

**REVOLUTIONARY SUMMER:  
THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE<sup>1</sup>**

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*No event in American history which was so improbable  
at the time has seemed so inevitable in retrospect as the  
American Revolution.*<sup>3</sup>

I. Introduction

In *Revolutionary Summer*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Joseph Ellis retraces the events that defined the fateful summer of 1776. Ellis describes that summer as a “crescendo moment” when critical decisions about independence, the political character of the United States, and national defense altered the course of American history.<sup>4</sup> To provide a more complete account of the “crescendo moment,” Ellis interweaves both political and military developments into a single, unified narrative, because as Ellis remarks, “the political and military experiences were two sides of a single story, which are incomprehensible unless told together.”<sup>5</sup> By placing the two side-by-side, Ellis succeeds in showing how each exerted pressure on the other as political and military leaders alike struggled with the new realities of American independence.

Unfortunately, *Revolutionary Summer*’s reliance on generalities limits its value as a work of historical scholarship. While merging politics and military affairs into a single narrative proves insightful, the “single story” Ellis attempts to tell in 188 brief pages lacks the substance of more thorough histories of the time, including earlier works by Ellis himself.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, although *Revolutionary Summer*’s perspective on politics and military operations illuminates important points, the book’s reliance on generalities diminishes its scholarly appeal. Other, more carefully

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<sup>1</sup> JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *REVOLUTIONARY SUMMER: THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE* (2013).

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<sup>3</sup> JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *FOUNDING BROTHERS: THE REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION* 3 (2000).

<sup>4</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at ix.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at x.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

documented histories tell the story of America's existential moment more completely and more engagingly.<sup>7</sup>

## II. A Confluence of War and Politics

In the preface to *Revolutionary Summer*, Ellis argues that political and military developments are best understood together, as two sides of a single coin.<sup>8</sup> “[E]vents on one front,” he observes, “influenced outcomes on the other, and what most modern scholarship treats separately was experienced by the participants as one.”<sup>9</sup> By combining the twin strands of politics and military affairs into a single story, Ellis succeeds in showing how events in one sphere influenced decisions in the other over the course of the summer of 1776. Ellis focuses on two key events to highlight the interplay between political and military decision-making: the declaration of American independence and the Continental Army's defensive military campaign in New York.

Following the withdrawal of British forces from Boston in the spring of 1776, Washington moved his forces south to defend the strategically important, though arguably indefensible, city of New York.<sup>10</sup> As Ellis notes, “Devising a comprehensive strategy for the conduct of the war required an established government with clearly delineated powers and designated decision makers charged with coordinating the quite monumental civil and military considerations.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately for Washington, the political infrastructure needed to formulate a strategy did not exist when Washington prepared to confront the anticipated

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., DAVID McCULLOUGH, *1776* (2005); JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *AMERICAN SPHINX: THE CHARACTER OF THOMAS JEFFERSON* (1998); ELLIS, *supra* note 3; RON CHERNOW, *WASHINGTON: A LIFE* (2010); BARNET SCHECTER, *THE BATTLE FOR NEW YORK: THE CITY AT THE HEART OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at ix–x.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at x.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 33 (“Unquestionably, New York enjoyed enormous strategic significance.”), 40 (noting General Charles Lee's conclusion that New York was indefensible). In his authoritative history of the New York campaign, *The Battle for New York*, Barnet Schecter explains that “the British saw New York as the key to subduing the rebellion.” SCHECTER, *supra* note 7, at 2. Schecter notes the British believed that gaining control of the Hudson River “would sever the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies from New England.” *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 40.

British advance.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, “the question of whether New York should be defended had never even been raised.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, political considerations did figure into the military calculus. As the political debate over the question of independence intensified, New York’s symbolic importance to the independence movement grew increasingly stark. Ellis asks, “How would it look if just as the political climax to years of debate finally occurred, the military embodiment of that glorious cause fled New York for the security of the Connecticut hills and allowed [British General William] Howe to occupy the city without a fight?”<sup>14</sup> The Americans, Ellis notes, “had profound political reasons to avoid appearing militarily weak and vulnerable at this propitious moment when, at last, independence was about to be declared.”<sup>15</sup>

Pressure to ensure an auspicious start to independence may have blinded Washington to the overwhelming challenge of defending the city. After reconnoitering the area around New York, one of Washington’s most experienced generals, Charles Lee, concluded that New York was indefensible.<sup>16</sup> Political considerations, however, managed to obscure Lee’s finding as Washington struggled to formulate a plan to neutralize the British threat. As a result, New York’s vulnerability, at least initially, “dropped out of the strategic equation.”<sup>17</sup> Politics had intruded into the military domain.

Military developments influenced political decisions in observable ways as well. Following the Battle of Long Island, the Continental Army

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<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 47.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*; see also SCHECTER, *supra* note 7, at 4 (“The Continental Congress had felt that New York, the second-largest American city, should not be given up without a fight, or the damage to American morale might prove fatal to the cause of independence.”).

