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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

(Applause)

Havers: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* for a discussion given by Rick Atkinson about his book *The British are Coming: The War for American, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777*. I'm your host Rob Havers, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago and is sponsored by the members of the museum and library. This program and hundreds more covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). From the battles of Lexington and Concord in the spring of 1775 to those at Trenton and Princeton in the winter of 1777 American militiamen and the then-ragged Continental Army took on the world's most formidable fighting force. The British are coming details the first chaotic first twenty-one months of the Revolutionary War and does so from a British perspective. It is a gripping saga indeed with astonishing character such as Henry Knox, Nathanael Greene, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. *The British Are Coming* is the first in a three-volume account by Rick Atkinson of America's fight for independence. Rick Atkinson is the best selling author of the Liberation Trilogy: *An Army at Dawn*, *The Day of Battle*, and *The Guns at Last Light* as well as a host of other books. His many additional awards include a Pulitzer Prize for Journalism and the George Polk Award. He also won our 2010 Literature Award for his significant contribution to the understanding of military history and military affairs. He is a former staff writer and senior editor of the Washington Post and currently lives in Washington D.C. Please join me in welcoming back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Rick Atkinson.

(Applause)

Atkinson: Thank you for that, Rob. Thanks for inviting me to be with you this evening. It's always great to be back in this wonderful city and this wonderful institution. I've had an affiliation with the Pritzker Museum and Library for some years now, and I have nothing but wonderful things to say about it. The last time I was here with a new book, shilling a new book, was in the spring of 2013 when we rolled out *The Guns at Last Light*, which was the final volume on my trilogy about the American role in the liberation of Europe during WWII. That project took me fifteen years, and even before the final volume was published I was thinking about what to do next. The obvious thing would have been to pivot to the Pacific and do for that theater what I had done for the Mediterranean and Western Europe. That would have required me to start WWII over again at Pearl Harbor or even earlier, and that had limited appeal. And besides I could shake a fascination that I'd had really since I was a kid with a different war in a different century. So I've now completed the first volume in what I hope (knocking) will be a trilogy. *The British Are Coming* begins with an extended prologue in June 1773 when King George III travels to Portsmouth on the southern coast of England for a four-day review of the Royal Navy; it's a fantastic, proud display of military muscle precisely a decade after the creation of the first British Empire with victory in the Seven Years War or as we know it the French and Indian War. 1773 is the year the phrase "the sun never sets on the British Empire" was coined. And this volume ends with the two battles at Trenton and the subsequent battle at Princeton in January 1777, which together resuscitated American hopes that had seemed all but extinguished. Let me concede that there is a lot to dislike about the

