

***Perceptions of Battle: George Washington's Victory at Monmouth*****J.R. Dacus****Havertown, PA: Brookline Books, 2024****240 pages****ISBN: 9781955041270****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v11i1.382](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v11i1.382)**

The Battle of Monmouth Courthouse commenced on a hot, humid day in modern-day Freehold, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778. In *Perceptions of Battle: George Washington's Victory at Monmouth*, J.R. Dacus weaves a lively and detailed narrative of the Monmouth Campaign utilizing first-person accounts of those who participated in the engagement. Considered by many to be a pivotal moment in the War for Independence, Dacus demonstrates that the crucial and complex action between British and American forces resulted in a victory for the colonial movement and General Washington's role in that victory was crucial (191).

Dacus opens *Perceptions of Battle* with the Continental Army's winter encampment at Valley Forge in late 1777. Washington selected the location as it would allow the army to resist an attack by British forces, who occupied Philadelphia. However, living conditions were brutal. Camp was dirty and disease ridden, and inhabitants suffered from hunger, cold, and lacked appropriate clothing and supplies. Washington faced many hardships leading up to and during the winter at Valley Forge, including defeats at Brandywine and Germantown and the British occupation of Philadelphia. Additionally, many in Congress, the army, and the general public were growing increasingly dissatisfied with the course of the war and questioned Washington's abilities as commander in chief (6).

Conditions began to improve in camp after Washington appointed Nathaneal Greene as Quartermaster General. Greene organized a systematic operation that helped the army survive and improve itself. Another improvement came from Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard

Augustin von Steuben, a former Prussian officer. He arrived in camp in February 1778 and demonstrated administrative brilliance as he trained and organized the Continentals to “stand, counterattack, and defeat” British forces (15).

In Philadelphia, British General Sir Henry Clinton was eager for glory and anticipated a campaign where he could test Washington and the rebel army. His plans were crushed, however, when he was instructed by Lord Germain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, to evacuate Philadelphia and consolidate his forces in New York due to the French alliance with the rebels.

One of the most infamous and controversial figures in the Battle of Monmouth was General Charles Lee. Lee was captured by the British in 1776 after the fall of New York. He was exchanged in a prisoner swap in 1778 and returned to the Continental Army at Valley Forge in May to resume his rank as second in command. In June, Washington had received intelligence regarding a partial British movement across New Jersey. He convened a Council of War on June 17 to discuss the possibility of pursuing the British. Lee disagreed and proclaimed an open engagement should be avoided and that the British should be allowed to return to New York unmolested. Washington publicly tabled the idea of an “immediate attack.” Regardless of his misgivings, Lee took command of the army’s right wing and led the advance into New Jersey to shadow the British.

Dacus details the conduct and controversial actions of General Lee during the Battle of Monmouth. Washington’s orders before the battle emphasized an attack but with discretion if the attack was under unfavorable conditions. Lee’s attack at the onset of the engagement was disorganized due to a lack of communication and confidence in the soldiers under his command. Clinton had reformed the rearguard, deployed artillery, and ordered his calvary to charge a group of militiamen covering Continental forces (100). Lee considered his options and redeployed his

troops several times as Clinton continued to push more of Cornwallis's troops toward Freehold. Dacus argues that a lack of clear directions regarding British movements and intentions, in addition to Lee being unaware of the locations of many of his formations, led to a retreat of the American advance guard. The rush of the withdrawing regiments and detachments, while not panicked, lacked control.

When Washington arrived at Monmouth, he was greeted with the retreating men on the road to Englishtown. Dacus points out that Washington's presence was like a "jolt of electricity," and he steered the men immediately and the atmosphere changed abruptly. They recognized his authority, and many cheered for their commander in chief (122). Washington reorganized the troops, ordered a strategic repositioning, and organized a defensive line.

Washington confronted Lee on the disorganized retreat and the lack of direction in the withdrawing men. Lee claimed that "disorder was from disobedience of orders, contradictory intelligence, and the retreat was not by his direction" (124). Washington publicly reprimanded Lee and ordered him to guard several detachments behind the hedgerow, to which Lee agreed. Brigadier General Anthony Wayne and Lee successfully slowed the British forces as Washington established part of his army on the higher ground of Perrine Hill. Dacus describes in great detail as one of the largest field artillery duels ensued with the Continentals and Militia repelling the British advances for several hours in the blazing heat.

As it grew later in the day and darkness fell over the battlefield, all activity ended. Both armies were exhausted from the day's activities. Clinton weighed his options. Although he was eager to battle the American rebels, the "long logistics train," the "strong American position," and the fatigue his own troops faced led him to order his men to march east around 10:00 pm.

Clinton took advantage of the exhausted Americans and retreated under the cover of darkness (152).

The American Revolution was far from over, but the Battle of Monmouth was a strategic victory for the American army. According to Dacus, the average soldier did not view Monmouth as a tactical draw, but rather as a “full-fledged victory” (156). Continental soldiers demonstrated their training and discipline on the battlefield and the engagement boosted American morale. Dacus argues that the battle was significant in that it demonstrated the maturing of Washington’s tactical and operational skills. The defeat of the Conway Cabal and the attempts to limit his command by the Board of War in the winter and spring of 1777–78 solidified Washington’s position as commander in chief. The success at Monmouth, the evacuation of Philadelphia, and the arrival of the French fleet signaled American success in the campaign of 1778 (190–91).

*Perceptions of Battle* is both a richly researched and incredibly detailed account of a complex engagement during the American Revolution. Dacus’s utilization of first-person accounts of those who participated in the Battle of Monmouth and its aftermath offers unique insights into the perceptions of the campaign. The book also sheds light on Washington’s leadership as commander in chief of the Continental Army. *Perceptions of Battle* is an accessible read for students, scholars, and history enthusiasts. This work will appeal to those interested in military history during the American Revolution and Washington’s leadership as he rose above his political enemies.

*Nicole Skalenko*

*Kean University*