<sup>16</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 33–34; see also CHERNOW, *supra* note 7, at 230 (“The same qualities that made New York a majestic seaport turned it into a military nightmare for defenders. There was hardly a spit of land that couldn’t be surrounded and thoroughly shelled by British ships.”). Ellis describes Lee as “the most experienced and colorful general in the Continental Army.” ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 32.

<sup>17</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 40. As Ron Chernow notes in his superb biography of Washington, “[i]n hindsight, the city was certainly doomed, but Washington considered it a ‘post of infinite importance’ that would be politically demoralizing to surrender without a fight.” CHERNOW, *supra* note 7, at 230 (citing MICHAEL STEPHENSON, PATRIOT BATTLES: HOW THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE WAS FOUGHT 230 (2007)).

had retreated to Manhattan where its position, cut off from the mainland, remained precarious. On September 15, British and Hessian troops crossed the East River from Long Island and assaulted the Americans' defensive positions along the eastern shore of Manhattan at Kip's Bay.<sup>18</sup> The attack was devastating.<sup>19</sup> In the frenzied retreat from Kip's Bay, entire regiments of militia abandoned their weapons and gear and fled pell-mell to Harlem Heights, leaving the city and port of New York in British hands.<sup>20</sup> The debacle forced a reevaluation of the fighting state of the Continental Army.

In the aftermath of Kip's Bay, the Continental Congress sent a committee to meet with General Washington and his staff.<sup>21</sup> They eventually concluded that "the Continental Army was really not much of an army at all," and they recommended reforms, known as a "New Establishment," that would allow the Continental Army to compete against the British Army on an equal footing.<sup>22</sup> In the end, the Continental Congress failed to deliver on its New Establishment recommendations, but as Ellis suggests, "the political gesture itself was important as a statement of commitment during this vulnerable moment."<sup>23</sup> Confronted by the army's military setbacks in New York, the Continental Congress felt forced to act to prevent an "epidemic of fear and disillusionment" from infecting the body politic and jeopardizing the independence of the fledgling nation.<sup>24</sup> Here, military affairs compelled the need for political action.

By juxtaposing political and military events, Ellis manages to highlight relationships often overlooked in more narrowly focused histories. Washington's decision to defend New York and the Continental Congress's response to the Kip's Bay retreat are examples of how Ellis's "single story" approach can reveal hidden influences on historical developments.

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<sup>18</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 148–49.

<sup>19</sup> *See id.* at 149 (noting that the retreat from Kip's Bay was "one of the low points for the American side in the war").

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 149–50.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 157–59.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 158.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

### III. Abridged Too Far

On the other hand, *Revolutionary Summer*'s unified narrative relies too heavily on generalities to maintain its brisk pace. Ellis overlooks historical nuances in favor of efficient storytelling, but in doing so, he sacrifices important context and the opportunity to explain events more fully. The narrative he presents, though concise, lacks a certain sophistication and suffers from excessive abridgement of the historical record. Ultimately, after arguing so forcefully for a unified approach to historical storytelling, Ellis undercuts himself by presenting the story of the revolutionary summer in such a slender volume. The stand-alone histories he discounts look compelling in comparison, because they, at least, manage to provide comprehensive coverage of their specialized topics.

To propel the narrative forward, Ellis resorts to broad generalizations that tread uncomfortably close to oversimplification. For example, he repeatedly emphasizes the disdain the two British commanders, General William Howe and his brother, Admiral Richard Howe, felt for General Henry Clinton to explain their repeated rejections of his military proposals. "Both of the Howe brothers detested Clinton and would have rejected his strategic advice even if it had come with endorsements from the gods," Ellis writes to explain why they rejected Clinton's plan to trap Washington's army on Manhattan.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Ellis asserts that the American press deliberately manipulated the reporting of events to influence public opinion.<sup>26</sup> He writes,

The press, in short, did not provide an unbiased version of the Battle of Long Island or the glaring problems within the Continental Army. In this highly charged and vulnerable moment, loyalty to "The Cause" trumped all conventional definitions of the truth so completely that journalistic integrity became almost treasonable.<sup>27</sup>

While Ellis generally supports these sweeping statements with appropriate endnotes, the book as a whole suffers from a lack of

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<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 147.

<sup>26</sup> *See id.* at 146.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* Ellis concludes his analysis of the press by declaring that the "partisan American press had concealed the full extent of the demoralized condition of the Continental Army" and by suggesting that "[f]ew Americans knew they were losing the war." *Id.*

foundational material and substantiating references to explain claims made in the text. Did the Howes really discount Clinton's professional judgment simply because he was "obnoxious"?<sup>28</sup> Ellis cites a secondary source, a biography of General Clinton by William B. Willcox, to support this claim, yet surprisingly, he fails to cite the Howes firsthand to establish their true opinion of Clinton.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, to support his contention that the American press was wildly partisan, Ellis includes a sampling of coverage from various newspapers. In particular, he uses the inaccurate reporting of four geographically dispersed newspapers to illustrate the press's bias in the aftermath of the Battle of Long Island.<sup>30</sup> He admits in an endnote that other newspapers may have reported the battle more accurately but quickly dismisses any conclusion that could be drawn from that evidence. He states, "I realize that this is only a geographically spread sampling and other newspapers might have provided more accurate accounts of the Long Island debacle. But if so, they were the exception rather than the rule."<sup>31</sup> Ellis's reflexive dismissal of other, potentially contradictory sources is disconcerting. Why should we believe that his seemingly random sampling of four newspapers reflected the rule?