founding fathers and the war they waged for American independence. The stirring assertion that all men are created equal did not of course apply to 500,000 black slaves, one in five of all souls who occupied the thirteen colonies when those words were written in 1776, nor was it valid for Native Americans, women, or indigenes. For the eight-year duration of the American Revolution, those who remained loyal to the British crown or even fence-straddlers skeptical of armed insurrection often were subjected to dreadful treatment--public shaming, disenfranchisement, confiscation, beatings, torture, exile, and worse. Some were imprisoned on Hudson River scows anchored below Albany or in an old Connecticut copper mine where they were lowered by windlass seventy feet below to rock walled cells known simply as hell. Partisan belligerence metastasized into civil war. John Adams later admitted, "I would have hanged my own brother had he taken part with the enemy in the contest." Conformity, censorship, and zealotry flourished. Even among patriots committed to independence, tribalism was rampant and sometimes violent with New Englanders distrusting Southerners--those who lived from New York to Georgia--and Protestants everywhere contemptuous of Catholics. In a defensive war waged for liberty and to secure basic rights, the Americans promptly invaded Canada in an attempt to win by force of arms what could not be won by negotiation and blandishment--a fourteenth colony. This was the first but hardly the last American invasion of another land on the pretext of bettering life for the invaded. The enduring image of a yeoman farmer leaving his plow in the furrow to grab a musket on behalf of freedom is mostly mythical. During the revolution General George Washington rarely had more than 20,000 troops in his army and sometimes as few as 3,000 in a country of 2.5 million people, particularly after the initial martial enthusiasm aroused at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill faded in 1775 relatively few American men volunteered for military service, especially if it involved enlisting for the duration in the badly led, badly fed, badly armed, and badly clothed Continental Army. And yet who would deny that the creation story of our founding remains valid, vivid, and thrilling. Even in 2019 at a moment when national unity is elusive, when our partisan rancor seems ever more toxic, when the simple concept of truth is assailed, the story informs who we are, where we came from, what our forbearers believed, and perhaps the most profound question anybody can ask themselves, what they were willing to die for. Indeed at least 25,000 Americans and possibly many more died in the American Revolution. It's a larger proportion of our population to die in any of our wars other than the Civil War in our entire history. Well, what can we learn from that ancient quarrel? Well, first if this nation was born bickering, disputation is in the national genome. Second, that there are foundational truths that not only indeed are true, but also as the Declaration of Independence insists, are self-evident. Third, that leaders worthy of our enduring admiration rise to the occasion with acumen, grit, wisdom, and grace. And fourth, that whatever trials beset us today, we have overcome greater perils, existential perils before. The American Revolution was not a war between regimes or dynasties fought for territory or the usual commercial advantages, but rather an improvised struggle between two peoples of a common heritage who had been gradually sundered by divergent values and conflicting visions of a world to come. Eventual American victory derived from embracing fewer strategic misconceptions than the British did. Certainly the Americans could be wrongheaded in believing for example that they had greater economic leverage over the mother country than they did or in caricaturing George III who sat on his throne for sixty years and was shrewder, more complex, and more admirable than the overbearing ninny who still dominates our imaginations and even today minces across the stage in "Hamilton" right down the street.

(Laughter)

Atkinson: Yet George and his ministers made three critical miscalculations. First, that most colonists remained loyal to the crown, notwithstanding troublemakers in New England capable of rousing a rabble. Two, that firmness including military firepower if necessary would intimidate the obstreperous and restore harmony, and three, that failure to reassert London's authority in America would eventually unstitch the newly created British Empire, encouraging insurrections in Ireland, Canada, the Sugar Islands in the West Indies, India. It's an 18th century version of the Domino Theory that would propel America into Vietnam two centuries later, and it was quite wrong. Britain also underestimated the difficulty in waging a protracted war across 3,000 miles of open ocean in the age of sail, for eight years as it turned out. Expeditionary warfare whether waged in North America in the 18th century or Central Asia in the 21st century is among the hardest of all martial enterprises. The British army in the revolution unable to gather feed and forage from the American countryside without being ambushed relied largely on provision ships from English and Irish ports. But of forty-transport vessels dispatched across the Atlantic during the winter of 1775-76, only eight of those forty reached the king's troops directly. The rest were blown by gales back to Britain or the West Indies or were intercepted by rebel marauders. Of 550 Lincolnshire sheep carried on ships that actually made it to Boston--that breed was deemed the fittest to undergo the voyage across the Atlantic. Of those 550 only forty arrived alive. Of 290 hog shipped, just seventy-four survived the voyage. And most of the 5,200 barrels of flour in one shipment proved to be rancid. The supply shortfall was a significant reason why General William Howe, the British commander in Boston, decided to abandon the town in the spring of 1776. When Howe moved to New York that summer he requested 950 horses to pull his ammunition carriages, his artillery carriages, and supply wagons. And of those 950, 412 died at sea during the voyage from Britain. Scores more were ruined beyond use when they arrived in America. Similar difficulties plagued the British for years. Logistics is always hard in war. I've personally seen just how hard it is in Somalia, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other hellholes. Even when the American rebels were fighting on their home turf in the revolution, they faced enormous difficulties. Of seventy-five official letters that George Washington wrote in January and February 1776, half mention munitions shortages often in pleading, fretful terms, particularly gunpowder which he just referred to as "the thing". American foundries lacked the high-temperature air furnaces needed to make big artillery guns. In May 1776 of nearly 200 new guns test fired at two Pennsylvania foundries, typically loading them with double charges, not one stood proof as battle ready. Of another twenty-four tested in New Jersey, eight burst on firing. Of forty-two naval twelve-pounders cast in another furnace, eighteen failed. There were other logistical bottlenecks. You would think firewood in colonial America would be one item in plentiful supply. But the army besieging Boston, encircling Boston around the British in the winter of 1775-76 needed 10,000 cords, and Washington fretted over what he called a most mortifying scarcity, which he feared would force his regiments to disperse or risk freezing. It's difficult to make musket balls without lead. By the summer of 1776 the Americans were desperately short of the stuff. In New York more than a hundred tons of lead laid weights from fishing nets, clocks, and window sash cords were collected to make bullets along with lead from downspouts and window glass came and pewter dishes. Paper made from rags in the 18th century and critical for currency and musket cartridges grew so desperately short that paper makers were excused from military service. Wool was so critical that those who ate lambs or ewes were denounced as public enemies. Without salt armies and navies couldn't stockpile the meat and fish needed to move anywhere. Two bushels of salt, more than a hundred pounds, were needed to cure a thousand pounds of pork. Beef required even more. Salt was also used to tan leather, to fix the dyes in military uniforms, to churn butter, and supplement

