

# 1776 Chapter-by-Chapter Reading Guide

This guide contains significant passages and their significance, related and shorter “micro quotes,” and discussion prompts.

## Ch 1: “Sovereign Duty” (pp. 3–19)

*Washington’s Frank Assessment and the Precarious Start*

- **Why read it:** McCullough opens by putting Washington’s private anxiety on display — it’s a sober, almost intimate passage that undoes heroic myth and shows how thin the margin for survival is. (4–6 minutes to read aloud)
- **Micro-quote/hook** (p 1, epigraph line): “Few people know the predicament we are in.”
- **Discussion prompt:** How does hearing Washington’s private worry change your view of leadership under pressure?

## Ch 1: King George III (pp. 4–6)

*More than His Cartoon-Villain Reputation*

- **Why read it:** Shows a sincerely duty-bound king.
- **Micro-quote** (p. 6): “America must be made to obey.” (Could read whole paragraph.)
- **Discussion prompt:** How does seeing the other side’s logic change our judgment?

## Ch 2: “Rabble in Arms” (pp. 41–69)

*Army’s Condition (Desertions, Enlistments, Supply Woes)*

- **Why read it:** This multipage portrait is powerful: mud, illness, men leaving, officers who don’t know what to do — it makes visceral the army’s unpreparedness and explains why the cause looked close to failure. (5–8 minutes to read aloud)
- **Discussion prompt:** What practical differences separate a ragtag force from a professional army? Which matters most, training or leadership?

## Ch 2: Henry Knox / “Noble Train of Artillery” (pp. 58–70)

### *Setup and Character Sketch Leading to the Ticonderoga-to-Boston Expedition*

- **Why read it:** McCullough’s portrait of Knox – a bookseller who becomes an artillery mastermind – is character drama + logistics, showing how small, imaginative acts of grit produced strategic leverage. (4–6 minutes to read aloud)
- **Discussion prompt:** Who are modern “Knoxes” in civic life—logistical problem-solvers who quietly change outcomes?

## Ch 3: Dorchester Heights: The night occupation & the British evacuation (pp. 97–112)

### *Turning Moment at Boston, the Decisive Night Operation and the Flight*

- **Why read it:** Cinematic, suspenseful, and decisive: the Americans transform an impossible situation into a strategic victory. The Siege of Boston ends with the Americans fortifying Dorchester Heights. This marks the first major victory for the Continental Army and a pivotal turning point in the American Revolution, the first time British troops are forced from a major city. Readers will feel the shift from desperation to stunned relief. (6–9 minutes to read aloud)
- **Micro-quote** (p. 105): “In no time small boys came running . . . to deliver the news that the ‘lobster backs’ were gone at last.”
- **Discussion prompt:** How did deception, logistics, and timing combine to create a victory without a pitched battle? When does caution become a risk? / The victory came with lessons in humility and increased community pride from Washington. What lessons are given in leadership?

## Ch 5: The Declaration of Independence read to the troops in New York (pp. 135–140)

### *The July 9 Reading and Its Effect*

- **Micro-quote** (p. 137): “At a stroke the Continental Congress had made the Glorious Cause of America more glorious still, for all the world to know, and also to give every citizen soldier at this critical juncture something still larger and more compelling for which to fight.”

- **Why read it:** Washington orders the Declaration of Independence read to the troops. This civic-ritual moment reframes soldiers' purpose. (3–5 minutes to read aloud)
- **Discussion prompt:** How do public rituals and readings turn private belief into collective action? What words in the Declaration of Independence would have given you “something still larger and more compelling for which to fight”?

## Ch 5: Landing at Long Island and the collapse in the field (pp. 171–182) –

### *August Assault and Rout*

- **Why read it:** This is full combat drama—professional British troops overwhelm the Americans. It’s essential for readers to understand how much Washington was outmanned and how close the cause came to being crushed. (6–8 minutes to read aloud)
- **Discussion prompt:** When an army is outclassed, what options does a commander realistically have?

## Ch 5: The midnight evacuation from Brooklyn (pp. 182–197)

### *The “Vanish-in-the-Night” Escape*

- **Why read it:** Reads like a suspense/thriller: desperate, quiet, cold — yet brilliantly executed. It’s a perfect moment to show competence and luck rescuing a bad situation. (6 minutes to read aloud)
- **Micro-quote:** “That the rebel army had silently vanished in the night under their very noses was almost inconceivable” (p. 191).
- **Discussion prompt:** Is an orderly withdrawal or skillful retreat a defeat or a form of strategic success? courage? Why did Washington make the choices he did? What modern leaders have “won” by withdrawing?

## Ch 6: Fortune Frowns (pp. 207–216)

### *The Kips Bay Panic and Washington’s Furious Reaction*

- **Why read it:** Unvarnished depiction of fear and collapse under naval bombardment — McCullough doesn’t spare the ugliness. It shows morale crack and a commander pushed to the edge (5–7 minutes to read aloud).

- **Discussion prompt:** How should commanders respond when troops break — discipline vs. compassion? How do teams and their leaders deal with morale, training, and accountability?

**Ch 6: Fall of Fort Washington & the near-collapse of the campaign** (Section III, pp. 234–246)

*The Fort Washington Disaster and Its Consequences*

- **Why read it:** One of the severe blows of 1776—thousands captured, morale shattered, Congress terrified. A sober passage that dramatizes how close the Revolution came to unraveling. (5–8 minutes to read aloud)
- **Micro-quote:** “Washington is said to have wept as he watched the tragedy unfold from across the river. . .” (p. 244).
- **Discussion prompt:** What do catastrophic defeats do to political will at home? Can victory be recovered after such losses?

**Ch 7: “Darkest Hour” → Paine’s The American Crisis, the Delaware crossing, & Trenton** (pp. 247–294)

*Despair, the Effect of Thomas Paine’s The American Crisis, and Trenton Crossing and Attack*

- **Why read it:** This long, dramatic sequence contains the low point (desertion, sickness, near collapse), Paine’s galvanizing words, the secretive crossing, and the Christmas-morning strike that re-made Washington’s reputation. It’s the emotional apex for showing how tiny actions can change a nation’s trajectory. (For a full dramatic arc, read the entire chapter. If you need a 5–8 minute read, consider pp. 247–260 [despair] then pp. 272–284 [crossing and Trenton attack].)
- **Micro-quotes:** “These are the times that try men’s souls” (p. 251). / Washington’s password for the Trenton attack: “Victory or death” (p. 273).
- **Discussion prompt:** How do words (Paine’s pamphlet) and action (crossing the Delaware) combine to restore public courage?