England was to march south from Canada to Albany, New York, where he would meet up with Howe who would sail up the Hudson River and relieve and resupply his army. But Howe had explicitly informed both London and Burgoyne that he had no intention of doing anything of the sort; he would instead pursue his own campaign in Pennsylvania. "With remarkable nonchalance," Atkinson wryly remarks, "both the government and Burgoyne shrugged off this inconvenient wrinkle." Thus was the general's great New Canada army of 8,000 men lost in a haze of wishful thinking and almost

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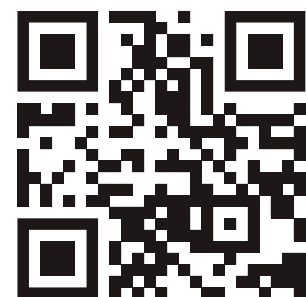
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unremitting strategic incoherence. Indeed, it was only France's entry into the war that gave Whitehall strategic focus in its war plans.

The Franco-American alliance assured the Americans they would not lose and, with sufficient French naval and military support, might actually be able to defeat the British and drive them from their country. Yet, although American independence was a sincerely avowed war aim of the French, it was not their only or most pressing goal. The renewal of the great Anglo-French military rivalry (soon joined by Spain) meant that new theaters would compete with America for attention, particularly the subcontinent of Asia and the Caribbean. It also meant that plans for any offensive operations by the Continentals would likely issue from the French or would at least require French support and consent. After his victory at Monmouth Court House, Washington proposed a decisive blow against the British in New York City. The French admiral Comte d'Estaing demurred, insisting instead on a far less risky attack on Newport. The resulting victory in that operation was deeply satisfying for the French, for they had inflicted "the greatest naval calamity for the Royal Navy in American waters during the war." For the Americans, however, it was pyrrhic. Once the French fleet sailed for the Caribbean, the return of British naval vessels left the Americans with no choice but to abandon the city once again. The American theater now had to compete with others for resources, a fact reflected in the tendency of both the British and French to move the conflict to Georgia and South Carolina, closer to the Caribbean where resources could be diverted in a timely fashion if necessary.

DRIVING THE FATE OF THE DAY FROM its outset are the two Georges, the American commander and the British monarch. Far from hagiographic, Atkinson's treatment of Washington could best be described as firm but fair. In the trilogy's first volume, *The British Are Coming* (2019), Washington was often shown to be indecisive, lacking some of the rudiments of both strategic and tactical command. At the outset of the second volume, having suffered crushing defeats in New York, he appears at times "impenetrably reserved and opaque." Atkinson is unsparing in his criticism of his disastrous performance at Brandywine: "the ground should have been scouted, men familiar with that ground interrogated, and Howe's maneuvers anticipated." Yet Washington learned

from his mistakes and listened to the counsel of his trusted officers. Like his army, he seems to have come of age as a commander at Valley Forge. "He was now decisive and confident in his generalship," Atkinson notes in his epilogue, "just as he was meticulous and comprehensive as an administrator." Combined with ever-patient deference to both a Congress that offered little in the way of strategic guidance or material support, and a French command that treated his proposals with indifference, by the end of the book Washington emerges as the truly indispensable man, as his biographer James Thomas Flexner called him, the only one capable of keeping all parties aligned, his army intact, and the American cause alive.

AT KINSON'S TREATMENT OF GEORGE III will be, for many popular readers, his biggest historical "intervention." In his telling, the British monarch was absolutely central to both the decision to use force and its continued deployment thereafter, driving war policy and strategy. George acted not only from a "mulish disposition" but from a sincere moral conviction grounded in his understanding of the British constitution. The first truly "English" Hanoverian monarch, he read voraciously in the literature on the constitution and arrived at what can be condensed into two simple, coherent, and (at the time at least) uncontroversial principles. The first was that the empire existed to serve the interests of Great Britain, which in this case meant the provision of revenue. The second was that sovereignty within that empire resided in the king-in-Parliament, the great dictum of the Glorious Revolution. It was only when the colonists rejected both the power to tax and, in George's eyes at least, the indivisible sovereignty of Parliament itself that he was resolved to use coercion. It was not pique that drove him but a defense, as he saw it, of the fundamental principles that underlay the entire British imperial and political system.

If Atkinson is correct—and his account is extremely persuasive—he has raised a curious conundrum. Here was a war fought (on both sides) for fundamental political principles, driven by a patriotic king without partisan, personal, or pecuniary interest. But the king should have known his costly and violent course of action had little chance of success. Over a decade before independence was declared, Benjamin Franklin, living in England at the time, had explained to the House of Commons as it debated the repeal of the Stamp Act how pointless military force would

be in enforcing its provisions. No number of soldiers could "force a man to take stamps who chooses to do without them," an observation that applied equally to duties on imported goods. A British force "will not find a rebellion," Franklin warned, but it "may indeed make one." Once disabused of the fantasy of a large American loyalist majority, British general Sir Henry Clinton concluded that the only way to recover the colonies was "to gain the hearts and subdue the minds of America." How was that to be achieved with bayonets and cannon? Again, they had been warned by Franklin: "No power, how great soever, can force men to change their opinions." Yet, as late as 1778, Atkinson notes, "George still regretted giving concessions to the colonists during the Stamp Act crisis."

BUT WHY WOULD HE HARBOR REGRETS if the concessions had put an end to the conflict, at least for a while, until the British provoked the colonists anew with the passage of the Townshend duties? To vindicate the principles of the British Constitution—the object of George's careful research—both monarch and parliament were in the end almost morally compelled to resort to arms. It was this mulish devotion to principle without consideration for prudence that Edmund Burke objected to in his famous 1775 parliamentary Speech on Conciliation. Citing Aristotle, Burke insisted that politics was a practical rather than theoretical subject of study, and that his fellow parliamentarians should eschew "this species of delusive geometrical accuracy" in practical matters of weight "as the most fallacious of all sophistry." Instead, they ought to rely on maxims drawn from experience. "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment" was ultimately founded on "compromise and barter" whereby "we balance inconveniences." To pursue a reckless course of warfare on the basis of theoretical commitments, even after experience had demonstrated the ill fit of means and ends, smacked of pedantry more than statesmanship. "Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom," Burke noted, warning ominously that "a great empire and little minds go ill together." As Rick Atkinson superbly traces, events might have taken an entirely different course had King George shown better judgment.

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