livestock feed. Before the war Americans imported about 15 million bushels of salt, half from the West Indies and half from Britain and southern Europe. When the war began the British trade embargo strangled two-thirds of those imports. Profiteers and hoarders drove up the prices from two shillings a bushel before the revolution began to as high as seventy-five shillings in 1777. To encourage salt works along the coast, pamphlets were printed with recipes for salt making, and congress authorized handsome bounties for every bushel produced. John Adams wrote, "All the old women and children are going down to the Jersey shore to make salt," but 400 gallons of seawater are needed for a bushel of salt, and that requires enormous stacks of firewood. Virginia spent more than 6,000 pounds, a huge sum in those days, to build evaporation ponds along the Chesapeake Bay, but they collected only fifty bushels. It was the most expensive salt in the world. Yet those problems, substantial as they were, hardly matched Britain's problems. The principle reason that the British never moved beyond Boston after the disastrous expedition to Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, except for the disastrous expedition across the Charles River to Bunker Hill, was that General Howe calculated that he needed 3,662 horses and 540 wagons to move his army plus nearly fifty tons of hay and oats every day to feed those horses. But that was 3,000 horses and 500 wagons more than he actually had. He couldn't move anywhere. He lacked the transport to do it. General John Burgoyne who was there with him in Boston observed, "Could we at last penetrate ten miles into the countryside, we should not attain a single sheep or an ounce of flour, for the rebels remove every article of provisions as they go." To give a sense of the variety of supply needs in New York, British supply officers requested 20,000 horseshoes, 1,100 harnesses, 48,000 blankets, and 1,500 scythes with whetstones, and 20,000 tons of forage a year. A thousand tons of bread required each month to feed British soldiers, to feed the recoats in New York, often arrived from depots in Cork moldy and infested with Irish rats, which soon--and there's no rat nastier than an Irish rat--

(Laughter)

Atkinson: --and they soon infested British warehouses on Staten Island. The daily allowance of a gill of rum needed for each redcoat--a gill is about five ounces. It's about a gallon a month allotted to each British soldier. That took an enormous amount of shipping space. The British navy board needed 400 transports and vitrioling ships to move and supply the large force in New York. That's triple the tonnage at the peak of British demands at the Seven Year War. Let me talk for a moment about your last king George III. He's an intriguing adversary. Queen Elizabeth II only recently opened up to outside scrutiny the Georgian Papers, which she owns. It's part of a project to catalogue and digitize the papers from all four Georges who became king in the 18th and 19th centuries. There are 350,000 pages, mostly from the reign of George III whom I mentioned was king for sixty years. Most of those pages are previously unpublished, and I was among the first allowed in to take a look. For a whole month in April 2016 at Windsor Castle where the papers are stored, every morning I would show my badge at the Henry VIII gate and show it again at the Norman gate, and then I would climb the 102 stone steps and the twenty-one wooden stairs leaning to the garret of the round tower begun by William the Conqueror in the 11th century. And there were the papers in gorgeous red binders. George was his own secretary until late in life when he began to go blind, and he wrote not only most of his correspondence himself, but he also made the copies. And as you pall through these pages--and they don't make you wear gloves--there's a tactile sense of being in his presence. Among other things, he's a great list-maker. Lists of British garrisons abroad from 1764 to 1775, of royal navy vessels under construction in various shipyards, of all his regiments in America with the number of officers, musicians, and rank-and-file for each tabulated with his arithmetic

