

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

How Can the Underdog Win?

Grade Level: 3–5 *United States History*

Time Needed: 40 minutes

Objectives: Students will be able to:

1. describe the strategy used by Washington to win the battles of Trenton and Princeton.
2. explain why these victories are viewed as a turning point in the war.
3. draw conclusions about ways that a weaker, smaller force in a war can defeat a stronger, larger force.

NJCCC Standards Grades 6–12:

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.

6.1.A.11. Summarize information in written, graphic, and oral formats.

6.4.E.2. Discuss the major events (e.g., Boston Tea Party, Battle of Trenton) and personalities (e.g., George Washington, John Adams, John Witherspoon, William Franklin, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson) of the American Revolution.

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.

Background for Teachers:

The first campaign of the Revolutionary War had started unexpectedly but went well for the American rebels. In the first fighting at Lexington and Concord, the rebels carried the day. However, the British successfully drove the Americans from their positions on Breed's Hill in the following days. The British army lost 1,000 men in the process, and the colonists only withdrew because they ran out of ammunition. Then the hastily assembled American army successfully secured cannons from the British fortress at Ticonderoga in New York and bombarded Boston until the British abandoned the city and retreated to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Before long, the Continental Congress had declared independence.

Newly appointed General George Washington knew that his troops weren't going to get off that easily. General Sir William Howe's British troops regrouped in Nova Scotia and gained reinforcements. Soon the British set their sights on capturing New York City, and Washington's army was powerless to stop them. The British drove the Patriots out of New York, across New Jersey, and into Pennsylvania. By the winter of 1776-1777, the fortunes of the Revolutionary cause were at a low ebb. Washington's army of 35,000 had shrunk to a cold and poorly supplied 3,000. Food, pay, and warm quarters were all in extremely short supply. Conditions at the winter camp were dire, with limited food and supplies, and substandard shelter. In mid-December, Washington had serious doubts that he could keep the army together another ten days.

Washington managed to turn things around, however, with a bold stroke in an unexpected time and place. He changed the odds of the fledgling nation in what were relatively small-scale battles in terms of numbers and casualties. The numbers were not what mattered. His actions revealed a level of motivation and resourcefulness that made the British realize they were in for more of a struggle than they had bargained for. The war was now to be a test of wills and a test of each side's ability to motivate their troops.

Overall, the British won more battles than the Americans, but the war lasted nearly eight long years. In the end, the British were willing to settle, and the terms favored the Americans.

Procedures:

Day 1

I. Procedures: Anticipatory Set

A. Discuss the following questions with the class:

1. What does the term underdog mean?
2. Does the underdog ever win against a stronger opponent?
3. What are some things an underdog could do to win against a stronger opponent?

II. Lesson Procedures:

- A. Introduce the Battles of Trenton and Princeton as examples of how the less likely contender can sometimes emerge victorious.
- B. Show the video Ten Crucial Days. (running time: 25 minutes)

- C. Have students complete the Underdog Worksheet about the Battles of Trenton and Princeton.
- D. Discuss the answers students found for the questions as a group.

Day 2

III. Procedures:

- A. Have each student imagine that he or she is a Continental soldier. In that role, have them write a brief letter to their family, describing their feelings during this low point of the war.

Homework (from the British Point of View):

Write a brief reaction to the following: The winter of 1776 was one of the most severe on record in the 18th century. Supplies of food and warm clothing were scarce for the Continental army, yet their desire for victory was strong. As a British soldier, you would understand how hard it would have been for Washington's men to carry out their attack in that type of weather, without proper supplies. As a British soldier, how would you feel about fighting someone who is that determined to win?

Assessment:

- Evaluate the students' worksheet answers for accuracy.
- Evaluate the students' British soldier response for effort and accurate information.

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>

Name _____

How Can the Underdog Win?

1. Why did Washington choose Christmas night and wintertime to attack the British?
2. Why did he choose to attack the Hessians in Trenton?
3. Why did General Howe only leave 1,500 Hessians to keep watch on Washington in Pennsylvania?
4. After the American victory in Trenton, General Howe sent General Cornwallis to fight Washington. What did Washington do to defeat him?
5. Did Washington fight all the British troops in Princeton at once? Why or why not?
6. How did Washington use his knowledge of the local area to outsmart the British?
7. Why are the Battles of Princeton and Trenton viewed as the turning point of the war?

How Can the Underdog Win?
Answer Sheet

1. Why did Washington choose Christmas night and wintertime to attack the British?

No one would expect an attack on a holiday evening. Most battles took place during spring, summer, or early fall—not during the winter.

2. Why did he choose to attack the Hessians in Trenton?

Morale and food supplies were low. Most soldiers were due to go home at the end of the year. Washington needed a quick victory to revive the troops' spirits.

3. Why did General Howe only leave 1,500 Hessians to keep watch on Washington in Pennsylvania?

General Howe thought that an attack was not likely, and he only needed to keep a presence in Trenton and have the Hessians keep watch on Washington's troops.

4. After the American victory in Trenton, General Howe sent General Cornwallis to fight Washington. What did Washington do to defeat him?

He moved to the side of the British and attacked them at a point in the road where the British didn't expect them.

5. Did Washington fight all the British troops in Princeton at once? Why or why not?

Washington split his troops. Half attacked the British from behind. He also attacked the British forces while they were spread over a great distance along a road.

6. How did Washington use his knowledge of the local area to outsmart the British?

He decided to use a road that had recently been built but was not yet finished. The British were unaware of the road's existence.

7. Why are the Battles of Princeton and Trenton viewed as the turning point of the war?

The battles came at a time when the Continental army was at its lowest point, both in morale and number of soldiers. The general outlook on the war was bleak and defeat seemed likely. The victories in Trenton and Princeton sparked a renewed faith in the war effort among soldiers and the American public.