

Q76 – What war did the Americans fight to win independence from Britain?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:

The war Americans fought to win their independence from Britain was the Revolutionary War – also called the American Revolution, or the War for Independence.

The towering figure of the Revolution was General George Washington, who led the Continental Army. For starters, he looked every inch the part: six foot two and a half, muscular, with an air of authority. In the Revolution's darkest hours, Washington held the army together through the sheer force of his personality. He had served in the British army during the French and Indian War where he kept his cool during the British debacle at the Battle of Monongahela – a trait he would demonstrate again and again throughout the Revolution. Washington lost more battles than he won but he learned from his mistakes. And he had the courage to gamble on victory.

On Christmas Day 1776, the Revolution seemed lost. The army was low on supplies, men, and morale. Enlistments were due to expire within days. Nonetheless, Washington crossed the Delaware River on a frigid night to surprise the enemy at Trenton ... then surprised them again at Princeton. Twin victories that stunned the British and elated Americans. Washington was fighting a war of endurance – holding his army together until the British would grow tired of fighting.

Five years after Trenton, Washington gambled again by slipping away from the main British army at New York, marching to Virginia, and trapping a British army at Yorktown. Yorktown clinched American independence. The British had had enough.

When the fighting ended, Washington did what few triumphant generals had ever done: he resigned his commission and went home – until America summoned him again, this time to be its first president.