scratchings in the margins as he's doing his sums. George copied out his own recipes for cough syrup. Write this down: rosemary, rice, vinegar, brown sugar, all boiled in silver. And insecticide--wormwood, vinegar, lime, swine's fat, quicksilver. He was an ardent theatergoer, and he kept critical notes on dramatic actors that he'd seen, had a formal gravity in his mean and a piercing eye. He had married an obscure, drab German princess. Charlotte, as in Charlotte, North Carolina and Charlottesville. She had learned to play "God Save the King" on the harpsichord during her voyage to England from Germany. They married six hours after they met, and he had the marriage bedroom decorated with 700 yards of blue damask and strategically-placed goldfish bowls around the bedroom. Nothing says I love you like goldfish.

(Laughter)

Atkinson: The happy union proved fertile. She produced children with lunar regularity. Eventually they number fifteen. And we see in his personal correspondence that George is a caring father. He's invested in the rearing of his kids. And through all this he's trying to figure out the proper course for the British Empire, for the monarchy, and for his people. He's easy enough to dislike but impossible, I find, to dismiss or simply reject as a reactionary autocrat. The war he chooses to wage is brutal, bloody, and sometimes savage. Unlike modern war killing in the 18th century is usually intimate--at very close range, face to face, often with a bayonet. That's partly because 18th century muskets were mostly inaccurate beyond fifty yards and almost hopeless beyond a hundred yards. Scholars have calculated that in the fights at Lexington, Concord, and the British retreat to Boston on April 19, 1775, the Americans fired at least 75,000 rounds, but only one bullet in every 300 actually hit a redcoat. The shot heard 'round the world probably missed. Battlefield wisdom held that it took a man's weight in bullets to kill him, and in Revolutionary War combat that was not far wrong. On the other hand masked musket fire like clusters of men firing in volleys sent swarms of one-ounce lead slugs flying downrange at perhaps a thousand feet a second, and that would be devastating. A man five feet, eight inches tall had an exterior surface of 2,250 square inches, of which a thousand were exposed to gunfire when he was facing an enemy frontally at close range. And given the primitive inadequacy of 18th century medicine, hardly worthy of the name, if you're hit in the torso, you have more than a fifty percent chance of dying. If you're hit in the head, the chances of dying are higher. By the way, later studies by the British army demonstrated that soldiers wearing conspicuous red uniforms were more than twice as likely to be shot in combat as those in muted blues and grays. Duh.

(Laughter)

Atkinson: American marksmen, especially those with rifles, which were more accurate than muskets but took longer to load and could not carry a bayonet, learned to target the brightest of the red coats, those that were almost vermilion in hue, because they were usually worn by officers who could afford the more expensive dyes that made those coats pop. In the battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, the British captured roughly a square mile of rebel-held territory at a cost of over a thousand casualties, including 226 dead. Of all the king's officers who would die in battle during the eight-year Revolutionary War, more than one out of every eight died in four hours at Bunker Hill. Well, those are some of the nuts and bolts of 18th century warfare, but what of the emotional guts of the American Revolution? That's what still moves us, stirs our pride, make us feel that those men and women of a dozen or more generations ago have something to say to us. Why is that? Certainly that revolutionary generation can seem so distant from us as to be almost a foreign people. If irony and skepticism are the twin lenses of modern consciousness, the revolutionaries often seem archaic. They're far less ironic and skeptical in worldview than their 21st century descendants. They speak English of course, but they have their own argo-idiom, their own slang. For example,