Ellis also resorts to descriptive shortcuts to describe his cast of characters, and the resulting portraits are largely unsatisfying. For example, Ellis unhelpfully describes Washington as "a physical specimen produced by some eighteenth-century version of central casting."<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Rush, a contemporary of Washington, managed to evoke Washington much more descriptively and more eloquently. "He has so much martial dignity in his deportment," Rush explained, "that you would distinguish him to be a general and a soldier from among ten thousand people. There is not a king in Europe who would not look like

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 110. Ellis notes that William Howe had "little respect for Clinton either as a general or as a man," and he suggests that Clinton's "lifelong tendency to make enemies of all his superiors" was at the root of Howe's professional and personal contempt for his second-in-command. *Id.* Clinton, he states, "possessed a truly unique talent for making himself obnoxious." *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 201 n.7 (citing WILLIAM B. WILLCOX, PORTRAIT OF A GENERAL: SIR HENRY CLINTON IN THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE (1964) and noting that Willcox's biography "provides the deepest analysis of any British officer in the war, as well as the most sophisticated psychological analysis of any prominent figure on either side").

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 146.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 205 n.26.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 25-26.

a valet de chamber by his side.”<sup>33</sup> Ellis also notes that Washington possessed “aggressive military instincts”<sup>34</sup> and states that, following the Declaration of Independence, Washington continued to build up his “networks of defense, both on Long Island and inside his own soul,” although he provides scant evidence to support these views.<sup>35</sup>

Ellis paints a somewhat more expressive portrait of Jefferson, although the image he conjures remains largely impressionistic as a result of the quick narrative pace. Jefferson, he explains, stood slightly over six foot two, had reddish blond hair, and possessed a “reedy” voice that “did not project in large spaces.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he was “also by disposition self-contained, some combination of aloof and shy, customarily standing silently in groups, with his arms folded tightly around his chest as if to ward off intruders.”<sup>37</sup>

Ellis draws on his earlier, National Book Award-winning biography of Jefferson, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, for inspiration on Jefferson, and a few recycled thoughts have crept into *Revolutionary Summer*. For example, both books describe Jefferson’s distress as he watched a committee methodically revise his original draft of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson, Ellis writes in *Revolutionary Summer*, “sat silently and sullenly throughout the debate, regarding each revision as a defacement.”<sup>38</sup> In *American Sphinx*, Jefferson “sat silently and sullenly, regarding each proposed revision as another defacement.”<sup>39</sup>

Comparing the two books more generally, however, it becomes clear how much of Jefferson’s essential character is lost in *Revolutionary Summer*’s rush to summarize. Jefferson becomes less sphinx-like—and less interesting—to preserve the book’s narrative clarity, but the resulting portrayal feels shallow and incomplete. In the end, by sketching his figures so broadly, Ellis reduces men like Washington and Jefferson to

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<sup>33</sup> CHERNOW, *supra* note 7, at 182 (quoting Benjamin Rush, in PAUL K. LONGMORE, THE INVENTION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON 162 (1988)).

<sup>34</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 1, at 73.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 72.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 59.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 61.

<sup>39</sup> ELLIS, *supra* note 3, at 50. In *Revolutionary Summer*, Ellis appropriately cites *American Sphinx* as the source for his description of Jefferson.

caricatures, two-dimensional shadows that waft through his story with little substance and little to remember them by.

#### IV. Conclusion

Throughout history, war and politics have frequently shared a common bond but have not always shared a common history. In *Revolutionary Summer*, Ellis combines the two in a single narrative that highlights how politics influenced military affairs and vice versa during the critical summer of 1776. Ellis's "single story" serves as a reminder that political debate is not conducted in a vacuum and that military decision-making never occurs in strategic isolation. Considerations in the political sphere inevitably intrude into the military decision-making process, and military events have sway in the political realm as Ellis convincingly demonstrates using the Declaration of Independence and the campaign in New York as examples. This message remains applicable even today. Politicians and military leaders who recognize the interplay between these forces may manage expectations more successfully when external pressures arise.

As a chronicle of history, however, *Revolutionary Summer* underperforms. Ellis reduces events and people to sketches, and his heavy use of summation dulls the story he attempts to tell. Those interested in learning about the history of the period or the complex, conflicted men who guided America to independence should instead look to Ellis's other, far more engaging books on the revolutionary period.