History

Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War
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This is edge-of-your-seat history, meticulously researched and laid out, but written with such high drama and cinematic clarity that even well-known events of America's Revolutionary War are made to seem suspenseful-as if this time their outcomes might be different. This sense of immediacy may arise from the fact that the author's principal trade is newspaper reporting, not writing history. A veteran political correspondent for the Boston Globe, Kranish previously co-authored a biography of 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry.

The Thomas Jefferson that Kranish presents here is not the magisterial political thinker and statesman now commonly portrayed. Instead, he is a harried public servant, invested with great responsibility but little statutory power. In 1779, three years after the Declaration of Independence was signed and while the war with Britain was still very much a toss-up, Jefferson was elected governor of Virginia for the first of two tumultuous one-year terms. By this time, the British had already launched devastating assaults against Virginia's ports. They would soon compound the damage by moving inland, commandeering the rich plantations, freeing slaves, pushing the state's capital from Williamsburg to Richmond, then overrunning Richmond and advancing toward Jefferson's estate outside Charlottesville.

Jefferson had precious few resources with which to stem that military tide. The loyalty of some of Virginia's richest, most prominent citizens remained in question. It was difficult to raise a militia. Armaments were in short supply. There was constant resistance to raising taxes to fund the war. Moreover, Jefferson had no military background. "[T]he reality of being a wartime governor must have weighed heavily on him," Kranish speculates. "The days of listening to high-flown debates on the floor of the legislature or writing great words of revolution would be replaced by a ceaseless stream of crises. Jefferson's strength had been in conceptualizing liberty, not making it a realityÂ…"

While Jefferson's ordeal is the focus of this narrative, Kranish also takes readers into the

camps and minds of such disparate combatants as the traitorous Benedict Arnold; the Prussian-born American general “Baron” von Steuben, who despaired at what he considered Jefferson’s ineptitude to prosecute the war; and British general William Phillips, whom Jefferson would befriend to his own detriment after Phillips was captured at the Battle of Ticonderoga and transferred as a prisoner of war to Virginia. Jefferson’s distress at being driven from Monticello on June 4, 1781, was short-lived. Less than five months later, its resources stretched thin, the British army surrendered at Yorktown. (February) Edward Morris