passing counterfeit money, widely practiced in the 18th century, was known as shoving the queer. Someone who died took heaven by the way. British soldiers at Boston by the way sometimes referred to Americans derisively as Jonathans. But those are minor differences. We rightly admire those Americans for their endurance, pertinacity, and sacrifice. Not only displayed by men serving in the ranks but by others swept up in the fraught events of those times. Lois Peters of Connecticut hadn't seen her husband Captain Nathan Peters in months because he was part of the besieging force around Boston when she wrote to him, "Pray come home as soon as possible. A visit from you at any time would be agreeable." Meanwhile she would harvest the corn, sell their oxen for enough cash to try to keep the family's saddlery solvent, sew him his shirt and take great pleasure doing it, she told him, and keep faith with the future. She signed her letters, "Your Loving Wife Until Dead." General Nathanael Greene, Quaker anchor monger from Rhode Island, makes one of the worst operational decisions of the war by leaving 3,000 American soldiers exposed and vulnerable at Fort Washington on Manhattan Island where in the space of eight hours in November 1776 they're trapped or killed or captured. This is during a period where American generalship is often characterized by miscalculation, misfortune, imprudence, and deficient military skills. But Greene picks himself up, takes a deep breath, and writes to Caty his wife, "The virtue of the Americans is put to a trial. I'm hearty and well despite all the fatigues and hardships. Be of good courage. Don't be distressed. All things will work out for the best." Be of good courage. He's speaking to us. To you and to you, and he's certainly speaking to me. The sheer drama of the American Revolution keeps it compelling and often thrilling, from the bloodletting at Bunker Hill to the skin-of-the-teeth escape by Washington and his army in the fog across the East River in August 1776 after a terrible drubbing on Long Island. And beyond the battlefield the theatrical power and pathos of the conflict surely outruns any dramatist's imagination. The abrupt arrival of the septuagenarian Benjamin Franklin in Paris to woo the French absolute monarchy into an alliance with radical republicans. The 100,000 smallpox deaths in North America from 1775 to 1782. Those white men sitting in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 lashing at horseflies with their handkerchiefs while carving up Thomas Jefferson's draft declaration to make it shorter and much better. The many American families, Ben Franklin's among them, ripped apart by irreconcilable political differences. If the central figures in our creation story have been embalmed in reverence, they nonetheless remain beguiling, worthy of perpetual scrutiny and often of emulation. Washington is a case in point. Yes, he owned more than 300 slaves at his death at Mount Vernon in 1799. You cannot square that circle. It's a moral failing of him and of the people that's impossible to reconcile. He demonstrated shortcomings as a tactical commander at Long Island, Fort Washington, and other battlefields. He does not see the battlefield spatially and temporally, the way a great captain like Napoleon does. The man who proverbially could never tell a lie sure could prevaricate. Washington's carping about his troops, his officers, and his lot in life. "I distrust everything," he grumbled in 1776, transforms the demigod into a sometimes-petulant mortal. Yet great responsibility enlarges him. He rightly embodies the sacrifice of personal interest toward a greater good, as well as other republican virtues--probity, dignity, moral stamina, incorruptly, traits that should remain true north for every citizen today. Abigail Adams said of him "Affliction is the good man's shining time." Lesser personalities largely lost to history speak to Americans in the 21st century of constancy and an antique patriotism. "Heaven only knows what may be my fate," Captain John McPherson wrote in a last letter to his father before being killed at Quebec. "I experience no reluctance in this cause to venture a life which I consider is only lent to be used when my country demands it." Likewise Lieutenant Samuel Cooper wrote his wife, "The dangers we are to encounter I know not, but it shall never be said to my children, 'Your

