



Oxford University Press, \$35  
Debunking revolutionary myth

3/17/04

# Action-packed

## How Washington really won the war

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**H**istorical nonfiction books often face the unfortunate fate of being, well, deadily boring.

Not historian David Hackett Fischer's new one.

In "Washington's Crossing" (Oxford University Press, \$35), Hackett tackles one of the signal events of the American Revolution — the night a bedraggled group of rebels led by George

Washington crossed the Delaware River and launched a surprise attack — and brings it to such vivid life, you'll be worried about whether they'll succeed.

Every school kid knows that iconic painting by Emanuel Leutze titled "Washington Crossing The Delaware," and most people with a passing acquaintance with American history think they know the story behind it: how the Hessians (i.e. the paid German soldiers) got

# — and it's American history

drunk on Christmas Day in Trenton, N.J.; how Washington and his men surprised them by capturing or killing more than 1,000 of them; that this marked the turning point in the Revolutionary War; and that no one would actually stand up in a boat the heroic but foolish way Washington is pictured.

Turns out, none of this is exactly true.

Fischer — who teaches at Brandeis University and worked a similar marvel with his best-seller "Paul Revere's Ride" —

convincingly declares that the Hessians were not drunk. They were simply worn out with exhaustion over false alarms and sneak attacks.

He also shows that the tide was already turning in the rebels' favor, thanks to Thomas Paine's rousing "American Crisis" pamphlet, spontaneous uprisings among the peoples of New Jersey, regular raids that kept the Hessians jumpy, and the vicious behavior of the British and Hessian soldiers.

And while Washington may

not have stood quite so tall in that boat, anyone actually sitting down on that stormy night would have been sitting in a pool of icy cold water.

The details are fascinating. Even Fischer's description of the different groups that made up the revolutionary army is telling. Backwoodsmen showed up with uniforms featuring the slogan "Don't Tread On Me," reflecting their individualistic streak. Washington himself came from the stratified world of Virginia, where all men were "free" — but

those without land and property knew their place.

The troops from Massachusetts were integrated with Indians and Africans alongside whites, reflecting the life on ships where many of them worked. And the Philadelphia Associators were the most egalitarian fighting unit imaginable.

Ambitious, carefully reasoned and great fun, "Washington's Crossing" refuses to glamorize that iconic moment in American history — and makes it all the more remarkable in the telling.