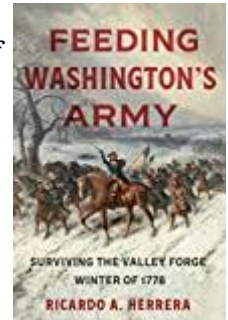


Ricardo A. Herrera. *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 272 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-6731-7.



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After the harrowing defeat of British forces by the French and their native allies at the Monongahela on July 9, 1755, Lieutenant George Washington spent twelve hours in the saddle attempting to rally fleeing British colonials and troops for a counterattack and riding for help. The British retreat was a chaotic melee of motion, destruction, and abandonment of wagons and food and supplies. Out of 1,459 combatants on the British side, 977 were casualties, including the death of the commanding officer, Major General Edward Braddock—an astounding 67 percent. Twenty years later, as he ascended to command the Continental army, Washington's focus reflected that horrific experience; at all costs he would maintain order, in defeat, in retreat, or when facing less than desirable odds.

In December 1777, with his army ill-fed and worse equipped, Washington made the decision to winter at Valley Forge. Washington's dedication to keeping his army cohesive and at numbers sufficient enough to present a threat to British aims, even during the harsh Pennsylvania winter, re-

flected a singular focus. In *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778*, Ricardo A. Herrera examines the actions directed by Washington to keep the Continental army alive. The stakes were high and the outcome uncertain as “the specters of disease, dispersal, desertion, and mutiny cast a shadow over the army ... [and] posed as much or more of a threat than did the British Army” (p. 19). Herrera takes aim at the myth of Valley Forge, in which the army starved under the incompetence of the poorly led and worse managed victualing system of the Continental Congress and local governments, and deftly illustrates how Washington attempted to maintain order and an advantage in the realm of logistics to feed his army. Far from being an army that embraced the suck (to use modern parlance), Washington actively sought out food and fodder, most notably in the Grand Forage of February 1778.

By February 1778, Washington was desperate. His army at Valley Forge needed “15,903 rations daily, which had to be transported from magazines, mills, and other sites,... [requiring]

over 113 wagons per day,” but could only muster eight wagons in camp that same month (p. 33). Faced with retreat, scattering his army to the winds to fend for itself, or action, Washington chose action in the Grand Forage.

The Grand Forage was a series of three expeditions, under Major General Nathaniel Greene, Brigadier General Anthony Wayne, and Captain Henry Lee Jr., directing infantry soldiers, riverine naval forces, and cavalry to glean whatever fodder and food they could for the army at Valley Forge across Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. In each case, these operations were gambles; the movement of hundreds of troops afield to find food and forage risked the safety of the defenses at Valley Forge, necessitated extra provisions for their execution, and required the consent of the local population. Through it all, Washington’s careful hand guided the operational maneuver of the Grand Forage while begging and cajoling his civilian masters to improve his logistics. Although successful at certain levels, the Grand Forage never eliminated the horrible privations at Valley Forge. Herrera concludes that these operations boosted morale, provided enough sustenance to keep the army fielded until spring, and reflected Washington’s growing political and operational acumen.

Through his telling, Herrera is in command of the primary sources, which are disparate and separated by the Atlantic Ocean. His breadth and depth are so great that his introductory chapter, which sets the stage for Valley Forge, almost reads like a narrative conversation between Washington and various civilian officials, from the commissary general of the Continental army, William Buchanan, to the governor of Maryland, Thomas Johnson. The author accomplishes the rare feat of making logistics interesting and illustrates the specifics of how logistics was a critical component of the larger strategic picture for the Americans and the British.

Herrera’s grasp of the material further allows him to illustrate the harsh impact of the Grand Forage on the local population—compensation by Washington’s foragers in near-worthless continental notes, hiding of livestock by owners, outright theft by Continental and British soldiers, and painful destruction of fodder by both sides to prevent use by the other. The brutality of colonists against both sides in defense of their own sustenance and the harsh treatment of loyalists and those loyal to the revolution were hard to read. Herrera pulls no punches. The author even teases out the sad discovery of thousands of barrels of flour and other food stores less than a two-day ride from Valley Forge that were undiscovered, because, as Herrera states, “the region was rife with people who wanted to be left at peace ... no matter how active the foragers.” “It was,” he continues, “impossible to uncover provisions and other necessary goods without adequate intelligence about the area” (p. 108). Washington barely kept his army in order at Valley Forge, and only through creating chaos in the surrounding populations. Thus, in the winter of 1777-78, with its own localized misery, Valley Forge was a precursor to larger discontent across the colonies in the last years of the war. The author does an admirable job linking the type of guerrilla warfare and misery required of the Grand Forage to future operations in the South.

Added to his command of the sources, Herrera brings a rare insight into Valley Forge. As a lead instructor at the US Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), the author has given numerous staff rides of the region to students. His intimate knowledge of roads, rivers, and bridges, with the added detail of their current locations in relationship to interstates and major highways, adds a fascinating view to the work. His skill at understanding the geography comes shining through in the chapter on Wayne’s mission to forage into New Jersey, giving a blow-by-blow account of the use of riverine forces to support Wayne under the command of Captain Jon Barry and the various skirmishes along the way with

British forces. Ultimately Wayne was able to shepherd hundreds of cattle back to Valley Forge while keeping the British at bay. Herrera's depiction of Wayne's operations is a master work, his experience in the local geography leading to a page-turning account. Herrera combines the best skills of the archaeologist and physical geographer in understanding terrain with those of the historian in intertwining the facts from primary written sources. His methods illustrate the power of using diverse perspectives to make a compelling case in academic research.

The outstanding research by Herrera also leaves the reader asking the big question: "How much food and fodder did the Grand Forage capture?" Answering that question could have added more explanatory power to the broader narrative of Washington and his general's gamble to execute the Grand Forage to save the army. The author rightfully points to the paucity of his sources, lamenting the lack of detail on exactly how much sustenance Wayne brought back into Valley Forge. Given Herrera's details on the number of cattle Wayne had shortly before entering camp and various details of Greene's and Lee's expeditions, even an incomplete table to summarize the various logistics gained by the Grand Forage would have been a useful addition to the historiography for future researchers. This is a minor factor, however, and only highlights the difficulty of finding primary sources from the eighteenth century and the excellent research by Herrera that leaves the reader asking deeper questions.

Herrera's work is a welcome addition to the scholarship of Valley Forge. While such books as Bob Drury and Tom Clavin's *Valley Forge* (2018), Wayne Bodie's *The Valley Forge Winter: Civilians and Soldiers in War* (2002), and Thomas Fleming's *Washington's Secret War: The Hidden History of Valley Forge* (2005) offer overall histories, Herrera stakes out a unique claim on the Grand Forage. His work adds much-needed insight to an overlooked part of the Valley Forge experience, given the lar-

ger narratives of Baron Von Steuben's and Washington's leadership in the face of poor civilian governance during the winter of 1777-78. The outstanding detail in his primary references and the tying together of British and American archives is worth the book's price alone. Future scholars will benefit from the detail in *Feeding Washington's Army*.

The challenge of tying logistics to operational success is one that continues to elude historians and those who examine military logistics in an operational context. Herrera deserves immense credit for his scholarship in this overlooked and misunderstood area of military history. For as Washington's harrowing day on July 9, 1755, proved, a well-fed, well-supplied, and well-led army can still suffer a humiliating defeat no matter how well the system of logistics performed, while Valley Forge proved the opposite.

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