father was a coward." He too died at Quebec. Even Benedict Arnold, perhaps the finest battle captain on either side in the first couple years of the war before his subsequent perfidy, wrote after being shot in the leg in Canada, "I am in the way of duty and I know no fear." Some years ago the distinguished historian John Shy--taught at the University of Michigan for decades--wrote that the Civil War, like every other major event in American history including the Second World War has a tragic human two-sided quality that the revolution seems to lack. The whole complex of revolutionary events takes on a smooth self-contained character that makes getting the right emotional grip on the subject very difficult. My premise is that tragedy is the bedrock of every war because every war is about young women--young men and sometimes young women--dying young. My ambition is to find that emotional grip, as Professor Shy put it, to revive the tragic human multisided quality that saturated the American saga from 1775 to 1783. So we see Lieutenant Edward Hull, a young Scottish officer in the 43rd regiment afoot shot at North Bridge in Concord then shot again during the British retreat toward Boston, captured by the Americans in agony from three bullet wounds, sucking on an orange donated by a compassionate rebel. He lingers for nearly two weeks in a twilight of pain and remorse before he too takes heaven by the way. Or we see Mary Pierce, the widow of a private killed at Bunker Hill while fighting with the Massachusetts militia, as she petitions the commonwealth for precisely five pounds and twelve shillings in compensation for her husband's coat, trousers, stockings, shoes, buckles, silk handkerchief, knife, and tobacco box. Or General Richard Montgomery in the assault on Quebec, hit by grapeshot through both thighs and mortally through the face. His effects were auctioned off to his own officers a couple days after his death, which was common in the 18th century, item by item. Two volumes of Polybius, Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, a buffalo skin and clothes brush bought by Captain Aaron Burr, and a wardrobe of ruffled shirts, Holland waistcoats, pair of tea tongs and other stuff all bought by Benedict Arnold. Or we see Ile aux Noix, the island of nuts. A couple hundred acres in the Richelieu River, just above the New York border where thousands of soldiers retreating from Canada in June 1776 jammed a malarial hell, half of them suffering from smallpox, dysentery, typhus, or some other god-awful malady, infested with lice and maggots. One doctor wrote, "We had nothing to give them. It broke my heart, and I wept 'til I had not more power to weep." And we see Matthew Patton of Bedford, New Hampshire whose son John had survived a gunshot wound to the arm at Bunker Hill but did not survive Ile aux Noix. Mr. Patton wrote simply in his diary, "I got an account of my John's death of the smallpox at Canada. He was twenty-four years and thirty-one days old." and of course entire towns are obliterated during the fighting. You may know that the British assault on Breed's Hill, Bunker Hill, in June 1775 that during that attack the decision is made by the British high command to bombard Charlestown across the river from Boston because American snipers are firing into the flanks of the king's regiments. Royal Navy warships will conduct the bombardment across the Charles River along with twenty-four-pounder field guns set on high ground in Boston where General Burgoyne has taken his post. And the shells they fire include carcasses each packed with gunpowder, Swedish pitch, salt peter, and tallow, and the Charlestown meeting house with its slender, towering steeple, is identified as a conspicuous aiming stake. Here's my account of what happened next. "The first shell fell short, bursting near the ferry slip. Gunners corrected their elevation, and within minutes the whole was instantly in flames, as Burgoyne would write. Fire loped through Charlestown streets like a thing alive, igniting buildings at the foot of Chestnut Street and around Malden shipyard. Other structures along the docks followed in quick succession--distilleries, a tannery, warehouses, shipwrights, a cooperage. Fire climbed the pitched roofs, a grand and melancholy sight, one loyalist observed. Then licked through houses away from the

waterfront and up to the marketplace, incinerating the courthouse and the Three Cranes Tavern. North of the market on Town Hill more houses and another distillery caught fire. The light breeze shifted from southwest to east, as it often did on fine summer days, and flames drove lengthwise through Charlestown. Fire ignited more wharves and a ship channel. Ebony smoke rose in a column as wide as the town and hung like a thundercloud over the contending armies, an American officer reported. Rebel musket men scurried from the burning buildings to hide behind stonewalls on Breed's Hill and in a nearby barn. 'The church steeples being made of timber were great pyramids of fire above the rest,' wrote Burgoyne, who had a way with words. 'The roar of cannon, mortars, musketry, the crash of churches, ships upon the stocks, the whole streets falling together in the ruin to fill the ear. All in all,' he added, 'the conflagration was one of the greatest scenes of war that can be perceived. Gawkers and gapers climbed not only Boston rooftops and hillsides, but the massive ships in the harbor. Loyalist and patriots perched together mesmerized by the sight of a town immolated. Here once again was an ancient squalid secret, that war was an enchantment, a sorcery, a seductive spectacle like no other, beguiling the eye and engorging the senses. They looked because they could not look away.'" Some 232 houses in Charlestown and more than 300 other structures were incinerated. And of course this episode foreshadows other incinerated towns like Falmouth in Maine and Norfolk. Historian Bruce Catton considered the American Civil War a redemptive tragedy. Surely the same can be said of the American Revolution. It embodied the enduring aspirations of an idealistic people and brought forth a nation abounding with a sense of destiny. No wonder the world was agog. "The cause of America," wrote the essayist Thomas Payne, "is the cause of all mankind." Even now the War for Independence offers clues to our national temperament. It remains a bright mirror in which we see traits that fashion the American character, from ingenuity and resilience to brutally and pugnacity. We've come far in almost two and a half centuries in power, diversity, tolerance, and sheer scale, but in some respects those ancestors remain nearer than we know. Their existential struggle churned up issues that perplex us to this day, including individual liberty versus collective security, the proper limits on executive power, the obligations of citizenship, and the illusive quest for a more equitable society. The tacit primal question of 1776 persists in 2019. Who do we want to be? "Democracy is never a thing done," poet and librarian of Congress Archibald McLeish told us. "Democracy is something that a nation must be doing." Even Jefferson's declaration, our foundational secular scripture--we hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the creators with certain unalienable rights. That is dynamic. Never a thing done. Something that a nation must be doing. The great Yale historian Edmond Morgan wrote that, "the creed of equality did not give men equality"--and we would say men and women—"but invited them to claim it. Invited them not to know their place and keep it but to seek and demand a better place." The American Revolution lasted 3,089 days. And the result was epic and enduring. The creation of the American republic, among mankind's most remarkable achievements. Nearly 90,000 more days have elapsed since those horsefly-swatting men asserted a human birthright of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Keeping faith with those who fought, suffered, and died for the principles we profess to still cherish requires more than a nodding acquaintance with them, more than a perfunctory acknowledgment of their struggles. For better and for worse, their story is our story. Their fight remains our fight. Thank you again for having me here this evening. (Applause)

1: Late in the war the British encouraged a slave insurrection, promising liberty to the slaves. If they had done that in 1775 or 1776, could they have won the war?

Atkinson: They did it in 1776. Lord Dunmore, the royal governor in Virginia, offered to free the slaves of any loyalist who would come and fight on the side of the British regulars. Thousands of slaves sought their freedom by essentially enlisting in the army or trying at least to make their way toward the British forces along the coast in Virginia, particularly around Norfolk. Nothing angered Southern plantation owners led by George Washington more than that act by Lord Dunmore. I mean, Washington's intemperate language is really something. Because this is a threat not only to the future hopes of a nation, America, it's a threat to their economic livelihood, which is predicated on slavery. And it really backfired against the British. And there had been discussion in London about whether this was a good idea or a bad idea; Dunmore went ahead and did it anyway. First of all it turns out to be a really bad idea for the slaves for several reasons. First of all they're subject to sickness. Smallpox, dysentery. They die by the hundreds. There are scenes of them bottled up near Norfolk after Norfolk has burned in early January of 1776, and it's just, it's pathetic, and it will go on as long as they're in proximity to the British army. Second, as I say it enflames the locals. And third it doesn't really help the cause at all. These are escaped slaves. They don't know anything about firelocks. They've not been permitted to handle weapons. Everything they're gonna learn about soldiery they're gonna learn in ten minutes before being sent out as cannon fodder basically. Incidentally one of the reasons why there were such robust militias in South Carolina particularly but all the Southern colonies was not against invasion from foreigners. It was as a slave insurrection-quelling force. That's why the South Carolina militia was as well organized as it was. So they tried it, they thought about it, subsequently they recognized it was probably a losing proposition. You also have to feed and clothe and house the slaves who have come over to your side. You know, it just wasn't gonna work for them.

2: First, since I have the opportunity, let me thank you for the immense service you've done for the history of the United States Army. Thank you, sir.

Atkinson: Thank you, sir.

2: Question about--I just finished through the battle of Quebec, and I guess my question is, could the British have won?

Atkinson: Sure, they could have won the war. They came pretty close to it. Washington came within a chin whisker of losing it several times. Now, Washington has the advantage fighting on his home turf. He doesn't have to win the war; he just has to avoid losing it. The British actually have to win the war. That's the nature of insurrections. What could they have done differently? Well, they could have avoided war to start with. That would have been a good start. And why didn't they? Well, part of the reason is a failure of imagination. There are negotiations that go on for years with Franklin leading the patriot cause in London before he leaves in the spring of 1775 to finally sail home. He's been in London for almost two decades. And there were various proposals, and there's no common ground that can be found ultimately. Part of the reasons is that nobody had the imagination to come up with the concept of a commonwealth, which eventually was effected, where individual countries keep their autonomy, they decide their own fate, but they're loosely joined in a communion of common heritage, like Canada and Australia, the way the commonwealth subsequently worked. Nobody can really come up with that idea or propose it in a way that's substantially palatable enough. So once the shooting starts, once things get nasty enough, it's hard to see that there's ever gonna be a political solution. The British potentially could have won the war had they trapped and destroyed the Continental Army, which they came very close to doing after the battle of Long Island for example during the retreat across New Jersey. Washington escapes across the Delaware River. There were other occasions. 1780 they come back to Charleston having lost a naval battle there of all things. The royal navy is

tattooed at Sullivan's Island in June of 1776. They come back four years later, they capture Charlestown, they capture 5,000 American soldiers. It looks finally like things are on the uptick, but they're not really. I mean, there's a war weariness that had set in by this point, and it's just not gonna work for them. So my feeling is that, yeah, the probably could have own had they had a more adroit, agile, aggressive commander maybe. William Howe had reasons for not wanting to make frontal assaults against entrenched positions. He had been part of that force that marched up Breed's Hill. Every member of his staff was killed or wounded. He came back down that hill, his white stockings soaked in blood. He knew the danger of attacking entrenched rebel positions, and so he didn't do it. And there were a couple of occasions where if he had done it and he'd overwhelmed them, could have been different, but I doubt it. So okay, one more question.

3: First and foremost, thank you again for coming this afternoon and evening. My question was this: throughout your lecture today you painted a British Empire which was willing to throw men, time, and resources despite several challenges, into the American colonies. What would you say was that marginal value the American colonies held that they were trying so desperately to fight for?

Atkinson: Yeah, well, I've asked myself that a number of times, and I know that there were a number of British statesmen or would-be statesmen who asked themselves that at the time. Again I think it goes back to this notion that they had persuaded themselves that if the American colonies slip away, this newly created empire, which in 1775 it's only twelve years old, that it's gonna disintegrate. You see this in George's correspondence. You see it in the correspondence among the senior British ministers like Lord Sandwich who commands the admiralty. Lord George Germain. He's the minister for America. He's kind of the Robert McNamara of the war. And it's an article of faith for them that if the colonies get away, then the rest of the colonies are gonna be fighting insurrections in perpetuity. And they believe--remember this is a mercantile state. That means that colonies exist to provide raw materials to the mother country and to buy the finished goods that the mother country has made out of those raw materials. That's the essence of the British economic system in the 18th century. It's worked really well for them. They have become rich. They're right on the cusp of the industrial revolution. They're ahead of all the rest of Europe in all the indicators of a prosperous, growing force. And they don't want to see that go away. And they believe that America is kind of the key to their continued success, their continued growth. They think that it's necessary in order to keep away the French. Remember they have fought several wars against the French already in the 18th century. They're blood enemies. And they believe that it's necessary to retain prosperity and this empire in order to be able to do to the French what they had done in 1763, which is to kick them around. So it's an article of faith. It's not stupid, but it's wrong. The American colonies will slip away. The Irish are always gonna be rebellious. They're Irish. Canada does not slip away. The Sugar Islands remain mostly under British rule. They retain India until the 1940s. The British Empire will be reduced by about one-third of its landmass when the American subcontinent basically vanishes. But another empire will emerge after the wars with Napoleon, a bigger, more potent empire actually than the one they had in the 18th century. So you know, we can look back on it and scratch our heads and think what are the marginal gains on this, and you have to say it's pretty questionable. But from their standpoint from walking in their shoes, we can understand it. Thanks again so much.

(Applause)

Havers: Thank you to Rick Atkinson for a great discussion, and thank you to our members for sponsoring this program of *Pritzker Military Presents*. The book is *The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777*, published

by Henry Holt and Company. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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